

The Beatification of
Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen
and the Mission of the Catholic Church
in the 21st Century

SEPTEMBER 8, 2026

Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary



A Pastoral Letter from Bishop John O. Barres
to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre

The Beatification of *Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen* and the Mission of the Catholic Church in the 21st Century

BY BISHOP JOHN O. BARRES

Introduction

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Diocese of Rockville Centre rejoices with Pope Leo XIV, the Church in the United States, and Catholics throughout the world on the beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen on September 24, 2026, in St. Louis, Missouri.¹

For me, this historic moment is deeply personal. I was baptized by Archbishop Sheen on October 2, 1960, at Saint Augustine's Church in Larchmont, New York, at a time when my father, Oliver Barres, was working for the Archbishop as a writer for the Propagation of the Faith in New York City.

The logic of the Sacrament of Baptism for every member of the faithful is the call to *Holiness and Mission*.² For a Catholic Bishop who was baptized by Archbishop Sheen, that call carries a particular and humbling responsibility: to be a Spirit-driven instrument of Catholic evangelization on Long Island and beyond.

By God's providence, at this historic moment of Archbishop Sheen's beatification, I have the privilege of serving as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Pontifical Mission Societies in the United States, which includes the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, and as the Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Catholic University of America. Archbishop Sheen was intimately linked with both institutions and an ardent champion of their missions. With his deep connection to them, serving in these capacities gives this occasion added significance for me.

No matter the connection, the beatification is a moment of grace that invites each of us to contemplate anew the life and sanctity of Archbishop Sheen. It also serves as a providential summons to rediscover enduring truths that his teaching so powerfully illuminated,

especially the missionary nature of the Church and the beauty of the Catholic priesthood.

Before seeing Catholic missiology and the gift of the priesthood through the teaching and witness of Archbishop Sheen, it is first fitting to revisit briefly his life and recall some of his most enduring works.

Biographical Sketch of Archbishop Sheen

Born Peter John Sheen on May 8, 1895, the future Archbishop was known from a young age by his mother's maiden name, Fulton. His ecclesial mission would take him far from rural El Paso, Illinois, where he entered the world. Indeed, after preparing for the priesthood in St. Paul, Minnesota, he was ordained a priest on September 20, 1919, for his home Diocese of Peoria, Illinois, and soon after was sent for further studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and then at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, where he earned a doctorate in philosophy.

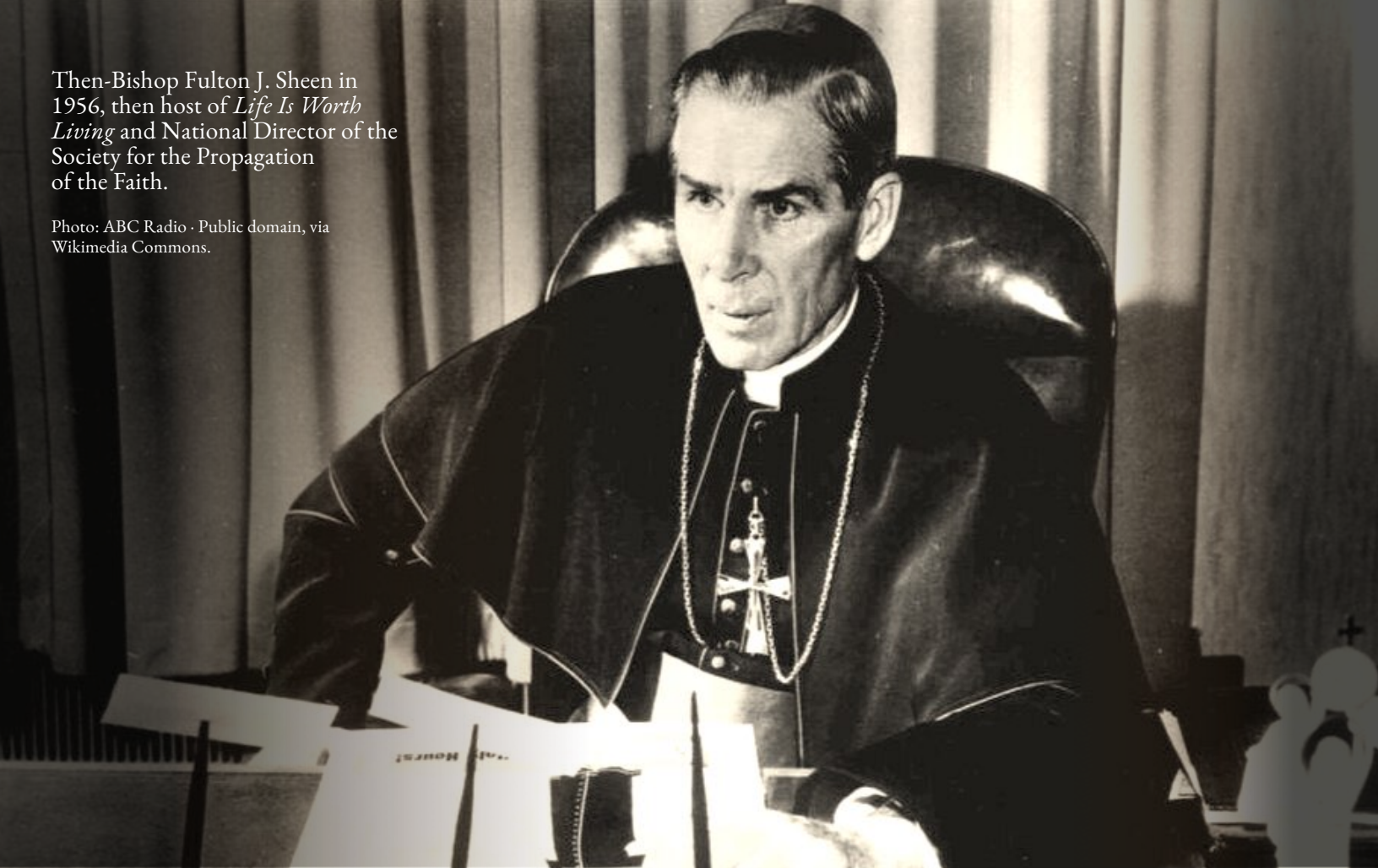
Following a further brief period of study in Europe, he returned to the United States and was assigned as a parochial vicar at Saint Patrick's Church in inner city Peoria. With all his learning, he was always a parish priest. A year later, in 1927, he was released for service as a professor at the Catholic University of America. He would teach there until 1950.

During those years, in addition to teaching and his academic work, Father Sheen became widely known through *The Catholic Hour*, a weekly radio broadcast he began hosting in 1930. His presentation of the Catholic Faith reached audiences across the nation and around the world, leading to invitations to speak and extensive travel.

