

## FULTON J. SHEEN

When I was a boy, Milton Berle had a TV show, every Tuesday night at 8:00 PM. I heard it was funny, but I never got to see it. Can anyone guess why? He was on at the same time as *Life is Worth Living*, starring Bishop Fulton J Sheen! My mother would let nothing else pre-empt Bishop Sheen!

On 8 May 1895, the future Arch-bishop Fulton J. Sheen was born in El Paso, Illinois. After high school at Spalding Institute, he studied at St. Viator College in Illinois and then St. Paul Seminary, Minnesota before ordination on 20 September 1919.

In 1920, he spent a year at Catholic University of America and left to pursue advanced study in philosophy at University of Louvain in Belgium. Five years later, he returned to Catholic U and taught for 23 years. His reputation as a preacher attracted media attention. His first experience with broadcasting was in 1926 when he recorded a series of sermons on a NY radio station. Four years later he was a summer fill-in on **The Catholic Hour** radio program. Audience response was so positive that he was asked to continue as a weekly speaker. From 1930 to 1950, Father Sheen's weekly talks presented Catholic teaching in a uniquely popular way. He was made monsignor by Pope Pius XI in 1934. In response to his radio broadcasts, he received a steady stream of letters and in 1937, wrote: *During the past year, letters demanding personal attention have run between 75 and 100 a day. This coupled with classes, never given with less than six hours preparation for each lecture, has left me physically exhausted. However the good to be done is such that one dare not shrink from its opportunities.* Invitations to speak took him across the country. He not only kept up a full teaching schedule but also wrote numerous books, publishing 34 during his 23-year teaching career at Catholic U and 32 after he left. In addition, transcripts of his weekly radio talks were published and he was a syndicated columnist in the secular press. On Easter Sunday, 1940, he appeared on the world's first TV broadcast of a Catholic service speaking on 'The Spiritual Symbolism of Television.' In 1950, when he left Catholic U to become national director of the **Society for the Propagation of the Faith**, he was one of the best known Catholics of his time and raised many millions to support Catholic missions through the Society.

Consecrated a bishop on 11 June 1951, he began his TV series, **Life is Worth Living** reaching an estimated 30 million viewers and me! It was the most widely-viewed religious series in TV history; he won an Emmy for Most Outstanding TV Personality, was featured on the cover of Time Magazine, and became one of the most influential Catholics of the 20th century. He led many people to convert, including politician Clare Boothe Luce, automaker Henry Ford II, Communist writer Louis F. Budenz, theatrical designer Jo Mielziner, violinist and composer Fritz Kreisler, and actress Virginia Mayo. Between 1962 and 65, he attended all sessions of the Second Vatican Council. In 1966, he was made Bishop of Rochester and in 1969 he officially retired and returned to New York though he remained active, writing and preaching until his death on the floor of his private chapel in New York on 9<sup>TH</sup> of December 1979, 39 years ago next week at the age of 84!

Naturally, Archbishop Sheen was considered for Sainthood and his Cause for Canonization was opened in 2002, by the Diocese of Peoria, IL. On 28 June 2012, Pope Benedict XVI announced that the Congregation for the Cause of Saints proclaimed him '**Venerable Servant of God Fulton J. Sheen.**' On 6 March 2014, a miracle was attributed to his intercession. The next step would be beatification. However, the process was derailed!

In September 2014, Peoria Bishop Daniel Jenky suspended the process when the Archdiocese of New York refused to send the body to Peoria for the inspection that is part of the process so that relics might be defined before beatification. Why that inspection can't take place in New York where the body rests beneath the main altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral is unanswerable. It even went to Court and in that NY Court, Msgr Hilary Franco, Archbishop Sheen's assistant, said that his long-time friend had expressed many times a desire to remain in New York after death. Sheen's niece, 90-year old Joan Cunningham, also opposed moving the body, but Bishop Jenky's gave an ultimatum – no body, no beatification. This meant that she would not live to see her uncle beatified. So in 2016, she changed her position and filed to have it returned to Illinois where he was ordained and where Jenky has a crypt awaiting. A New York Court decided in June 2018 that the body could be moved and Cardinal Dolan appealed that decision since he was devoted to Archbishop Sheen. Bishop Jenky threatened that if New York won't transfer his body, then he will unilaterally shut down the cause for canonization. Apparently the Vatican must step in to rule. What is so incredibly sad is that the canonization process doesn't make saints, but merely recognizes the saints that God has already made; and even if they don't recognize him, we do even if he did pre-empt Milton Berle!

