

Education

Bishop Sheen valued education at all levels

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

When Bishop Fulton J. Sheen arrived in Rochester to be installed as bishop of Rochester Dec. 15, 1966, he brought with him more than his international notoriety as a writer, lecturer and television star.

He brought a love of education.

Indeed, he had spent 25 years teaching, 24 at the The Catholic University of America.

"Teaching is one of the noblest vocations on earth, for in the last analysis, the purpose of all education is the knowledge and the love of truth," he declared in his 1980 autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*.

Thus it was no surprise that during his three years in Rochester he took a hand in education efforts here.

Seminary support

"One of the most cherished possessions of any bishop in a diocese is a seminary," he wrote in his autobiography. And in Rochester, he noted, he had St. Bernard's Seminary, with which he remained closely involved in his three-year tenure.

One of his first gestures when he arrived in the diocese was to have dinner with the faculty and staff at St. Bernard's the night before he was installed as bishop, recalled Father Joseph Brennan, who served as rector of the seminary under Bishop Sheen.

"He wanted to make it clear he was very interested in the seminary," Father Brennan observed.

When he arrived, the seminary had already begun to develop ecumenical ties with Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

As noted in the June 12, 1997 *Catholic Courier* ("Bishop Sheen set pattern of ecumenism"), he encouraged those links, and even began exploring moving St. Bernard's from Lake Avenue to near the Divinity School on South Goodman Street, which eventually was accomplished in 1981.

He also began to promote a more ecumenical and international faculty at the seminary, Father Brennan observed.

The faculty had largely been from the Diocese of Rochester, and occasionally from neighboring dioceses, Father Brennan explained. But Bishop Sheen brought in faculty members from Europe, some of them non-Catholic.

Among those imports were the Rev. Michael Bordeaux, an Anglican specialist on Eastern Europe, and the Rev. John Townroe, another Anglican, to teach spirituality. The bishop also recruited former communist Douglas Hyde to teach there briefly.



Bishop Fulton J. Sheen poses with seminary students at St. Bernard's Institute in 1968.

File photo

"Obviously, it made for a very enriched faculty," Father Brennan said. "They kind of opened the seminary, and indeed the diocese, but especially the seminary, to a broader world."

At the same time, Bishop Sheen encouraged the students to live in Rochester's inner-city parishes and to work with social service organizations, often in conjunction with non-Catholics. He also encouraged the efforts, already begun, to include women on the faculty and opening seminary courses to lay people.

Even after he left the diocese in 1969, "The seminary continued pretty much in the path that was set in those years," Father Brennan said. "It followed that pattern of ecumenical openness and openness to lay people and women and people beyond the diocese."

And, he noted, St. Bernard's Institute, which emerged from the seminary when it closed in 1981, "is just a natural extension of those policies."

Programs evolve

By the time Bishop Sheen had arrived, the diocese's high school/college seminary program had begun to change as well.

St. Andrew's Seminary had housed two high school years and the first two college years of the program; St. Bernard's had housed the last two college years.

To help see St. Bernard's accredited as a graduate institution, the diocese had removed from it the college seminary portion.

Thus in 1965 the diocese opened Becket Hall to house all college-level seminarians. Becket Hall later moved from temporary quarters in Rochester out to a new building (now known as Murphy Hall) on the campus of St. John Fisher College, Pittsford.

EDITORS' NOTE:
This is the fourth in an occasional series about Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen's years as bishop of Rochester.

The Becket Hall program was unique, noted retired Rochester Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, who served as Becket Hall's rector.

"In the eastern part of the United States, that was unheard of, that a seminary would be part of a college," Bishop Hogan said.

Bishop Sheen remained in contact, visiting Becket Hall often, Bishop Hogan noted, and even supplied its motto: "Gladly will I spend and be spent." Bishop Hogan added that when he replaced Bishop Sheen as bishop of Rochester in 1969, he adopted that motto as his own.

At the same time as Becket Hall was emerging, St. Andrew's was drawing fewer high-school seminarians and it became clear it could not continue, Bishop Hogan acknowledged. So Bishop Sheen closed St. Andrew's and replaced it with King's Prep, an innovative coed high school that in many ways foreshadowed diocesan efforts to train lay leaders.

"Bishop Sheen wanted to make it a quality program, a coed program, to train for qualified leaders in the church, whatever vocation they chose," Bishop Hogan said. "It was a marvelous idea."