As television emerged as a new medium, he was given the opportunity to host his own program. His intellectual gifts, spiritual intensity, and extraordinary

Then-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen in 1956, then host of *Life Is Worth Living* and National Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

Photo: ABC Radio · Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



charisma made *Life Is Worth Living* a primetime success, at times attracting an audience of ten million viewers. Whether speaking from a radio studio, standing before a television camera, teaching in a university classroom, or preaching from a pulpit, Archbishop Sheen's message remained the same: Jesus Christ.

He was appointed National Director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in 1950, and the following year, he was named an Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of New York. Leading the Propagation of the Faith for sixteen years, then Bishop Sheen made known the needs of the Church in developing parts of the world and raised millions of dollars to support missionary evangelization.

In 1966, he was named Bishop of Rochester, New York, an office he resigned in 1969, as he celebrated fifty years of priesthood. He was then given the honorary title of Archbishop, and during the remaining decade of his life, he continued to preach, teach, write, and evangelize.

His biography is truly remarkable. However, it should not be understood merely as the ascent of an intellectually gifted and exceptionally talented

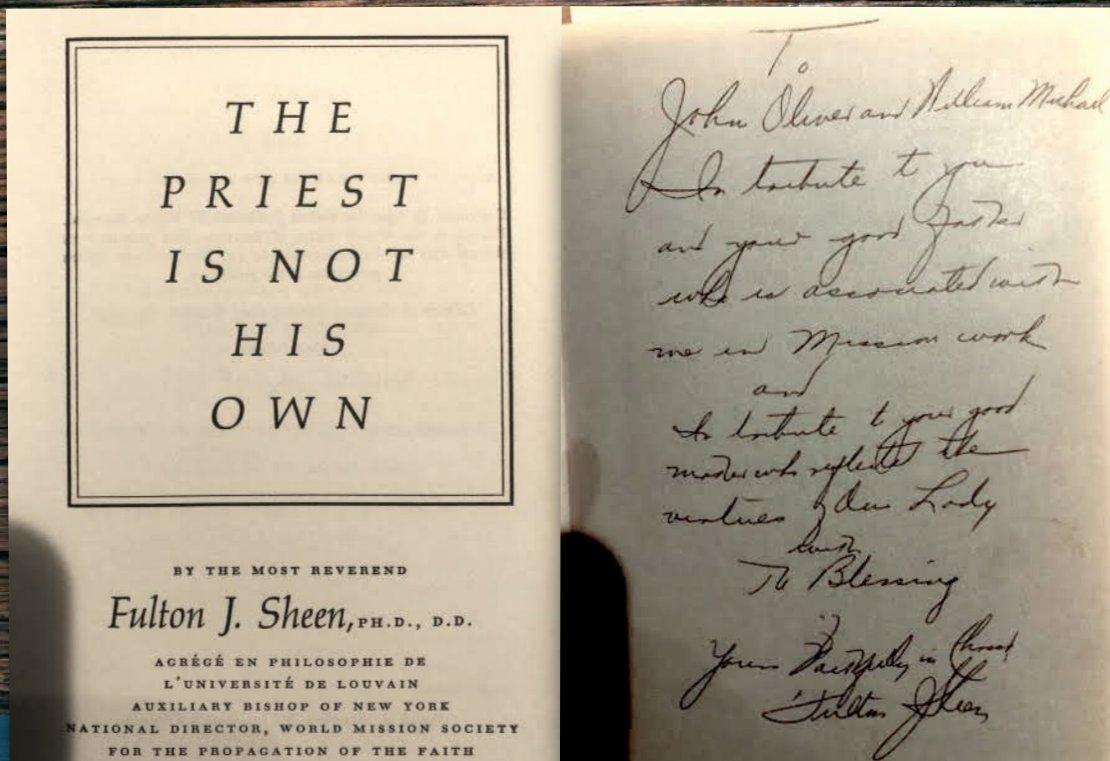
churchman. Rather, it shows the gradual unfolding of a vocation formed in prayer, disciplined by sacrifice, and wholly devoted to making Jesus Christ known through every medium and ministry God placed at his disposal. His life radiates holiness.

Though Archbishop Sheen entered eternal life on December 9, 1979, his best-known works continue to uplift and inspire people throughout the world.³ They include the following.

Treasure in Clay

In his 1980 autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, Archbishop Sheen reflects on the arc of his life, the development of his spiritual life, and his fire for the Church's global mission. He considers his daily commitment to a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament and asserts "that as Christ is both divine and human, so the mission of every Christian is to be transcendent in lifting eyes to Heaven but also immanent in the care of the way he lives on earth."⁴

In these words, we see the harmony of contemplation and mission. The Christian raises his eyes to heaven not to withdraw from the needs of the world but to learn



Inscribed copy of *The Priest Is Not His Own*, given to Oliver and Marjorie Barres, with the inscribed dedication to their young sons, John Oliver and William Michael.

how to serve the world with the mind and heart of Christ. Prayer purifies, directs, and intensifies the call to mission.

The Priest Is Not His Own

The Priest Is Not His Own is a great American Catholic classic on the theology and spirituality of the priesthood. In 1963, when the book was published, Archbishop Sheen gave a copy to my father, Oliver, and my mother, Marjorie. He dedicated the gift to their two sons—my younger brother and me—with this inscription, written in his own hand on the inside cover:

To John Oliver and William Michael:

In tribute to you and your good father who is associated with me in Mission work and in tribute to your good mother who reflects the virtues of Our Lady.

*With the Blessing of
Yours Faithfully in Christ,*

+Fulton Sheen

In this beautiful meditation on priestly life, Archbishop Sheen emphasizes the spiritual interdependence of the priest and his people, a truth that must never be forgotten. He says, “The moral and spiritual life of the priest is related in two ways to the Mystical Body of Christ. His holiness helps to make the faithful holy. The sanctity of the Christian community, in turn, helps to make him holy.”⁵

The renewal of the priesthood and the renewal of the Church are inseparable. Holy priests help form a holy people, while the faith, prayers, sacrifices, and witness of the Catholic faithful sustain priests in their own pursuit of holiness. We might say missionary fruitfulness comes from this mutual sanctification.

Life of Christ

In his classic *Life of Christ*, published in 1958, Archbishop Sheen urges us to read, know, love, and live the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. His synthetic and striking reflections help readers penetrate the mysteries presented in those Gospel narratives.

Here is one soul-stirring example: “Our Lord wanted the great drama of Calvary to be played not once, but

for every age of His own choosing. He wanted men not to be readers about His Redemption, but actors in it, offering up their body and blood with His in the re-enactment of Calvary, saying with Him, “This is my body and this is my blood.”⁶

For Archbishop Sheen, the mystery of Christ is never merely a subject to be studied. It is a mystery to be entered, lived, and proclaimed.

