

CONTINUED...

Bishop Sheen

Continued from page 1

see of Bishop Sheen. The man who had held millions of people enthralled during television broadcasts in the 1950s, and who had been touted as a possible candidate for such prestigious sees as Chicago or New York, held sway over this "average" diocese for approximately three years — resigning Oct. 15, 1969.

During those three years, however, he left a mark that continues to affect the diocese today. He advanced the process of implementing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, gave greater say to lay people and the priests in operations of the diocese, launched the housing program that still bears his name, and explored ecumenical and interfaith ties.

At the same time, however, he became embroiled in controversies over the employment of minorities in Rochester industries, called into question U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War and attempted to give away the buildings of St. Bridget's Parish in an effort to fight poverty — without first consulting the parish.

But all that was in the future. At the time of his appointment and arrival in Rochester, people in the diocese were just trying to grasp what had happened.

"I know when I first heard it, I said, 'Wow,'" recalled Father Michael Hogan, at the time the assistant pastor at St. Francis DeSales Parish in Geneva, but who would soon become Bishop Sheen's secretary. "I felt very honored that we were going to have him as the bishop of Rochester."

The man bringing this sense of "honor" to the diocese was 71, already late in life for receiving a first see.

He was at the time perhaps the best known Catholic cleric in the United States.

But no one ever offered an official explanation for the appointment.

Born May 8, 1895, in El Paso, Ill., Bishop Sheen was ordained in 1919. He earned advanced degrees from the Catholic University of America, the University of Louvain, Belgium, the Sorbonne in Paris, and the Collegio Angelico in Rome. He briefly served in a parish in Peoria, Ill. — which with some brief work at a parish in England were his only pastoral experiences before Rochester — then began teaching philosophy at the Catholic University in 1926. He went on to teach and lecture at universities

around the world.

In addition, he began broadcasting on the radio in 1930, and in 1951, launched the "Life is Worth Living" series on television. The series, which went off the air in 1957, once was one of the top-rated shows on television and earned him an Emmy.

On top of his teaching and speaking, Bishop Sheen published two regular newspaper columns, and by the end of 1966, had published more than 70 books.

Since 1950, he had been national secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, traveling around the world to promote the missions — and raising millions of dollars for those efforts. He was made a bishop May 28, 1951.

Thus when Bishop Sheen was appointed to Rochester, people in the diocese believed that they knew the man.

But speaking at his Dec. 15 installation service, Bishop Sheen warned that he might not be what they had anticipated.

"A new bishop in a diocese is something like a new baby in a family," Bishop Sheen said. "There is no doubt about the child being loved. The problem is: 'What kind of child will he be?'"

Even before his installation, diocesan officials began to get indications that Bishop Sheen would be doing things his way.

Msgr. Cocuzzi noted that he and other diocesan officials went to New York City several times to meet with Bishop Sheen to plan his installation ceremonies.

"We were deluged (with requests for seats) by people of the diocese who had given donations," he said. But Bishop Sheen had made it clear "that he wanted a good block of places reserved for the parishioners, and not just reserved for the glitterati, the luminaries of the diocese."

He also broke with Bishop Kearney's practice of addressing priests not by their names, but as "Mon Frere," Msgr. Cocuzzi reported. Bishop Sheen, however, called each priest by name. And after he arrived in the diocese, he attempted to have informal lunches and gatherings with priests.

Further, he indicated he would live in an apartment at the chancery — at that time at 50 Chestnut Plaza — rather than at the bishop's residence, then on East Avenue. Bishop Kearney would continue to reside there.

In addition, Bishop Sheen dismissed suggestions of chartering a private plane to fly to Rochester the day before his installation, noted Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan archivist and author of *The Diocese of*

Rochester: 1868-1968. Instead, he flew in on a regular flight, unaccompanied, Dec. 14.

"He didn't want to splurge, and that was in keeping with the spur of Vatican II," Father McNamara explained.

Among the participants at the elaborate installation ceremonies Dec. 15 were Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, Lt. Gov. Malcolm Wilson, and Episcopal Bishop of Rochester George W. Barrett.

But once installed, Bishop Sheen continued to do things a bit differently.

On Dec. 17, for example, the staff at St. Francis de Sales Parish got word that Bishop Sheen would be in Geneva the following day to celebrate Mass at St. Francis and St. Stephen's parishes.

"The great thing I remember about it was Bishop Jim Moynihan (now of Syracuse, but at the time vice chancellor of Rochester) introducing us to him," Father Hogan said. "We asked, 'Bishop (Sheen), what do you want us to do?' He said, 'Oh no. You tell me what you want me to do.'"

"That was the thing that impressed me, how natural Bishop Sheen was, very informal," Father Hogan said.

The then-assistant pastor met the bishop in the rectory of St. Francis DeSales Parish again a few weeks later.

"It was a Saturday (in February 1967)," Father Hogan recalled. "I had been in bed sick, when I came down in the afternoon to hear confessions, and who was in the kitchen but Bishop Sheen."

The archbishop had been visiting parishes in the Southern Tier and had swung by Geneva on his way back to Rochester, Father Hogan explained.

"He just wanted tea and a chance to talk," Father Hogan said. But the priest told the bishop that the pastor was also sick, and that he, the least sick of the two, had to go to the church to hear confessions. Bishop Sheen quickly offered to help.

So that afternoon, some penitents at the parish unknowingly confessed to the bishop of the diocese.

"I think some people who went to confession and found out later it was Bishop Sheen nearly died," Father Hogan laughed.

A short time later, Bishop Sheen invited Father Hogan to the chancery and asked him to be his secretary.

Bishop Hickey was recruited to be the vicar general of the diocese in a similar way.

Shortly before Christmas 1966, Bishop Sheen stopped out at St. Theodore's for lunch, and the two spoke about possible

candidates for vicar general, Bishop Hickey recalled. In January, he received a call from the Bishop Sheen. At the time, the St. Theodore's pastor was hosting an ecumenical gathering at the rectory.

Bishop Sheen invited him to come to his apartment for tea and cookies. Bishop Hickey said when he tried to explain that he was hosting the gathering, the bishop told him to get someone else to take care of it and get down to the apartment.

When Bishop Hickey arrived, Bishop Sheen asked him to be vicar general.

"I said, 'I've got to think this over.' He said to hurry, 'the television people and reporters are in the next room waiting to interview you,'" Bishop Hickey reported.

While providing for amusing anecdotes today, this style of leadership and camaraderie did not always sit well with fellow priests — and sometimes led to trouble, Bishop Hickey acknowledged.

"He was not the ordinary bishop," Bishop Hickey said. Because of his work with the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and not in pastoral duties, "he thought if you said something one day, it would be done the next."

This was a change from Bishop Kearney's way of getting things done, Msgr. Cocuzzi observed.

The former bishop delegated tasks, and met with staff on a regular basis as ideas and programs were being developed. The process thus would often get stretched out, but would allow for plenty of input.

"I think (Bishop Sheen) had a much more personal style," Msgr. Cocuzzi said. "Bishop Sheen suddenly decided to do something, and he went ahead and did it."

But prayer always lay at the root of the decisions Bishop Sheen made, Father Hogan noted.

"He always started every day with an hour of prayer," Father Hogan recalled. And it was during this hour that he became inspired with some of the ideas he tried to implement in the diocese.

"Everything he thought of came from a prayerful situation," Father Hogan said.

Some of those ideas would later cause him trouble — but all that was in the future. The first weeks in Rochester were essentially a time for the new bishop to get to know his diocese, and for the diocese to get to know him.

"The first few weeks were exciting," Bishop Hickey said. "It was a honeymoon, I guess."

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