The school opened in the former St. Andrew's building, the current diocesan Pastoral Office at 1150 Buffalo Road, Gates.

"It offered an education program that was unique and creative, and on the cutting edge of education at that time," noted Fa-

ther Emmett J. Halloran, who served as the school's principal.

However, in 1970, Bishop Hogan was forced to close the school for financial reasons. He explained that the diocese had been subsidizing the school with funding that came out of monies intended for seminary funding.

"I could not describe King's Prep in terms of seminary training, so I couldn't use the funds for the seminaries to fund it," he recalled.

And although Becket Hall exists today, it has become a residential pre-theology program and center for priesthood vocations, on Gregory Street in Rochester.

Elementary schools

Bishop Sheen himself had earlier faced the closing of a school.

In April 1968, he approved the closing of Most Precious Blood School in Rochester. The school had only four classrooms, forcing grades to double up, and the diocese deemed it "substandard."

Parents reacted, picketing at the chancery (then located in downtown Rochester) and Sacred Heart Cathedral, and at events attended by Bishop Sheen, including the dedication of Becket Hall.

"Most Precious Blood (protesters) pelted his car with stones," Bishop Hogan recalled. "We had to sort of sneak him in the back."

The diocese relented one month after announcing the closing, giving school officials a year to improve conditions. Most Precious Blood School survived until 1994, when it was closed.

Ironically, Bishop Sheen's focus had been to save schools, especially in Rochester's inner city.

Early in 1967, Bishop Sheen met with education officials, and during their discussions the possibility of closing some inner-city

schools was raised, recalled Father Albert Shamon, who was Bishop Sheen's vicar for education.

Father Shamon spoke out against the idea, so Bishop Sheen gave him a year to come up with a solution. The vicar proposed "regionalism."

Under his plan, Monroe County was cut up like a pie, with one or two inner-city parishes in each section. The other city, suburban and county parishes in the respective sections would financially assist those inner-city parishes and schools.

Bishop Sheen approved the plan, and none of the schools had to close during Bishop Sheen's years, Father Shamon proudly noted.

While tackling the inner-city schools situation, Father Shamon was also dealing with the consolidation of the diocese's education activities. Under Bishop Sheen, the separate departments of schools and religious education (CCD) were consolidated. That merger remains in place today in the form of Faith Development Ministry.

Although Bishop Sheen was only in the diocese three years, he had to contend with some religious education issues that arose in part because of attempts to implement Second Vatican Council directives. Father Shamon worked with the bishop to create interim religious education texts, for example, while waiting for publishers to provide them.

In addition, Bishop Sheen acted on two sacramental issues that affected religious education.

One change he instituted was moving the age of confirmation from grade school, generally around sixth grade, to high school.

"Bishop Sheen felt it should be like bar mitzvah," Father Shamon noted. "It should be a sacrament of decision where you are really going to accept responsibility for what your sponsors said for you at baptism."

But the bishop halted attempts to move first penance until after first Communion.

"He said, 'I didn't know we had so many immaculate conceptions,'" Father Shamon recalled.

Beyond such efforts, however, Bishop Sheen was unable to complete everything that he had set out to do with the education department, Father Shamon said.

"What he wanted to do was decentralize the operations of the education office," Father Shamon said. "Of course, the bishop didn't stay long enough to implement it."

GYM UNIFORMS
SCHOOL SPIRIT
FUND RAISERS

YOUR SCHOOL

T-SHIRT, SWEATS
SCHOOL JACKETS

CUSTOM SCREEN PRINTED OR EMBROIDERED
QUALITY SPORTSWEAR
GREAT PRICES, PRODUCTS & SERVICE SINCE 1989

CALL TOM SPOONHOWER METRO SPORTS
7 W. MAIN ST IN WEBSTER 872-3843

Catholic Schools
A+
Diocese of Rochester

Visit a school near you, or call: (716) 328-3210

Great
Beginnings
Last A
Lifetime!

**BACK TO
SCHOOL SPECIAL**

Stride Rite
Every Step of the way.™

\$5-\$10

Over 500 pairs of selected
childrens shoes, now \$5-\$10!

SULLIVAN'S SHOES
14 EDMOND STREET
(Off Monroe Ave. near Goodman)

Hours: Mon.-Fri. 10-5;
Thurs. 'til 7, Sat. 10-3

(716) 442-8730