Three to Get Married

Published in 1951, Sheen’s *Three to Get Married* is a timeless classic on the Sacrament of Marriage. It is known both for its inspiring theology, spirituality of marriage and family, and its realism about the daily, sanctifying crosses that married couples carry together.

Its essential insight is expressed in the title: it takes “three to get married.” When Jesus Christ is at the heart and center of a marriage—and when that marriage is united to the mission of mercy of his Church—a married couple and their family can, in the words of Pope Francis, “transform the world and history.”⁷

It shows, too, that the missionary nature of the Church is lived not only in distant lands or through public preaching. It is also lived in the domestic Church, where spouses witness to the faithful and fruitful love of Christ, where children first learn to pray and are formed in the Faith, and where the joys and crosses of daily life become occasions of grace.

Archbishop Sheen’s Presence on Television and Other Media

Lastly, we remember Archbishop Sheen’s presence on television, especially *Life Is Worth Living*, and use of other forms of media.⁸ These broadcasts capture his compelling, biblically rich, and doctrinally substantial preaching and teaching. They also demonstrate his remarkable appeal to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Archbishop Sheen understood that the Church must enter the contemporary means of communication with confidence, creativity, intellectual seriousness, and evangelical charity. He did not dilute the Gospel to make it suitable for modern media. Rather, he brought the fullness of the Gospel into those media with clarity, beauty, conviction, and humor.

How blessed we are to have inherited such a rich treasury of writings and media appearances from Archbishop Sheen. He remains accessible, close to us,

and his voice continues to call the Church to missionary boldness, Eucharistic contemplation, intellectual clarity, and personal holiness.

Having considered principal events in the life of Archbishop Sheen and surveyed some of his enduring works, we turn now to the missionary nature of the Church that he knew so well and which animated his life.

The Beatification of Archbishop Sheen and the Renewal of 21st Century Contemplative Catholic Missiology

In the late 1990s, while a graduate student priest in Rome, I made my annual retreats on the campus of the Pontifical Urbanianum University, which overlooks the Vatican, at the *Centro Internazionale di Animazione Missionaria* – the International Center for Missionary Animation. I always loved that name; it is a proclamation in itself.

The first time I entered the chapel of that retreat house, I found large statues of Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux – co-patrons of the Church’s global mission work. I also discovered a large bust of Archbishop Sheen in the library.

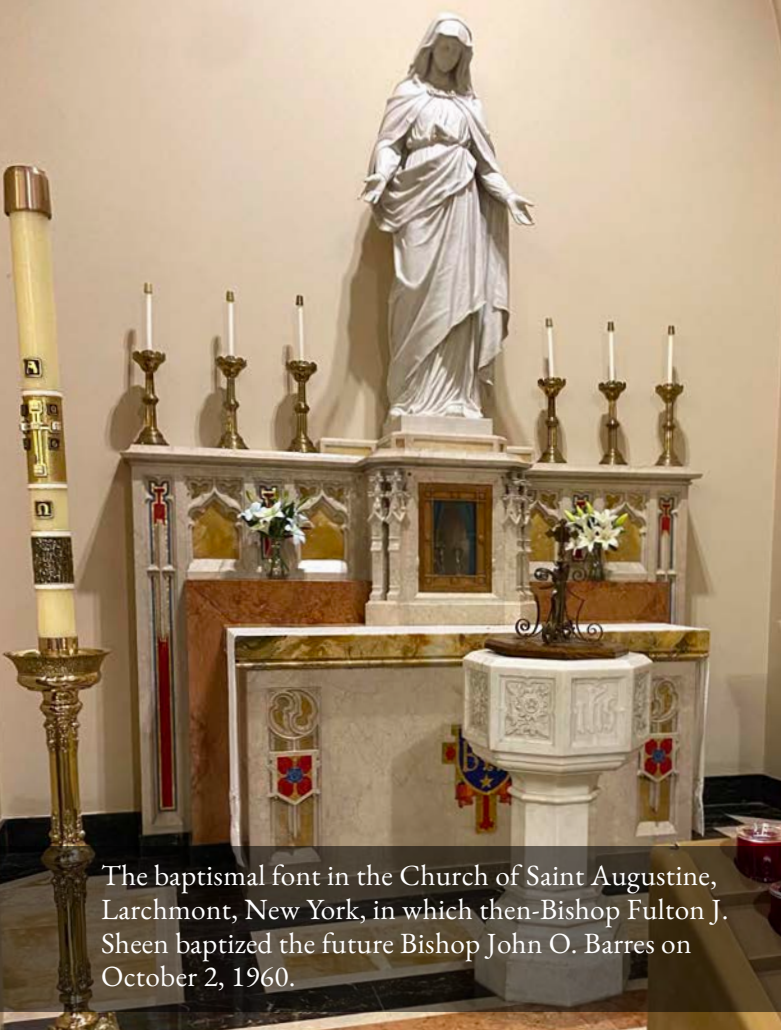
I thought to myself how beautiful that our American Saint Paul of Catholic worldwide mission is at the very heart of this retreat house that serves primarily priests and religious from developing countries.

And then a few years later a more knowledgeable priest said to me: “Bishop Sheen’s bust is in the library because he paid for the retreat house!”

Even so, the connection is fitting. Archbishop Sheen is rightly and forever linked to the Church’s missionary efforts. Yet the remarkable fruitfulness of those efforts also reflects the generosity of countless American Catholics who have prayerfully supported the Church’s mission throughout the world.

As Catholic Americans, we can be humbly proud that our philanthropy has supported the Pontifical Mission Societies, the Propagation of the Faith, and the World Mission Sunday second collection.

This prayerful financial support has advanced the global mission of the Catholic Church on every continent in so many powerful ways and it is important that we continue and increase that history of generosity in the 21st century.



The baptismal font in the Church of Saint Augustine, Larchmont, New York, in which then-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen baptized the future Bishop John O. Barres on October 2, 1960.

Recently, I wrote a piece for the Pontifical Mission Societies' *Mission* magazine. It was a very moving experience, especially since my father, Oliver Barres, wrote for the same magazine in the 1950s and 1960s under the direction of Archbishop Sheen.

Many of my father's articles ended up as chapters in his book on Catholic worldwide mission entitled, *World Mission Windows*, which was published by Alba House in 1963, just two years before the Second Vatican Council's document on the missions, *Ad Gentes*.

I recently re-read the book and was amazed how the missiology and Catholic Social Justice teaching are as relevant and on point today as they were in 1963 before the Council.

