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# Catholic Courier

■ DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK ■ VOL. 108 NO. 21 ■ THURSDAY, March 6, 1997 ■ 75c ■ 16 PAGES

## Vatican II Bishop

### Sought to be a 'model'

When the people of the Diocese of Rochester learned that in 1966 Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was to be their bishop, they expressed surprise and pleasure. Perhaps the best-known bishop in the United States was to be their very own.

What they didn't know is that the man who had graced television screens, radio airwaves and podiums across the land for years was intent on making their diocese a showcase for implementing the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

But in an interview prior to his installation on Dec. 15, 1966, he made his intentions clear.

"I can only speak generally until I am situated there," he said in the Nov. 18, 1966, *Courier Journal*. "But what I'd wish to do would be the task of implementing, and putting into action, the decrees of the Ecumenical Council. Today the people come to the church. Tomorrow the church must go to the people."

He also made his intentions clear early on to those who worked with him in the diocese.

"He told me, 'I want to make the Rochester diocese a model for the entire country for the implementation of Vatican II,'" recalled Father Albert Shamon of Auburn, Bishop Sheen's vicar for education.

During his three years in the diocese, Bishop Sheen — who was named an archbishop in 1969 after leaving Rochester — did launch a number of initiatives called for or inspired by the Vatican Council in an effort to take the church "to the people."

Many of Bishop Sheen's moves placed the diocese at the forefront of efforts to apply conciliar decrees, especially as they applied to diocesan administration and priests. Some of those initiatives produced immediate changes in the diocese — and continue to have lasting effects.

Among those changes:

- Bishop Sheen oversaw the renaming of the diocesan administrative office and began transforming its operating structures.

- He brought in lay people for the first time to oversee diocesan finances and to serve on advisory boards.

- He permitted the priests of the diocese to vote freely on who would be the vicar

general and created an elected Priests' Council to serve as an advisory body.

- He inaugurated programs to reach out to Hispanics, inner-city residents and the rural poor.

- He ordained the first permanent deacon in the country — nearly a year before any other permanent deacons were ordained in the United States.

That he was dedicated to implementing conciliar decrees should not have been surprising: Bishop Sheen had actively participated in the council. He served on a pre-

conciliar group that prepared documents for the council sessions. He was a member of the Conciliar Commission on the Missions. And he voted with the bishops of the world to approve the documents developed at the council.

Once given a see, he saw implementing the council as his duty, observed Syracuse Bishop James Moynihan. He served as Bishop Sheen's chancellor most of the future archbishop's three years in Rochester.

"He was extremely traditional in the sense of orthodoxy," Bishop Moynihan said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. But he described the future archbishop's attitude as, "if the council dictated that we be a little more radical in some things, then so be it."

#### Power to priests

Bishop Sheen gave clues as to the direction he was taking just 15 days after arriving in the diocese. On Dec. 30, 1966, he wrote asking the priests of the diocese to name fellow priests they would like to see in leadership positions in the diocese.

As a result, retired Auxiliary Bishop Dennis Hickey, then a monsignor and pastor of St. Theodore's Church in Gates, was named vicar general Jan. 23, 1967.

Of the two other men who finished at the top of that poll, Msgr. John McCafferty was, in 1968, made an auxiliary bishop along with Bishop Hickey, and Msgr. Joseph Hogan was later to succeed Bishop Sheen as bishop of Rochester.

Bishop Hickey recalled that even after he arrived in Rochester, Bishop Sheen kept

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T. Gordon Maseccar/Diocesan Archives

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen shakes hands with a Monroe County Penitentiary inmate after blessing him on Dec. 25, 1969. That same day, he became the first Rochester bishop to celebrate Christmas Mass in the jail. Bishop Sheen tried to "go to the people" as part of his efforts to implement the decrees of the Second Vatican Council in the Diocese of Rochester.

STORY BY LEE STRONG