

CONTINUED...

Sheen

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flame, and he fanned it." Father Michael Hogan, who served as Bishop Sheen's secretary, said that the bishop was simply acting in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

"Vatican II emphasized that we share in common areas of faith," Father Hogan said. "Sheen was so much into it, he favored whatever could be done."

Indeed, in the "Decree on Ecumenism," the council exhorted "all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism."

And in the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," the council urged Catholics "to enter with prudence and charity into discussions and collaborations with members of other religions."

But Bishop Sheen's ecumenical and interfaith efforts were based on more than just his desire to carry out the decrees of Vatican II, Father Hogan observed. The bishop had a long history of reaching out to people of all faiths through his mission work as national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

"He never got the missions off his mind," Father Hogan said. And as with his mission efforts, Bishop Sheen "didn't care about the faith (of people), he just cared about the needs."

The bishop showed his openness to working with people of other faiths shortly after his installation as bishop of Rochester Dec. 15, 1966. The civil rights group FIGHT (Freedom, Integration, God, Honor - Today), begun with the sponsorship of the Council of Churches, was battling Eastman Kodak Company over the hiring of African-Americans.



File photo
Bishop Fulton J. Sheen enjoys some laughs with Dr. Gene Bartlett, president of the Divinity School, in 1967. The bishop encouraged cooperation between St. Bernard's Seminary and the Divinity School.

On Jan. 23, 1967, addressing the Rochester Chamber of Commerce, Bishop Sheen did not specifically cite Kodak, but did talk about racism in Rochester, referring to it as "a pimple on our nose." (The controversy surrounding Bishop Sheen's involvement in this issue will be detailed in a later article in this series.)

And Bishop Sheen had announced on Jan. 3 the appointment of Father P. David Finks as vicar of urban ministry. Father Finks' assignment was to tackle problems of poverty and racism.

By the fall of 1967, Catholic and Protestant urban ministry was operating out of a joint office in Rochester. The Joint Urban Ministry Office soon became involved in efforts to get Catholic and Protestant seminary students working in summer programs in the inner city; creating ecumenical planning groups and sponsoring workshops and education programs; and

fostering job programs.

Bishop Sheen also quickly became caught up in helping to meet the housing needs of the poor.

In June 1967, Bishop Sheen, while holding a press conference across from Immaculate Conception Church about poverty, a black woman with young children confronted him, Father Hogan recalled.

"She said, 'Hey, you don't know what it's like to live in a rat-infested apartment,'" Father Hogan said. So the woman and her children piled into the bishop's car and Bishop Sheen visited the woman's home.

Shortly thereafter, he launched The Bishop Sheen Housing Foundation, incorporated April 16, 1968. In 1980, it merged with the Episcopal Diocese's housing commission to become the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation.

But the program, which helps low-income people pay for emergency repairs and find affordable housing, has really been ecumenical from its beginning, noted current executive director, Allyn Smith.

"He didn't limit the families to be served" (to just Catholics), Smith said.

From the outset, she said, the program worked with the Jewish Federation and other church and community groups.

"I think from Day One the bishop knew that we needed the cooperation of all groups to make it work," Smith remarked.

Even to this day, people are surprised to learn that the foundation will help people of all faiths.

"There are people who say, 'You're Catholic.' They don't believe the flexibility," Smith observed. "It's nice to be able to say, 'The bishop didn't care. He just cared about the needs.'"

Bishop Sheen's approach in such matters was a kind of "pragmatic ecumenism," Rev. Rice noted.

"He grew to an understanding of ecumenism as being involved in social ministry together," Rev. Rice explained.

But his efforts were not limited to joint social ministry projects. Even as he was launching initiatives to reach into the inner city, Bishop Sheen was establishing further contacts with the local Jewish community.

Actually, contact between the Catholic and Jewish communities had begun under Bishop Kearney, noted Father Joseph Brennan, who served as rector of St. Bernard's Seminary under Bishop Sheen.

Father Brennan pointed out that as a teacher of biblical studies at St. Bernard's in the early 1960s, he had begun to take students to Temple B'rith Kodesh.

"It just kind of gradually evolved because of my interest in Judaism and Israel," Father Brennan recalled. "When (Bishop) Sheen came, the Jewish community invited him to come and speak."

When Bishop Sheen spoke Jan. 30, 1967, Father Brennan said, "It was a very dramatic event."

Although there were mixed reactions in both the Jewish and Catholic communities to the visit, Father Brennan added, "I think everybody appreciated his coming."

Moreover, he returned less than a month later. On Feb. 22, at the conclusion of an all-

day colloquium on Jewish/Catholic relations held at St. John Fisher College, Bishop Sheen spoke at the temple again.

"I am here tonight to try to educate our own people to a deeper understanding of the mystery of faith and how much we owe to the Jewish people," Bishop Sheen said in his speech.

"I tell you Christian people," the bishop added, "to deny this heritage and this background would be to deny your own parentage."

"It was a breakthrough - and a first in many ways," Father Brennan acknowledged.

Father Brennan was involved in another of Bishop Sheen's efforts to reach outside the Catholic community - another effort that had actually begun under Bishop Kearney: the coming together of the Catholic and Protestant seminaries.

As early as August 1963, the Divinity School, under Dr. Gene Bartlett, had invited the faculty of St. Bernard's Seminary to observe sessions at the school of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. And in 1965, the faculties of the two schools jointly sponsored lectures on the Dead Sea Scrolls by Father Roland DeVaux, OD.

In 1966, prior to Bishop Sheen's arrival, Father Brennan became the rector of St. Bernard's, and Bartlett began to suggest greater cooperation between the schools. Bishop Sheen encouraged such cooperation after arriving in the diocese, Father Brennan said.

A fire at St. Bernard's on April 11, 1967, got seminary officials thinking of even greater cooperation, he noted.

"As a result of that, the fire marshals gave us a fairly elaborate list of improvements that needed to be done to make it safe," Father Brennan said. The cost of the repairs was such that seminary officials began to consider moving.

Bartlett then suggested that St. Bernard's move onto the Divinity School campus. Father Brennan took the suggestion to Bishop Sheen.

"He was quite interested and supportive," Father Brennan recalled.

The schools began to allow cross-registration, continued to cosponsor lectures and students from both schools began to work together in social ministry projects.

In 1968, the schools formed the Rochester Center for Theological Studies - St. Bernard's would later be known as the North Campus, the Divinity School complex as the South Campus.

But in March 1969, black students at the Divinity School occupied Strong Hall - the main building - and staged a 17-day lock-out over demands about the appointment of minority faculty and administrators.

"At that point, Bishop Sheen became much cooler to the idea," Father Brennan recalled. "He would never say publicly why, but he wrote a letter to the board to say we should play this more cautiously."

The two schools did not pursue a joint campus, but they did maintain ties and continued to work cooperatively, Father Brennan pointed out. After St. Bernard's closed as a seminary in 1981 and became St. Bernard's Institute, it did ultimately move to the Divinity School campus.

"What we dreamed of back in the 1960s did come to pass, but in a significantly different form," he acknowledged.

That other people completed an initiative promoted by Bishop Sheen is not surprising: That was the way he worked, observed Bishop Dennis Hickey, who served as Bishop Sheen's vicar general.

"He opened it up, and really got people involved so they could take ownership of it," Bishop Hickey said. "His idea was the church would step in, get something started, then let other people take over."

Still, Bishop Sheen did set the course, Rev. Rice asserted.

"He set an atmosphere that allowed Roman Catholics to become involved," Rev. Rice concluded. "Bishop Sheen established a tradition of the engagement of the bishops and the clergy in ecumenical enterprises."

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