

Bishop won wide respect during term

By Father Robert F. McNamara
Guest contributor

The *Courier* had much to write about during its eighth decade, 1959-1969. These were days of rising inflation, civil rights advocacy, and mounting dissent over the Vietnam conflict. Churchwise, they marked the sitting of the Second Vatican Council, and the deepening of the spiritual controversy that followed it.

Rather than focusing on any specific issue, I shall focus on one person: Fulton J. Sheen, who served as bishop of Rochester from 1966-69. During his regime here, Bishop Sheen touched on all the above-mentioned civic tensions, and as a very active participant in Vatican II, he came to us resolved to update our diocese according to the council's standard. Did he succeed in making us a model postconciliar diocese? We shall see.

Bishop Sheen was, of course, nearing the end of his career when named to the see of Rochester. He had been ordained a priest of the Diocese of Peoria, Ill., in 1919, and served there as an assistant pastor for one year. But as a most promising student, he had already been delegated to graduate study, and had won doctoral degrees with highest praise at both Louvain and Rome. Inevitably he was reassigned to academe, and began a term of 24 years in the philosophy department of the Catholic University of America.

During his days in Washington, then-Father Sheen also developed his natural gifts as a preacher and lecturer. His philosophical training enabled him to simplify complex subjects and his ability as a writer and elocutionist helped him to state his case winningly. Already much in demand as an orator, he was engaged in 1930 as the first regular speaker on radio's "Catholic Hour." A pioneer of the "electronic gospel," Father Sheen won a large radio audience by deftly and attractively applying Catholic principles to the world's current worries.

By 1950, his broadcasts were reaching 4 million listeners in America, and through short-wave transmission, countless thousands elsewhere.

As early as 1940, Dr. Sheen (now a monsignor) had spoken on the first religious radio program ever televised. In 1950, he was named national director of the mission-funding Society for the Propagation of the Faith. A year later he was consecrated auxiliary bishop of New York, and launched his television lecture series, "Life is Worth Living," donating the income he received to the Catholic missions.



During his three years as the Bishop of Rochester, Fulton J. Sheen was very much in the public eye, speaking out on the Vietnam War, civil rights and the care of the poor.

His visible persona — gracious, articulate, yet unflinching — had by 1956 won him an audience of 30 million, and he was awarded a television Emmy as a first-rank video celebrity. After 1957, he "starred" in three briefer TV series. Meanwhile, he was authoring many books, a number of them reprints of his radio and television addresses.

By the 1960s, therefore, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was the best-known Catholic priest in this country. Many preachers of other denominations followed his lead into the electronic pulpit. With the possible exception of the Rev. Billy Graham, none has equaled him in credibility or creditability.

Even though the bishop's microphone career was past by 1966, Rochesterians in general were pleased to welcome him. Although 71, he had the appearance and verve of a younger man. At his installation on December 16, 1966, he frankly announced his intention to make of his new diocese a showcase of what Vatican II expected. He set out upon this program like a man in a hurry.

One theme emphasized by the council was "collegiality: a working together." In that spirit, the bishop at once asked his priests to nominate by secret ballot those

local priests whom they would most like to see serve in his "cabinet." Bishop Sheen counted the ballots himself and evidently acted on their recommendations. As the council had commanded, he established a consultative "senate" or council of his priests.

Vatican II also promoted interfaith and ecumenical contacts. Bishop Sheen readily accepted an early invitation to address the Jewish congregation of Temple B'rith Kodesh. With regard to local Protestant bodies, he promoted the formation in 1968 of the "Rochester Center for Theological Studies," a consortium of local seminaries including Colgate-Rochester (Baptist), Bexley Hall (Episcopalian) and St. Bernard's Seminary (Catholic).

But Bishop Sheen's greatest concern was for the poor. This concern was inspired not only by the words of the council, but by his personal convictions.

Soon after his arrival, he took the bold step of naming Father David P. Finks Vicar of Urban Ministry. The vicar's duty would be to work among the poor — mostly blacks and Hispanics — in the blighted city center.

The bishop did not hesitate to raise the subject of poverty in an address to the Rochester Chamber of Commerce delivered soon after his installation. Rochester, he said, was like a beautiful woman with a single facial flaw: insufficient attention to the poor, to urban renewal, jobs and housing opportunities. This slight flaw, he said, could be easily medicated by good will.

As a counter-gesture for the impoverished on behalf of the church, he announced that he was imposing a tax on all Catholic parishes which undertook building programs. The income from this tax, he said, would aid the poor locally and elsewhere.

On July 30, 1967, Bishop Sheen shocked the national media when he publicly urged President Lyndon B. Johnson to call off American participation in the current Vietnam War. Once again, a principal motive for Sheen's appeal was to secure the transfer of the billions committed to armaments to remedying the necessities of the poor.