The great Catholic missiologists in history like Archbishop Sheen teach us that a deep passion and conviction about Catholic global mission makes us more effective missionaries in daily life in our families, parishes, dioceses, universities, hospitals, institutions, and especially in the secular public square. Therefore, understanding the Church's missionary nature and being invested in those efforts, in whatever form, is crucial for every Catholic.

When Archbishop Sheen baptized me at Saint Augustine's Church, I can only imagine his riveting voice saying, *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*, as he poured water over my head in the presence of my parents, godparents, four older sisters and family friends.

Providentially, Archbishop Sheen was not only baptizing me but, in a certain sense, sending me out as a future Successor of the Apostles and Diocesan Bishop on Catholic worldwide mission.

My parents Oliver and Marjorie had both been ordained Congregational Protestant ministers from the Yale Divinity School but had converted and entered the Catholic Church in 1955. My father's book *One Shepherd, One Flock* describes how they gradually came to embrace the truth claims of the Catholic Church, truth claims that are the fulcrum of the Church's call to worldwide mission.

My parents were friends with great Catholic missiologists like Father John Considine, M.M., often considered the missiological architect of Maryknoll's approach to the missions.⁹ They were also friends with Bishop William McNaughton, M.M., who, as the Bishop of the Diocese of Incheon, Korea, attended sessions of the Second Vatican Council while still only in his thirties.¹⁰

The holy lives, ecclesial missions, and inspirational teachings of these great Catholic figures have inspired my life and mission as a 21st century American Catholic Bishop. They also illuminate the Church's teaching on mission and evangelization and inspire our own integration of that teaching in our 21st century Catholic witness.

Key Themes of Catholic Missiology

All Catholic documents on missiology and evangelization from the Second Vatican Council's *Ad Gentes* (1965) and Pope Saint Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) to Pope Saint John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), and Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* (2026) share certain critical themes. Recalling these themes in the following points helps us better understand Archbishop Sheen's missionary motivation and contribution, as well as our own call to missionary evangelization.¹¹

- Catholic missiology is grounded in the doctrine and experience of the Trinity. The saints open their souls contemplatively to the indwelling presence of the

Holy Trinity, and it is precisely this indwelling of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that launches them on their unique Trinitarian ecclesial missions to make disciples of all nations. The great missionary saints understand that the Biblical and Eucharistic mission of the Church is animated by the presence of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and expressed in the mission mandate of Matthew 28:19-20: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

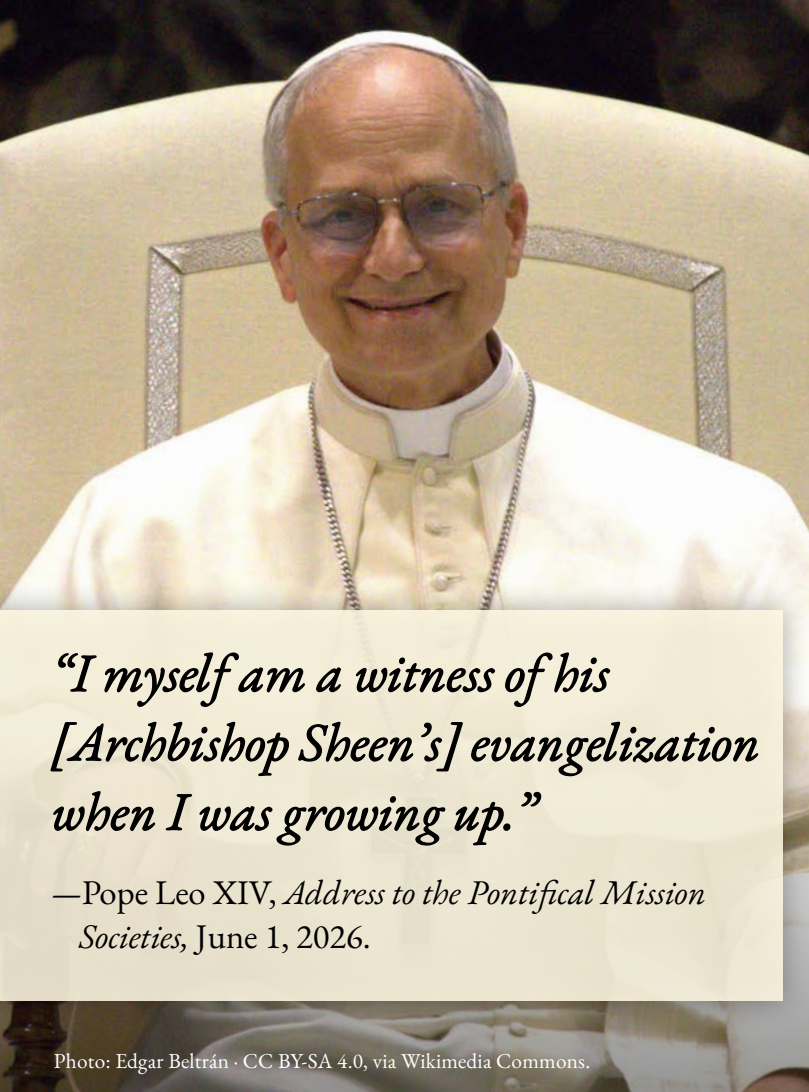
- Jesus Christ is the unique Redeemer of the World. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Way, the Truth and the Life for all peoples, cultures, geographies, and moments of history.
- As “the universal sacrament of salvation,” the Catholic Church is by its very nature missionary.¹²
- All Catholics are called to be missionaries and to be constantly open to what Pope Leo XIV calls “missionary conversion.”¹³ All Catholic parishes, dioceses, universities, hospitals, and institutions must seek to deepen their spirit of “missionary conversion.”
- Catholic evangelization requires all Catholics to be both witnesses and teachers of the Faith in the context of our universal baptismal call to holiness and mission.
- All Catholic evangelization is focused on the mysterious power of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and all Catholic evangelization requires what Pope Saint Paul VI called a “crucifying effort.”¹⁴
- The vibrant living of the Beatitudes, Matthew 25, the spiritual and corporal works of Mercy, and every dimension of the interdependent Gospel of Human Life and Catholic Social Justice teaching are critical to the witness and progress of Catholic evangelization.¹⁵
- Pope Saint John Paul II stresses: “The Church proposes. She imposes nothing. Open the Doors to Christ!”¹⁶ An essential component of Catholic evangelization is the Catholic emphasis on Religious Liberty seen in the Second Vatican Council’s *Declaration on Religious Liberty*.
- Catholic evangelization and mission require fidelity to every dimension of the Church’s doctrine. Catholic evangelization and missiology cannot be separated from Catholic Trinitarian theology, Christology,

Pneumatology, Biblical and Fundamental Theology, Dogmatic or Systematic Theology, Sacramental Theology, Moral Theology (including the Gospel of Life and Catholic Social Justice Teaching), Spiritual Theology, Anthropology (the Church’s view of the human person), and Eschatology (the Church’s teaching of the Last Things).

