

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen: A Devotee of Mary and the National Shrine

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On Sunday morning, May 16, 1920, the land on which the Basilica of the National Shrine now stands was blessed by Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States. Leading the worship procession that day was a cross bearer and two candle bearers, one of whom was a young priest, ordained just eight months earlier for the Diocese of Peoria, Illinois. At that



time, Reverend Fulton John Sheen was a theology student at The Catholic University of America. The relationship that began that day between this young priest and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was to last more than a lifetime.

Bishop Thomas J. Shahan, rector of The Catholic University of America and founder of the National Shrine, appointed Father Sheen to the theology faculty in 1926. In his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, Archbishop Sheen recounted a meeting during his second year of teaching in which the “brilliant, gifted, saintly rector” said to him: “Young man, this university has not received into its ranks in recent years anyone who is destined to shed more light and luster upon it than yourself. God bless you.” Some two years later, on Sunday evening, March 2, 1930, the “light and luster” of which Bishop Shahan spoke, made its debut across the American airwaves.

The radio career of Fulton J. Sheen was launched with the inaugural broadcast of *The Catholic Hour* sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Men (NCCM) in cooperation with NBC radio. Monsignor Sheen hosted this program for the next twenty years. The program began on a 17-station network. By 1950, it was carried by 118 NBC affiliates and by short wave around the world to an average weekly listening

audience estimated at 4 million persons just in the United States. In the fall of 1951, now Bishop Sheen, ordained the previous June in Rome, began his *Life is Worth Living* television series. By 1956, he was appearing on 123 ABC-TV stations around the country. This program was replaced in 1961 by *The Fulton Sheen Program*, which ran until 1968.

It was estimated that this two-time Emmy winner (Most Outstanding Television Personality) reached 30 million people a week. When acknowledging the award in 1952, he said, “I feel it is time I pay tribute to my four writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.” In addition to his radio and television work, Bishop Sheen also wrote two news columns: “God Love You” for the Catholic press and “Bishop Sheen Speaks” for the secular press.

The opening of the Marian Year to commemorate the centenary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was set for December 8, 1953. The American bishops saw this celebration as the perfect time to launch their appeal to complete the construction of the National Shrine, which had stalled in 1932 with the death of Bishop Shahan. In cooperation with this effort, the NCCM arranged for *The Catholic Hour* to be broadcast from the Crypt Church at 2 p.m. (EST) each Sunday in November over 143 NBC stations.

To further encourage the faithful, a Kinescope titled “America’s Shrine to Mary,” featuring Bishop Sheen was filmed in the Crypt Church in November. It



aired on Thursday, December 3, 1953, between 10:30 and 11:00 p.m. Fifteen minutes before airtime, the good Bishop gave a 15-minute radio address on the Mutual Broadcasting Company.

The appeal of the American bishops was enthusiastically fulfilled and on November 20, 1959, the National Shrine was dedicated. Bishop Sheen walked in the entrance procession with the other members of the American hierarchy. For Bishop Sheen however, this route was rather familiar, as he had walked it in a similar liturgical procession almost forty years earlier, before the time of the marble and limestone walls.

Following the completion and dedication of the National Shrine in 1959, the Midnight Mass or first Mass for Christmas was broadcast regularly from the Great Upper Church by ABC-TV. Bishop Sheen was among the earliest and most frequent celebrants and preachers of this Mass. The relationship between the National Shrine and Fulton J. Sheen was a constant. The



Midnight Mass, 1962.

celebration of the tenth anniversary of the dedication of the Shrine on November 11, 1969 featured not only the premiere of *A Solemn Mass for Peace*, composed for the occasion by Jean Langlais, organist of the Basilica of St. Clotilde, Paris, but also the preaching of Bishop Sheen. The Great Upper Church was packed. Father, Monsignor, Bishop, and Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen had been a frequent celebrant and preacher at the National Shrine both during and after his teaching tenure.

In 1974, the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and The Catholic University of America jointly established the Patronal Medal, given in recognition of the contributions of an individual towards the advancement of Marian devotion, theology, and the general appreciation of the place of Mary in the life of the Church, our nation and the University. The first person so honored was Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.



Archbishop Sheen and President Walton presenting him with the Patronal Medal.

Two months before his death, Archbishop Sheen had a moment with Pope John Paul II at Saint Patrick's Cathedral on October 2, 1979, as the new Pontiff was beginning his first pastoral visit to the United States. The Holy Father, who had read many of the writings of Archbishop Sheen, embraced him and said: "You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus. You are a loyal son of the Church" (*Treasure in Clay*). Archbishop Sheen died on December 9, 1979 at the age of 84. A life-long friend of the Shrine, his Masses and sermons, whether nationally televised or not, contributed much to its growth. In 1989, friends and benefactors installed the marble lectern/pulpit in the Crypt Church as a tribute to the memory of this man of rhetorical and philosophical eloquence.

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints officially opened the Cause of Archbishop Sheen on September 14, 2002, granting him the title "Servant of God." The Vatican announced on June 28, 2012 that the life of Fulton J. Sheen was one of "heroic virtue," for which he received the title "Venerable Servant of God," moving his Cause one-step closer to beatification and then canonization. ☩

*Visit the National Shrine bookstore online at www.nationalshrineshops.com for the writings and autobiography of Archbishop Sheen or DVDs of the television series *Life is Worth Living*.*