

FULTON J. SHEEN

"I should like to know two things -- first, what the modern world is thinking about; second, how to answer the errors of modern philosophy in the light of the philosophy of St. Thomas."

In one of my novels there is a school janitor who goes about his duties wearing a headset, listening to Fulton Sheen on tape. How many readers now catch the allusion?

Sheen's tapes are still available, and videos too, that unforgettable voice still at our electronic beck and call. In them he is retreat master, apologist for the faith, expositor of Christian philosophy, a patient, practiced performer whose range and register kept a generation on the edge of their seats. A television star in the first generation of the medium, Fulton Sheen spoke on a set that combined a rectory study and the classroom at The Catholic University where he taught for decades. The books on the studio shelves were props, but the blackboard was functional and often in use.

As a monsignor, he had lectured in a cloak. The first time I saw him was in the auditorium of Holy Angels Academy in Minneapolis. While he was being introduced, he sat in his chair like Lincoln in his monument. When he stood to the welcoming applause, his head was bowed, the dark cloak wrapped tightly about him. And then the arms went out, the crimson lining of the cloak caught the light and seemed to burst into flame, his

deepset eyes swept the audience. "God love you!"

At a certain level of sophistication, it was *de rigueur* not to take Fulton Sheen seriously, to lift a brow at his theatrics, to suggest that he was fine for the groundlings, but...

Every teacher simplifies, and Fulton Sheen simplified. But the manner, the histrionics, the studied poses, had a single aim. To convey to his listener the message of Christ. He was a show-off in the service of the cross.

Like so many other extraordinary churchmen, Fulton Sheen came out of the Peoria diocese. He was born in El Paso -- El Paso, Illinois. He was educated at the parish school in Peoria, went on to St. Viator's in Bourbonnais, Illinois (what a salad of languages the midwest is), completed his preparation for the priesthood at the St. Paul Seminary and was ordained for Peoria in 1919 at the age of 24.

After two years of graduate work at the Catholic University, Sheen became dissatisfied with his progress. A professor asked him what he wanted from his education. "I should like to know two things -- first, what the modern world is thinking about; second, how to answer the errors of modern philosophy in the light of the philosophy of St. Thomas." He was advised to go to Louvain in Belgium.

That dual aim captures the point of Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris*, the encyclical that launched the modern Thomistic revival. The return to

Thomas was at once a quest for the truth and for the means to stem the downward slide of modern culture. It was characteristic of Sheen to notice that the name of one of his professors was a palindrome: Leon Noel.

Sheen's unscheduled public debate with S. Alexander, a British philosopher he visited to discuss Alexander's views of God, first put his Thomism to the test. It was Sheen's claim to have read at least once every line Thomas Aquinas wrote.

Sheen retained a youthful look into old age and it is somewhat surprising to realize he was not an ecclesiastical *wunderkind*. He was nearly forty when he was made a monsignor and fifty-five when he became auxiliary bishop of New York, the elevation following on his being named National Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

That missionary role followed on Sheen's remarkable history of converts. One of the more famous of them was Clare Booth Luce, author, congresswoman, wife of the founder of the Time-Life empire. The first time they met, when he had asserted the goodness of God, she became angry, shaking a finger under his nose, asking why a good God had permitted her daughter to die. "In order that through that sorrow, you might be here now starting instructions to know Christ and His Church."

Those notables of the time, like Sheen himself, I suppose, have drifted into anonymity. Footnotes would have to identify most of them. A frequent note was the person coming from communism to the faith. From

the time of the Spanish Civil War, Fulton Sheen had recognized communism as a spiritual as well as a military menace. *Communism and the Conscience of the West* (1948) is one of the more than sixty books that Sheen published, beginning with *God and Intelligence* in 1925. Along with *Philosophy of Science* (1934) and *Philosophy of Religion* (1948), these are Sheen's most academic books. But from the beginning, he was uninterested in an academic career in the narrow sense. He was a Christian philosopher, a priest, an evangelist. Most of his books convey this pastoral aim.

Sheen took part in Vatican II, and was appointed bishop of Rochester in 1966 at the age of seventy-two. Three years later, he resigned and was named Titular Archbishop of Newport (Wales). He died in New York City on December 9, 1979. I passed him on the street not long before that. He was coming down Park Avenue toward Grand Central, in the direction of St. Agnes Church which is located on the street that now bears Sheen's name. I was surprised at how short he seemed. He nodded when I greeted him and there was a flash of the famous smile before he passed on. I had the sense of having seen a celebrity, but it was more than that.

Sheen made a Holy Hour before the Blessed Eucharist every day of his life, keeping a promise he had made on the day he was ordained priest. He tells us too that from the beginning he prayed that he might one day become a bishop. This was not clerical ambition, not in the usual sense. He declined to have his name put forward when the proposal was made early

in his life. It was the fullness of the priesthood he wanted, the power to ordain others priest, to be a successor of the apostles.

There has been no one like him since. Perhaps there was no one like him before. He was an original who throughout his life bore the stamp of the Thomist project. To know the truth and to refute error.

Will his books live? A book lives in being read, of course, and I suspect there are not many readers of his output now. Does he deserve readers? Of this there can be little doubt. His books are knowledgeable without being learned. Oh, one comes upon little inaccuracies that annoy -- and then is annoyed with himself for exhibiting the pedantry of which Fulton Sheen was incapable.

Perhaps it is only as a performer, as the indefatigable radio speaker and television lecturer, that he lives now. It is not only fictional janitors who are tuned in to that unforgettable voice, speaking to us now from that great studio in the sky. Listen and you will hear his trademark adieu.

God love you!