

Ex Libris

Fulton J. Sheen

Compiled by
Alexis Walkenstein



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For my future husband.

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Introduction

I call him *my* saint. I also call him my hero, my “New York minute” maneuverer, my bishop in heaven, and my communications master.

But for a long time, all I really knew about Fulton J. Sheen was that he was a famous TV bishop of my parents’ generation. In the ’50s and ’60s, people from all backgrounds—Jews, Christians, and non-believers—gathered around the television on Sunday evenings for Bishop Sheen’s popular broadcasts. When they were children, both my then-Jewish dad in Revere, Massachusetts, and my Catholic mother in suburban Natick, Massachusetts, would gather with family around their TV sets to watch Bishop Sheen’s TV shows *Life Is Worth Living* and later *The Fulton Sheen Program*. Sheen’s charismatic preaching style was joyful, fervent, full of common sense, and at times even hauntingly

prophetic. Everyone wanted to watch the bishop with the chalkboard, piercing eyes, and disarming wit.

I began to know Fulton Sheen around the time I was offered a position as communications director for a diocese in south Florida. When I accepted the job, I knew I was walking into a difficult situation. I would be assisting a new bishop who was assigned to renew and reform a diocese that was still reeling from the sex abuse scandals. I was a faithful Catholic and had covered the Church as a mainstream journalist, but I didn't really know what it would be like to work for a bishop or the Church.

Before I embarked on my 1,400-mile drive from Boston to Florida, I wandered into a local Catholic bookstore and perused the shelves, hoping to find a spiritual work to mark my move and inspire my next assignment. Almost immediately, I plucked *Three to Get Married* by Fulton Sheen from the shelves. Intrigued by the book's topic, I wondered if this holy bishop could help me on two fronts: my newly appointed service to a bishop and the Church as well as my desire for marriage.

After I bought the book, I tossed it into my trunk amid suitcases, boxes, and all my life's possessions. It was soon forgotten, buried in the back of my petite convertible for the unforeseen future. *Three to Get Married* didn't surface until I was getting ready to sell my car and was cleaning out the trunk a few years after I arrived in Florida. When I saw the

book, it was as though it became illuminated, drawing me to it. I heard God say in my heart, *"You can't just have a vocation to marriage and not prepare."*

I read Sheen's book several times and it moved me deeply. Not just because of the topic, but also because Sheen was a teacher who imparted wisdom relevant to every human person striving for meaning in his or her life. He presented the power of the Sacrament of Marriage with great pastoral care and seriousness. His Catholic approach to marriage clashed with the frivolity of our contemporary event-centric culture. But I appreciated that Sheen didn't mince words. Faith comes from hearing the word of God, and Sheen knew who he was as a bishop: a teacher. He fully lived his episcopal office to teach and instruct.

As I read the book, I felt inspired to ask Sheen to intercede for me amid the difficult challenges I was facing at my job. The diocese where I worked was still in ongoing repair after the sex abuse scandals and was currently dealing with a serious financial embezzlement scandal. I instinctively felt that Sheen was the perfect intercessor for me at this moment in my life and for the situation of the diocese I worked in at the time.

I began to read Sheen's many books and watch his television shows. I learned that he taught not just with his provocative and impactful words on the airwaves and in books, but in every way he lived his priestly life. He lived a

charism of being present to people. He didn't remain locked behind the closed doors of a rectory; he spent himself for the Church. He was out with people, serving the laity and taking time for the poor. The presence of Christ in Sheen was not restrained but rather shared—poured out so that all who encountered him might encounter Jesus through his episcopal office.

Sheen's charisma and holy way of life intrigued me, but there was also a personal connection. He was an Emmy-award winning TV bishop, and I had won an Emmy during my local television news days when I worked in New York. In a way, I had been grieving leaving my secular career, but here was this Emmy-toting bishop modeling for me how to bridge both the world of media and the Church. His witness spilled out of traditional Church forums and permeated popular culture. As a bishop, he used his platform to reach millions.

When I worked in mainstream television news, I had seen the power of the platform to do good and inspire even amid the tragic and difficult stories that make up so much of secular news. As a journalist, I felt guided by the Holy Spirit to tell stories of incredible human triumph, witness, and resilience. As God led me from mainstream television news toward more direct evangelization in the Church, I felt called to bring the Gospel to the world through media in a new, bolder way. Sheen was a model for me of this kind of

evangelization. He was also an intercessor as I made this step in my personal witness and expression of the faith.