- Fidelity to every dimension of Catholic doctrine and evangelization is in service of the ecumenical and interfaith mission of the Catholic Church. Ecumenical and interfaith progress occur when the Catholic Church is open to sharing the liberating and objective truths of her teaching in a spirit of charity, humility, and mercy.
- Catholic mission flows through the inspired word of God, contemplative lectio divina and a deep Pauline conviction that “the Word of God cannot be chained” (2 Timothy 2:9).
- Catholic mission flows through the cosmic power of the Catholic Mass, silent contemplative adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, love for the Seven Sacraments, and a sacramental theology and spirituality of life.
- The laity are “salt, light and leaven” because of “their deep involvement and full participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the earth, the world and the human community.”¹⁷ The primary arena of the Apostolate of the Laity and their baptismal call to holiness and mission is in the secular world, in secular networks, and in the temporal order, where they are the Light of Christ.

The Second Vatican Council’s teaching from *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* is summarized and focused in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* in Canon 225-2 which reads: “[The laity] have also, according to the condition of each, the special obligation to permeate and perfect the temporal order of things with the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, particularly in conducting secular business and exercising secular functions, they are to give witness to Christ.”

Pope Saint Paul VI expresses this eloquently in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975): “[The laity’s] own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents,



*“I myself am a witness of his
[Archbishop Sheen’s] evangelization
when I was growing up.”*

—Pope Leo XIV, *Address to the Pontifical Mission
Societies*, June 1, 2026.

Photo: Edgar Beltrán · CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

professional work, suffering. The more Gospel-inspired lay people there are engaged in these realities, clearly involved in them, competent to promote them and conscious that they must exercise to the full their Christian powers which are often buried and suffocated, the more these realities will be at the service of the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

The laity enrich the missionary life of parishes by bringing this lay secular evangelizing perspective into parish life as parish life in turn strengthens them, their marriages, their family lives and their daily engagement in passionately loving the world.¹⁹

Archbishop Sheen knew and lived these central themes of missiology. They kindled in him a burning zeal for mission and lay at the heart of his ministry.

The same must be true of us. Each of us must respond generously to our baptismal call to holiness and mission and become vibrant instruments of missionary conversion in the daily life and mission of the Church.

Mission fields abound. Starting within the home, they encompass the globe. Among these many places, with Pope Leo XIV in *Magnifica Humanitas*, Archbishop Sheen would urge us to remember the digital world, which the Holy Father calls “a new continent to be evangelized.” Archbishop Sheen would have us turn with missionary boldness to this frontier and encourage us to use the emerging technologies of that world, including artificial intelligence, ethically and wherever they can serve the Church’s global mission. Yet he would never allow the means to eclipse the person, for “a human face” must always remain “the center of our history.” Archbishop Sheen would want the 21st century Catholic Contemplative Revolution to guide the 21st century Industrial Revolution.²⁰

May the beatification of Archbishop Sheen renew our understanding of Catholic contemplative missiology and deepen our commitment to living it.

The Beatification of Archbishop Sheen, the Catholic Missionary History of the United States of America, and the Renewal of the Catholic Priesthood in the 21st Century

The history of the Catholic Church in America is a history of bold and intrepid missionary endeavors.

Along with countless consecrated men and women and innumerable members of the laity, holy priests have shaped the history of the United States. Their heroism, evangelizing zeal, and pastoral charity are woven into our nation’s story.

Looking to those priest saints and blessed who labored in this part of God’s vineyard that is *the land of the free and the home of the brave*, we see a wide and beautiful American kaleidoscope of holiness and mission in the Catholic priesthood.

Think of the New York Jesuit martyrs: Saints Isaac Jogues (1607-1646), René Goupil (1608-1642), and Jean de Lalande (d. 1646).

Recall the Redemptorist Saint John Neumann (1811-1860), the Bishop of Philadelphia, and his confrere, Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos (1819-1867).

Consider the missionary hearts of Saint Junípero Serra (1713-1784) in California and Saint Damien of Molokai (1840-1889) in Hawaii.

Remember Blessed Michael McGivney (1852-1890) and the worldwide Catholic mission of the Knights of Columbus.

Call to mind the Capuchin Blessed Solanus Casey (1870-1957), a mystical porter who opened the Doors of Christ to so many souls.

Think, too, of Blessed Stanley Rother (1935-1981), a parish priest-missionary from Oklahoma who died as a parish priest-martyr in Guatemala.

Spanning centuries, the priestly holiness of these saints and blesseds has animated the life of the Church and contributed to our growth as *one nation under God*.

How providential that in this 250th anniversary year of our nation's birth, celebrated this past Fourth of July, this illustrious company of holy priests should grow with the beatification of Archbishop Sheen.²¹ Indeed, it is a fitting time, when pondering his life and role in American Catholic Church history, to consider the insights he offers priests today – men called to that same holiness and missionary boldness.

The Catholic Priesthood: A *Treasure in Clay*

A good place to begin exploring these insights of Archbishop Sheen are his books on the Catholic priesthood: *The Priest Is Not His Own* (1963), *Those Mysterious Priests* (1974) and his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay* (1980), as well as his retreats to priests.²²

It is worthwhile to ponder a few of the soon-to-be Blessed's insights into priestly life from *Treasure in Clay*. In the opening chapter, Archbishop Sheen states that in the vocational calling of the Catholic priest there "is enacted the frightening tension between the dignity of his calling and the corruptibility of his clay."²³

What exactly does this mean? It means that there is a glorious transformation in a man's being or ontology that occurs when he receives the Sacrament of Holy Orders at his priestly ordination. This change in his being, this imprinting of a sacerdotal sacramental character, calls him to the heights of holiness in his vocation.

However, that is not the complete story. The other part of the story is a man's fallen human nature – evident in the absurdity of a priest's failings and weaknesses, his stupidities, banalities, and blind spots, and seen in the



Reverend Fulton J. Sheen, early in his priesthood.

Photo: Harris & Ewing · Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

struggles a priest has with the capital sins of pride, anger, avarice, lust, sloth, envy, and gluttony.

There is a tension between the nobility of priestly ontology and fallen human nature.

The incongruity can result in both tragedy and comedy. For instance, I only understood the novels and literary technique of J.F. Powers (1917-1999) in *Morte d'Urban* (1962) and *Wheat that Springeth Green* (1988) when I finally appreciated that they were about this tension.²⁴ Powers' humor and charitable satire about the daily realities of the clerical world and the comic foibles, quirks, and eccentricities of priests demonstrate at the same time a love and esteem for the *treasure in clay* that is the Catholic priesthood.