His crowning and certainly his most dramatic gesture on behalf of the poor, at least in his own judgment, was making a gift to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development of the property of a Rochester inner-city parish. The condi-

tion imposed was that H.U.D. would at once build on the gift-site housing for the needy. All this arrangement was kept secret. H.U.D., given a choice of churches, picked St. Bridget's, Rochester. The decision reached, Bishop Sheen announced to the world this important symbolic gesture.

He clearly expected bravos, but he received boos. Forgetting in this case the notion of collegiality, he had failed to consult on the give-away with the parishioners of St. Bridget's. When H.U.D. learned of this intramural dissent, it quickly withdrew its acceptance of the property and the deal fell through. Ironically, if the parishioners had been consulted, it is quite likely that they would have approved the plan.

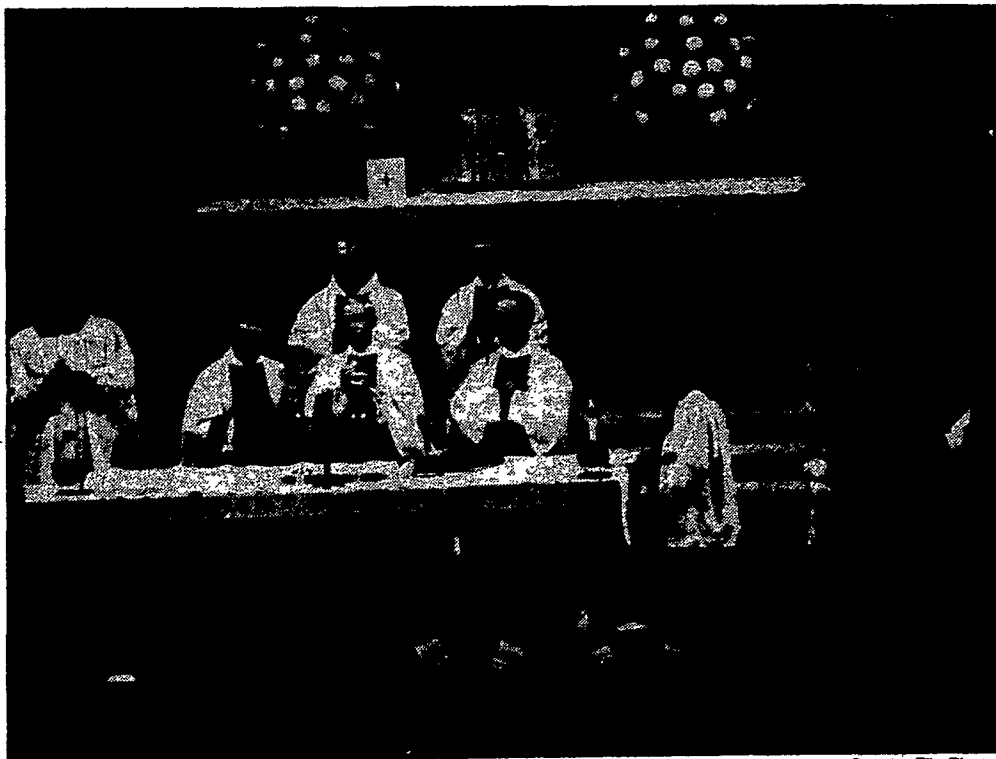
Bishop Sheen's verve for innovative action declined noticeably after the St. Bridget's incident. It was perhaps the first real failure of his life, and it shook him deeply. In October, 1969, he issued a statement that he had resigned as ordinary of Rochester, a full year short of 75, the mandatory age for retirement.

Graced now with the rank of titular Archbishop of Newport, a suppressed see in England, Archbishop Sheen returned "home" to Manhattan, the media capital of the world. After a fairly active decade there, he died on December 9, 1974, and was buried in the crypt of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Judging from his memoirs, Archbishop Sheen never fully understood the reason for his Rochester "failures." Others could see it clearly. He was a visionary, an "idea man," a conceiver of sometimes brilliant concepts. But he lacked the realization, springing from administrative experience, that even the shrewdest of plans must first be tested in dialogue, and only then be followed through.

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, working in a period of transitional confusion, was perhaps more successful than he imagined. Furthermore, his diocesans, whatever their complaints about him, never ceased to respect him as a man of deep piety, great generosity, and sincere pastoral concern. A complex man, a prophetic American churchman, his reconciling voice had "gone out to the limits of the earth."

As time passes, Rochester Catholics will, I think, come to appreciate more fully the earnestness with which he served us during his brief sojourn.



Courier File Photo

Bishop Sheen celebrates Mass during his installation as the sixth bishop of the Diocese of Rochester at Sacred Heart Cathedral in December of 1966.