Clearly, Sheen was my God-sent heavenly reinforcement, a bishop-intercessor not only for me but also for my diocese and the Church. Sheen was a bishop who was unafraid to lead the Church in season and out of season, just the intercessor needed for the newly assigned bishop of my diocese. Sheen is not yet a saint, and I did not know that much about him. But I did know that Sheen was a reformer, and my diocese needed renewal. Sheen was also a master of communications media, and I was working with the media every day. Like Sheen, I strove to teach when I interacted with the press, not just with a mere “no comment” or defensive statements, but with authentic evangelization. I shared positive stories of hope with the religious press, but also with the mainstream media. Sheen was an intercessor and a model for such a time as this.

A few years ago in December, the women in my family took a mini road trip to New York City for a “girls’ weekend,” which included holiday shows, shopping, and some unexpected signs from my new holy friend. Of course, you can’t visit New York without stopping at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. So, we made a visit to the cathedral and a few of us stayed behind to take in the beauty, go to Mass, and spend time in prayer. At one point, I saw my mom and my Aunt Suzanne kneeling behind the main altar, so I knelt down

next to them to unite our prayers as a family. As I knelt, I read the engraved plaque on my kneeler. It was in honor of “Servant of God Fulton J. Sheen” and included a prayer to advance his cause for canonization. I had been asking for Sheen’s intercession, but I had not known that he was on his way to becoming a saint!

My spiritual friendship with Sheen had culminated in this huge grace-filled realization that my new bishop friend was already on his way to becoming a saint. This was a strong confirmation that he was truly helping me—in my work, in my sacrifice of a successful secular career, in my waiting and preparing for a God-sent husband, in my sufferings and joys, and in my family life.

I became lost in the moment, keenly aware that while we sometimes choose the saints we like and are attracted to, at other times *they* choose us. The reality of the saints is that *they are as alive as we are*. This is particularly true in the case of Fulton Sheen, a bishop whose love for life was accompanied by a joy and humor that were contagious. I marveled that there are no coincidences with God. It was as if time stood still in that moment.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that Bishop Sheen was probably buried in the crypt below the main altar. Unabashedly, I summoned the security guard and asked if Sheen was “down there.” With a typical New York-style eye roll, he responded, “Yeah.” Determined, I pressed on and petitioned to be

allowed down below. Reluctantly the guard said, “Hang on, let me get the sacristan.” As we waited on our respective kneelers for permission to enter the crypt, I was bursting inside, knowing we were just a few steps away from the saint-to-be.

The security guard finally returned with an older sacristan who had more keys hanging from his neck than a garage attendant. The sacristan told us that he could bring us down to the crypt after the next Mass. We told him we’d wait. After the Mass, he brought my mom, my aunt, and me beneath the main altar into the crypt, which housed many of New York’s successors to the Apostles—bishops, cardinals, and now Fulton J. Sheen. We knelt on the cement floor and pressed our bodies as close as we could to Sheen’s resting place. I asked Sheen to pray for five seemingly impossible situations. I offered him my heart and my intentions, and silently ended by saying, “and I will promote you if you help me.”

Promote him.

I didn’t really know what that last part of my prayer meant. It wasn’t something that I would ordinarily say. I was certainly not bargaining with God; the prayer just welled up inside me. Looking back, I believe I was recognizing a call from God to help others to know this holy TV bishop in heaven. That he responds to prayers. That the truth he lived is Jesus’ truth, and that with his help we can understand Jesus and the Church better and be led on the path of a life truly

worth living. After what seemed like an eternity, we emerged from the crypt and I suddenly burst out laughing. It occurred to me that promoting Sheen was a win-win situation. He's already famous!

Little did I know that I was about to get my first assignment from this "New York minute" bishop. . . .

As my family and I walked down Fifth Avenue away from St. Patrick's Cathedral, I turned on my phone and checked my email. At the top of my inbox was an email from a priest I had never met before, Father Stanley Deptula, the executive director of the Fulton J. Sheen Foundation in Peoria, Illinois. He was reaching out to ask if I would help him "promote Bishop Sheen in South Florida." MIC DROP.

I immediately raised the phone high to the heavens and declared, "My prayers are being answered!" I shoved my phone in my family's astonished faces and then executed a flurry of email exchanges with now-Monsignor Deptula. I excitedly explained that, just minutes before, I had prayed to Fulton J. Sheen inside the crypt of St. Patrick's Cathedral. He said he wasn't surprised and that this was typically how Sheen operated. He asked if my diocese would be interested in supporting the cause for the canonization of then-Servant of God Fulton J. Sheen. YES.