Archbishop Sheen owned up to his own weaknesses and clerical pettiness. He writes: "The keeping of the scorecard of past wrongs, the chewing of a cud of resentment, licking of the wound, and the memories of how we received them, the playing of the tapes of injustices real or imagined, were so many proofs that I had not thoroughly digested what my Faith taught me and my lips confessed, that all trials come from the Hands of the Loving God."²⁵

The struggle between acrimony and a priestly spirit of humility and magnanimity occurs in every priest's heart. It is nice to know that a bishop and priest soon-to-be beatified struggled with what priests and bishops struggle with every day. It reminds us holiness is possible.

G.K. Chesterton, the primary literary influence on Archbishop Sheen, once said: "The glad Good News of the Gospel is the Good News of Original Sin." God works mysteriously through the human weaknesses of priests as he worked through the betrayals of Peter and the thorns in the flesh of Paul.

Archbishop Sheen writes: "Vocation is not immune to failures. We pray and do not become more spiritual; we mortify and still are tempted; we take a resolution and still return to backbiting. When we have labored 'all the night and have taken nothing' we are summoned to recommence our response to vocation. There is not a priest in the world who has not had in his life a long chain of generous beginnings, the rowing out again into the very sea we thought was barren. Even the Church itself is in the process of beginning again. She is persecuted, sometimes driven out of a country, but she comes back, as from persecuted Poland came the successor of Peter ...The Second Look meant to me

what it has always meant to all my brother priests – the joy of beginning again. Seventy times seven, you can always begin a new chapter, start a second mile, catch a second wind, launch out into the deep, excavate new layers for untold spiritual wealth. There is always, in the Church, that wonderful Land of Beginning Again."²⁶

With these insights of Archbishop Sheen, priests can appreciate again the gift of the priesthood they have received is a *treasure in clay*, a treasure calling them to heroic holiness right in the daily experiences of their weaknesses.²⁷ How powerful, especially among the many and various challenges of priestly life, to hear this word from Archbishop Sheen and have his witness of sanctity.

Jesus Christ as Victim on the Cross United With the Catholic Priest as Victim on the Cross

Another point on priestly life from Archbishop Sheen worth considering is the Catholic priest as victim on the Cross united to Jesus Christ the Victim on the Cross. It is a key theme that permeates and guides all three of Archbishop Sheen's books on the priesthood.

In *The Priest Is Not His Own*, he writes: "There is nothing else in this book but that idea. And if the reader would like to hear that chord struck a hundred times, he may now proceed."²⁸ He continues: "Our priesthood is best illumined in the fires of victimhood."²⁹

The priest as victim is absolutely central to Archbishop Sheen's theology and spirituality of the priesthood. The priest is both Lamb victim and Shepherd victim.

He writes: "We priests are not only shepherds, but also lambs...The priest playing the role of a shepherd often goes to his death as a lamb. The shepherd who would give more abundant life to the lost sheep is bound to have wolves howling about him and thus be led ultimately to his death."³⁰

He shows how the priest is both Lamb and Shepherd in his celebration of the Mass: "In the Offertory, the priest is like a lamb led to the slaughter. In the Consecration, he is the lamb slaughtered as the sacrificial victim."³¹

Archbishop Sheen connects Christ the Victim with the priest victim as celebrant of the cosmic missionary mysticism of the Catholic Mass: "In the Consecration, Christ renews His sacrifice in an unbloody manner. The act of love that prompted that sacrifice is eternal, for He is the Lamb 'slain in sacrifice ever since the world was

made' (Revelation 13:8). Each time the priest speaks the words of consecration, he applies Calvary and its fruits to a particular place and a particular time. Localized at one point in space and one moment in time, Calvary is now universalized in space and time. The priest takes the Cross of Calvary with Christ still hanging on it, and he plants it in New York, Paris, Cairo and Tokyo and in the poorest mission of the world. We are not alone at the altar; we are in horizontal relations with Africa, Asia, our own parish, our city – everyone. Clinging to the chasuble of every priest, for example, are six hundred million souls in China who as yet know not Christ. When the priest takes the host in his hand, he is looking at fingers gnarled from slavery in the salt mines of Siberia. As he stands before the altar, his feet are the bleeding feet of refugees tramping westward toward barbed wire, beyond which lies freedom..."³²

How deeply Archbishop Sheen resonates with Pope Saint John Paul II in his 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, who says that every Mass has "a cosmic character"; every Mass "is celebrated on the Altar of the World."³³

The cosmic power of the Catholic Mass and the contemplative adoration of the Blessed Sacrament flows through the priest's interior life, evangelizing pastoral charity, and liturgical *ars celebrandi* as it flows through the mysterious power of the Cross.

When a priest rejects the Cross, consciously or unconsciously, his integration and living of the priesthood stalls and short-circuits.

Only a priest who understands how an existential embrace of the Cross in all its mystery is critical to the living out of the ontological change that occurred in his being at his priestly ordination can embrace and live his priestly identity and mission.

In *Those Mysterious Priests*, Archbishop Sheen writes: "Those who are priests can discover that beautiful paradox of the heart: that it is hard to be a good priest-victim, but it is harder not to be."³⁴

The priest who embraces and lives Christ the Victim lives the mystical Paschal Mystery logic of his ontology. Rejection of the Cross and Christ the Victim results in a constant angst-ridden conflict in the interior life, mind, heart, soul and body of the priest. Hence, Sheen's wise conclusion "that it is hard to be a good priest-victim, but it is harder not to be."³⁵

In *Treasure in Clay*, Archbishop Sheen writes: "The dialectic between the sublimity of the vocation on the