With my bishop's generous permission, I helped to organize a series of events in my diocese. We reintroduced Sheen to those who already knew and loved him and brought him

to an entirely new generation, including young families and seminarians. God was hearing my prayer and was touching both the diocese and the Church that I loved. This work of evangelization became a real labor of love for me. I felt like the veil between heaven and earth was very thin in this grace-filled time. I was keenly aware that as I promoted Sheen's cause alongside my day-to-day work in the Church, God would be busy on my behalf.

In the midst of our work to promote Bishop Sheen, another surprise occurred. An elderly woman in the diocese who was a friend of Bishop Sheen heard about the local events and introduced me to Bishop Sheen's niece, Joan Sheen Cunningham. When I found out about Joan, I invited her to attend the Masses that would be offered in honor of her late uncle to promote his cause for sainthood.

Joan's presence in our diocese and witness to her uncle's life of virtue and holiness were extraordinary blessings. Fulton Sheen was not only an uncle but a spiritual father to Joan, who had often accompanied him as a young girl. She revealed to me certain aspects of her uncle's holy way of life, some not widely known. For instance, Joan told me that Sheen never drank alcohol. She shared with me how joyful and playful he was when interacting with people, the urgency he felt for souls, and his "love for love" as he played match-maker for couples. She told me that he spent time in prayer with Jesus in a eucharistic Holy Hour every day. He was also

very generous; he often gave his coat away, right off his back, when he encountered someone in need. Joan also told me how he had a heart for the missions his entire life, and often ministered to his brother priests.

When you read the lives of the saints, they often have a pack of saintly people who accompanied them in life. Now I was sitting, conversing, and relating with one of Sheen's "posse." Joan made me feel personally welcomed into Bishop Sheen's family, and she extended that same hospitality to those who turned out for the events in honor of her uncle. After dropping her off at her hotel one evening, I wept as I drove home. In meeting Joan, I felt as if I had met a part of Fulton Sheen. I felt closer to him than more than ever before. As I drove, I prayed that many people would get to know Christ more through Sheen's spirituality and his holy example. I would later meet many more of Sheen's relatives and friends, and each impacted me deeply. Soon I was surrounded by Sheen's "posse"—and I was their newest member!

Fulton Sheen lived his life to the full and for the glory of God because *he knew God*. He knew the person of Jesus Christ and he knew who *he* was as a son of God, especially as a priest. That zeal propelled Bishop Sheen to spread the Catholic faith to saints and sinners alike, so that everyone could come to know their identity in Jesus Christ. Sheen's zeal urged him to evangelize not just on TV, but also in

hospitals, on airplanes, in the streets, in his family, with the Hollywood elite, as a media pioneer, with strangers, with the homeless and the unwanted—in America and all over the world. Sheen taught in word and deed how to know, love, and serve God, which is the fundamental reason for our existence. This call to know, love, and serve God remains relevant and even more urgent today.

Bishop Sheen called people out. Out of sin and into new life. Out of bad habits and self-centeredness and into relationship with God and service to one another. Ever since my initial encounter with saint-to-be Fulton J. Sheen, I have wanted to shout from the rooftops the very many things God has done through Sheen's intercession. I want to lead others to learn what I have learned from his powerful teaching. Bishop Sheen is the special saint-to-be for a new generation.

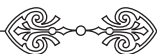
This book is your personal invitation to be renewed in Christ, in the school of Fulton Sheen. In the pages that follow, you will encounter the wisdom of this spiritual powerhouse in words of encouragement and challenge—for the faithful as well as for seekers. Whether you picked up this book yourself or someone else picked it up for you, there are no coincidences with God. I became Fulton Sheen's "spiritual student" without realizing at first what was happening. There is a reason that *you* too are here now with Bishop Sheen.

Over the years, Fulton Sheen produced a lot of content to choose from, but in this book I focus on five main areas of his thought: the mystery of God, freedom, God's love, sin, and Jesus. As you sit at the feet of this great teacher, contemplate the inescapable love of God for you personally and how he is calling you through Sheen's words. While reading, try to surrender your will to God's divine will, and embrace your vocation of love in imitation of Christ's great love for you.

God can transform your life through the redemptive power present in the Gospel that Sheen preached. I hope you accept his invitation to be set apart, set free, and set on fire for a life in Christ—a life worth living because Jesus lives in you.

—Alexis Walkenstein

JMJ+



GOD IS FIRE

Because God is Fire, we cannot escape Him, whether we draw near for conversion or flee from aversion: In either case He affects us. If we accept His love, its fires will illumine and warm us; if we reject Him, they will still burn on in us in frustration and remorse.

—Peace of Soul, 242

The Soul and God

God solicits each of us by a dialogue no other soul can hear. His action on the soul is always for us alone. He sends no circular letters, uses no party lines.¹ God never deals with crowds as crowds—they could give Him only earthly glory—but what He wants is each soul’s singular and secret fealty. He calls His sheep by name; He leaves the ninety-nine that are safe to find the one that is lost. On the Cross He addresses the thief in the second person singular: “This day, *thou* shalt be with Me in Paradise.”² God never sells His bread of life wholesale. He tempers the wind to the individual sheep; He heals the particular man. Once the soul becomes conscious of the Divine Presence, it feels itself under a Divine Imperative and whispers to itself: “This is a

message sent to me and no one else.” This inner influence of God, which is so personal, arouses it to a knowledge of its own responsibility—we know, now, that it was God Whom we offended in the past. External things are no longer blamed for the soul’s condition; rather, we strike our breast and say: “*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*” At last we are fully conscious of the two great realities of human life: the soul and God.

—*Lift Up Your Heart*, 164

Invasion of Divinity

When humans feel the first impulses of God's grace summoning them from misery to peace, they are sometimes inclined to shrug their shoulders and say: "This impulse to surrender does not come to me from any God; it is just a weakness of my human nature." Yet this explanation is patently untrue, because when God begins to affect the soul, it breaks with nature. A love of God inspires us to discipline and mortification, to give up the occasion of our sins. If the impulses were from nature alone, nature would not thus lift the knife against itself. Some opponents of religion say the experience of God is a projection of something we ourselves create in the subconscious mind. But there is nothing in the unconsciousness that was not once in consciousness;¹

and here the soul is in the presence of a great Inexperience, a Divine Novelty, never known or even suspected before. Furthermore, when once the impulse of God strikes the soul it moves us to behavior contrary to either our conscious or our unconscious previous plans. This could not be if there were not present a Force from without, stronger than ourselves, and yet One with which we could cooperate. There is no need to multiply the answers to these false objections people raise against God. For there will always be perverse souls in the world who persist in disbelief, no matter what evidence is offered them. Their determination to deny love is very great, and they will go out of their way to find elaborate denials of the beautiful Obvious—as if someone were to try to dissuade us from enjoying the fragrance of a rose by saying that it really originated from a distant perfume factory.

The invasion of Divinity is a valid and unmistakable reality. Its effects are contentment with what we are and a yearning to be what we are not; it thus implies that a response is expected of us. No gift or favor ever has to be accepted, but once we consent to a favor, this creates an obligation. A refusal to respond to grace, at such a crisis, always leaves the soul more empty and bereft than ever. It is no slight thing to bar God from our doors when He has urgently asked us to let Him enter.

—*Lift Up Your Heart*, 159–160

Hungry Heart

Our hunger for the infinite is never quieted; even those disillusioned by excess of pleasures have always kept in their imagination a hope of somewhere finding a truer source of satisfaction than any they have tried. Our search for the never-ending love is never ended—no one could really love anything unless he thought of it as eternal. Not everyone gives a name to this infinity toward which he tends and for which he yearns, but it is what the rest of us call God.

The pursuit of pleasure is thus a token of man's¹ higher nature, a symptom of his loneliness in this world. Torn between what he has, which surfeits him, and the far-off Transcendent, which attracts him, every worldly human being stands in grave danger of self-hatred and despair until

he finds his true Infinite in God. As Pascal put it: "The knowledge of God without a perception of man's misery causes pride, and the knowledge of man's misery without perception of God causes despair. Knowledge of Jesus Christ constitutes the middle course, because in Him we find both God and our own misery."²

Until a person has discovered the true Infinite, he is invariably led from subjectivism—the setting up of his own ego as the absolute—to hedonism—the philosophy of a life given solely to sensate pleasures. . . .

The proper attitude toward life is not the one of pleasure seeking, but the cultivation of a Divine sense of humor within our human limitations. And what is humor? It is said that one has a sense of humor if he can "see the point" and that he lacks a sense of humor if "he cannot see the point." But God has made the world in such a way that He is the point of everything we see. The material is meant to be a revelation of the spiritual, the human a revelation of the Divine; and the fleeting experiences of our days, a revelation of Eternity. The universe, according to God's original plan, was made transparent, like a windowpane: A mountain was not to be just a mountain, but a symbol of the power of God. A snowflake was not just a snowflake, but a clue to the purity of God. Everything created was to tell something about God, for "by the visible things of the world is the Invisible God

made manifest.”³ According to this plan, every person was to be a poet, a humorist, someone endowed with a sense of the invisible, infinite values in everything.

—*Lift Up Your Heart*, 53–54