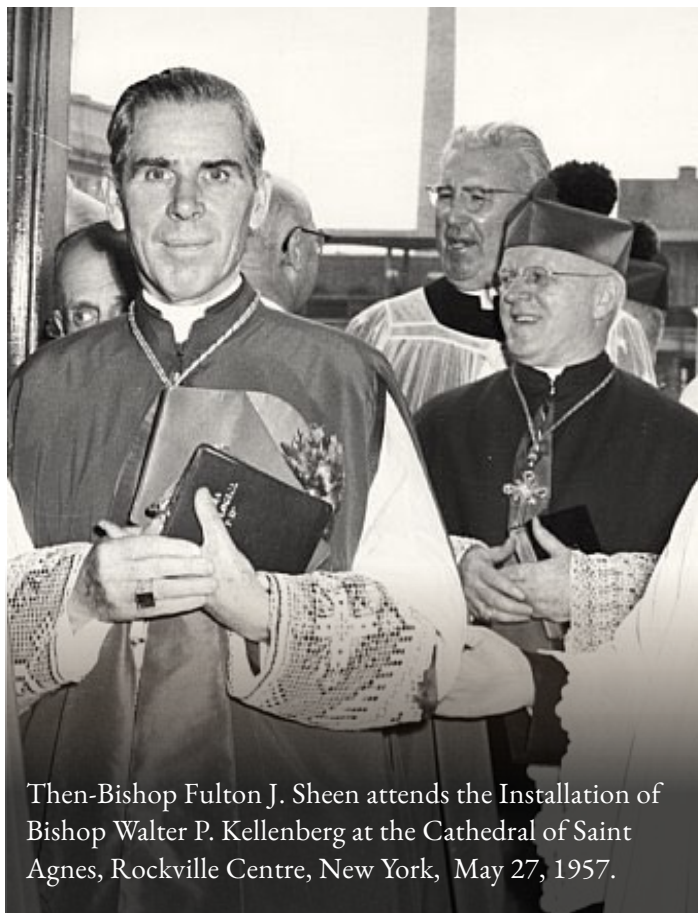
one hand, and the frailty of the human clay on the other, is a kind of crucifixion. Each priest is crucified on the vertical beam of the God-given vocation and on the horizontal beam of the simple longing of the flesh and a world that so often beckons to conformity with it. The best vintage of wine is sometimes served in tin cups. To be a priest is to be called to be the happiest of men, and yet to be daily committed to the greatest of all wars – the one waged within. But God is constantly remolding that clay, giving it a second and third, and even seventy times seven changes. The prophet Jeremiah was bidden to go to a potter's shop."³⁶

This interior war can only be waged in and through the power and wisdom of the Cross.

Archbishop Sheen says that the priest discerns his life and autobiography in and through the Cross of Christ.

In *Treasure in Clay*, Archbishop Sheen reflects on the potential delusions of writing one's own autobiography and his understanding that the autobiography of every priest can only be written through, in, and from the Cross.

He writes: "*That autobiography is the crucifix* – the inside story of my life not in the way it walks the stage of time, but how it was recorded, taped and written in the Book of Life. It is not the autobiography that I tell you, but the autobiography *I read to myself*. In the crown of thorns, I see my pride, my grasping for earthly toys in the pierced Hands, my flight from shepherding care in the pierced Feet, my wasted love in the wounded Heart, and my prurient desires in the flesh hanging from Him like purple rags. Almost every time I turn a page of that book, my heart weeps at what *eros* has done to *agape*, what the 'I' has done to the 'Thou,' what the professed friend has done to the Beloved. But there have been moments in that autobiography when my heart leaped with joy at being invited to His Last Supper; when I grieved when one of my own left His side to blister His lips with a kiss; when I tried falteringly to help carry His gibbet to the Hill of the Skull; when I moved a few steps closer to Mary to help draw the thrust sword from her heart; when I hoped to be now and then in life a disciple like the disciple called 'Beloved'; when I rejoiced at bringing other Magdalenes to the Cross to become the love we fall just short of in all love; when I tried to emulate the centurion and press cold water to thirsty lips; when, like Peter, I ran to an empty tomb and then, at a seashore, had my heart broken a thousand times as He kept asking over and over again in my life: 'Do you love Me?' These are the more edifying moments of the



Then-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen attends the Installation of Bishop Walter P. Kellenberg at the Cathedral of Saint Agnes, Rockville Centre, New York, May 27, 1957.



Then-Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen preaching at the dedication of the Grotto, Church of Notre Dame, New Hyde Park, New York, August 5, 1945.

autobiography which can be written as a kind of second and less authentic edition than the real autobiography written two thousand years ago.”³⁷

Think of every priesthood ordination class photo in every seminary around the world. Pray for the souls of the deceased priests in those class pictures and pray for the holiness of the priests in those class pictures who are in ministry and those who are retired.

As we walk through the halls of the seminaries of the world, the priests in these ordination pictures whisper to us. They call out to us. Each of them has a story that reflects the story of Peter whom Archbishop Sheen loves so much.

Like Peter, each priest has a story of graces embraced and moments of great fidelity and victory. But each of them also has a history of betrayal and treachery. In those moments of betrayal and treachery, “Peter was willing to confess Christ the Priest, but not Christ the Victim.”³⁸

Archbishop Sheen is realistic about the weaknesses of human nature and the weaknesses experienced by every priest: “Every bad priest is close to being a good one; every good priest is in danger of being a bad one. The line between sanctity and sin is a fine one. It is easy to cross, and the one who crosses can quickly gain momentum in either direction³⁹...Each priest is a man with a body of soft clay. To keep that treasure pure, he has to be stretched out on a cross of fire.”⁴⁰

A moment-by-moment vigilant living in the presence of God is critical to a priest’s moment-by-moment fidelity to his vocation and ecclesial mission.

Finally, Archbishop Sheen seeks the connection between the Catholic Priest as Victim and Our Lady as Victim at the Foot of the Cross: “Once a priest-victim has given himself to Christ, as Mary did for the service of the Son and the regeneration of the world, then everything else becomes secondary. That is why once one totally faces Christ, as Mary did, he will do for Christ what he would otherwise never think of doing. Even when he fails, he will appeal to her intercession, for she knows what it is to lose God – she having lost Him for three days. At the end of a priest-victim’s lifetime of devotion, regardless of his failings, omissions and treacheries, he will hear the Divine Judge say approvingly, ‘I’ve heard My Mother speak of you.’”⁴¹

As the beatification of Archbishop Sheen approaches, priests have a providential opportunity to rediscover his

compelling vision of the priest as victim: one who is united with Christ not only as Shepherd but also as the Lamb who offers himself for the life of the flock. Archbishop Sheen teaches that priestly sacrifice is not a tragic burden to be endured but the deepest expression of priestly identity, lived especially at the altar, where the priest joins his sufferings, limitations, prayer, and pastoral charity to Christ's perfect self-offering.

In an age tempted by comfort and self-preservation, Archbishop Sheen calls priests to the liberating joy of the Cross, and his beatification offers a timely model of priestly holiness.

Conclusion: Archbishop Sheen, Catholic Contemplative Missiology and the Priesthood in the 21st Century

The beatification of Archbishop Sheen invites the Church to receive anew the missionary fire that animated him and his priesthood. He understood that the Church does not possess the Gospel for herself. He knew she receives it as a gift to be proclaimed to every people, culture, and continent.

At a moment when humanity is both more connected and seemingly more divided than ever before, Archbishop Sheen's witness summons us to a renewed Catholic missiology, one that is deeply contemplative, truly universal, and courageous in its engagement with every dimension of human life. The "missionary conversion" called for by Pope Leo XIV, and so needed in the 21st century, will begin wherever believers allow the love of Christ to conquer their hearts.

For Archbishop Sheen, contemplation and mission were never competing demands. His fidelity to the daily Holy Hour inspired his preaching, writing, and service to the Church. He went before the Eucharistic Lord so that he might be sent forth with the mind and heart of Christ. His life therefore reminds every baptized Catholic that authentic mission begins with the Eucharistic Lord at Mass and in Adoration. There we meet Jesus Christ and contemplate his face, allowing his gaze to transform us and help us carry his mercy into our homes, parishes, workplaces, and communities.

This same union of contemplation and mission is indispensable to the renewal of the Catholic priesthood. As we celebrate Archbishop Sheen's beatification, we pray that priests everywhere may rediscover the Holy Hour as a privileged school of priestly identity, holiness, and pastoral charity. We pray, too, for a bold and abundant harvest of priestly vocations—for young men

willing to become contemplative missionaries, rooted before the Eucharistic Lord and ready to pour out their lives for the evangelization and sanctification of the world. Through Archbishop Sheen's intercession, may our priests be renewed in holiness, our seminarians strengthened in fidelity, and many generous hearts opened to the call of Christ.

Finally, may the soon-to-be Blessed Fulton J. Sheen intercede for a new and creative Pentecost in Catholic missionary communications and for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the entire Church. May his witness help us proclaim the ancient Faith with renewed confidence, imagination, clarity, and love. Above all, may he teach us again that holiness and mission are inseparable.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



+ John O. Barres

Most Reverend John O. Barres, S.T.D., J.C.L., D.D.

Bishop of Rockville Centre



Endnotes

Page 1

¹ Pope Leo XIV spoke of Archbishop Sheen in an *Address to Participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies* on June 1, 2026, as follows: “It is also providential that this year, on 24 September, in St. Louis, Missouri, a renowned National Director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in the United States of America, the Venerable Fulton J. Sheen, will be beatified. Archbishop Sheen was a light of faith, hope, and love that shone through the radio and television media for decades. I myself am a witness of his evangelization when I was growing up. His broadcasts touched millions with the hope of the Gospel and his initiatives and efforts resulted in enormous spiritual and material aid to the Churches in areas of first evangelization. May our new Blessed be an example for all of the National and Diocesan Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies throughout the world.”

² *Holiness and Mission* is the episcopal motto of Bishop Barres, taken from Pope Saint John Paul II’s Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*.

Page 2

³ For a full and most helpful bibliography, see Kathleen L. Riley, *Fulton J. Sheen: An American Catholic Response to the Twentieth Century* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2003), 321-349.

⁴ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1980), 113.

Page 3

⁵ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), 67.

Page 4

⁶ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1958 (2008 edition)), 403.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Address to Bishops at the World Meeting of Families*, Philadelphia, September 27, 2015.

⁸ The *Catholic Faith Network* continues to broadcast many of these programs and will offer special programming to celebrate Archbishop Sheen’s beatification and to pray for his eventual canonization.

Page 5

⁹ See Robert Hurteau, *A Worldwide Heart: The Life of Maryknoll Father John J. Considine* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

¹⁰ See Bishop John Barres, “Tribute to Maryknoll Missionary Bishop William J. McNaughton, MM,” *Long Island Catholic* (March 2020), 3-5.

¹¹ This section draws extensively on my article “Embracing the Missionary Call” in *Mission: A Magazine for the Pontifical Mission Societies*, Fall 2024.

Page 6

¹² See the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

¹³ See Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, June 1, 2026: “My dear brothers and sisters, the Second Vatican Council insisted that the “Church on earth is by her very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Ad Gentes*, 2). Mindful of this, I invite you all to appreciate the urgency of embracing an **ongoing missionary conversion** and to look together for ways of being a missionary Church for the healing of our world, so fraught with tensions, conflicts and wars. In this important task, the work of the Pontifical Mission Societies remains essential. Let us therefore continue our missionary journey with joy and renewed zeal. In all that we do for the work of evangelization, may we always place Jesus Christ at the center, embracing the beautiful Gospel principle expressed by John the Baptist: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn* 3:30). Entrusting all of you, your collaborators, benefactors and all who share in this vital missionary work to the maternal intercession of the Mother of God, Mary - Queen of Missions - and that of all the missionary saints, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.” (Emphasis added.)

¹⁴ Pope Saint Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 10.

¹⁵ For a helpful summary of the history of Catholic Social Doctrine, see Pope Leo XIV’s 2026 Encyclical Letter, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 25-45.

¹⁶ See Pope Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, 39.

¹⁷ See Pope Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, 15.

Page 7

¹⁸ Pope Saint Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 70.

¹⁹ See Bishop John Barres' February 10, 2026, Address "In the Workshops of Saint Joseph and Saint Josemaria Escriva: A 21st Century Catholic Theology and Spirituality of Work in an Era of Epochal Artificial Intelligence Change and Industrial Revolution," at www.drvc.org. The Address was delivered to the Institute for Human Ecology at The Catholic University of America. This section on the Apostolate of the Laity draws directly from that Address.

²⁰ See Pope Leo XIV, Encyclical Letter, *Magnifica Humanitas*, 238 and 233.

Page 8

²¹ See Bishop Barres' February 10, 2026, Statement "Bishop Barres and the Church of Rockville Centre give God Thanks for the Beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen," at www.drvc.org.

²² This section draws extensively on Bishop Barres' March 31, 2026, Chrism Mass Homily delivered at the Cathedral of Saint Agnes, Rockville Centre, New York. Available at www.drvc.org.

²³ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 4.

Page 9

²⁴ See Nathan Kilpatrick, "'Light Even More than Love': The Irony of the Cross in J.F. Powers' *Wheat that Springeth Green*," in *Logos* 18:3 Summer 2015, 57-80.

²⁵ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 345.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 330 and 343.

²⁷ Archbishop Sheen explores the same theme in the tenth chapter of *The Priest Is Not His Own*, entitled "The Priest as Simon and Peter." *The Priest Is Not His Own* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 162-184.

²⁸ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

Page 10

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

³³ Pope Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 8.

³⁴ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Those Mysterious Priests* (Staten Island, NY: St. Pauls/Alba House Books, 1974), xi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 34.

Page 11

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *The Priest Is Not His Own*, 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁰ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 4.

⁴¹ Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Those Mysterious Priests*, 325.



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

*The Beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen
and the Mission of the Catholic Church
in the 21st Century*

MOST REVEREND JOHN OLIVER BARRES, S.T.D., J.C.L., D.D.

WWW.DRVC.ORG



@RVCDIOCESE



CATHOLIC FAITH NETWORK

(OPTIMUM 29/137, VERIZON FIOS 296,
AND CHARTER SPECTRUM 162/471)

WWW.CFNTV.ORG