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## At the center of the storm: Bishop Sheen & controversy

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

Protesters picketed outside the chancery. Upset people surrounded — even stoned — his car. Diocesan priests voiced public opposition to his proposals.

These were not the sorts of things Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, best-selling author, prolific fund-raiser for the missions, and radio and television star, was used to facing.

But such incidents marked his three years as bishop of Rochester (1966-69). He became embroiled in controversies over civil rights and the poor, entangled in an age of protests, and caught up in growing pains of a church working out the consequences of the Second Vatican Council.

"People were taking sides," recalled Father Michael Hogan, who served as Bishop Sheen's secretary. "That was the beginning of era of a lot of vocalizing and marching."

In fact, Father Hogan noted, at the chancery there were so many protests, "He often said we should have a bunch of blank posters so people could write their own message and march up and down the halls."

And by all accounts, the reaction that followed the most public controversy in which he was involved — the proposed donation of the St. Bridget's Church to the federal government for low-income housing — was among the factors that led to Bishop Sheen's early retirement.

### The blemish

Thoughts of retirement were likely not on his mind when he was installed as Rochester's bishop Dec. 15, 1966. As noted previously in this series, he readily plunged into his pastoral duties, visiting churches, meeting with priests and getting to know his diocese.

Early on, he discovered problems in Rochester when it came to race relations and the needs of the poor.

Those discoveries came in part through meetings with Father P. David Finks (who later left the priesthood), and leaders of FIGHT (Freedom, Integrations, God, Honor, Today.)

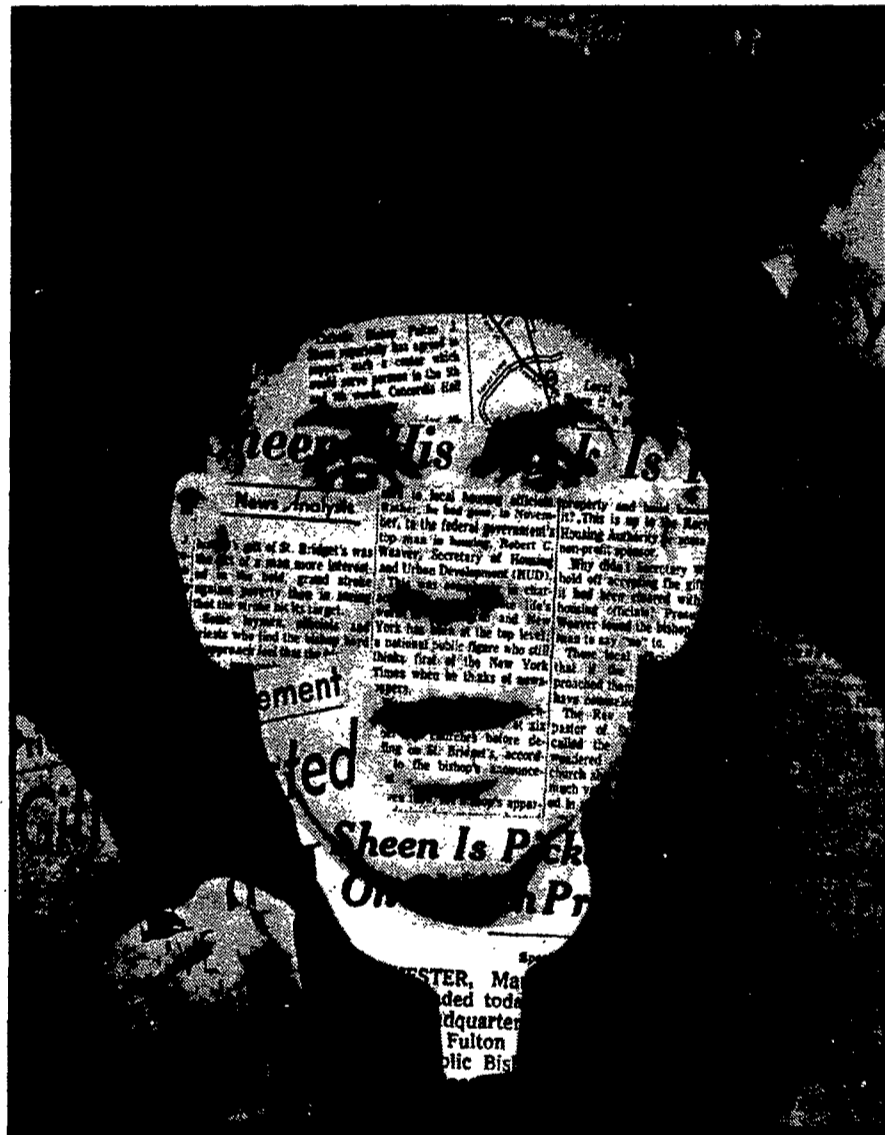
FIGHT was formed in the wake of race riots in Rochester in the summer of 1964. The organization sought to improve the lot of the inner city poor, especially blacks, and at the time of Bishop Sheen's arrival was focusing primarily on job discrimination.

During 1966, the organization had been meeting with Eastman Kodak Company officials to discuss creating a job training program at the photo company, Finks recalled in a telephone interview from his Sanford, N.C., home.

"After a couple of meetings, negotiations broke down and a Kodak executive said there would be no more," Finks said. Then Bishop Sheen arrived in Rochester.

Bishop Sheen met with Finks within days of his arrival, and on Jan. 3, 1967, announced that he was appointing Finks his vicar of urban ministry. More meetings to discuss urban issues and FIGHT followed between the two.

Then on Jan. 23, 1967, Bishop Sheen addressed the Rochester Chamber of Commerce. He did not directly mention the Kodak/FIGHT conflict, but it was clear that he was alluding to it when he described Rochester as a



beautiful woman.

"The whole world is looking at Rochester," he said, "but it is looking at us in the same way that one woman looks on the face of another woman who has a pimple on her nose. She could be well dressed, beautiful and tastily groomed — but the searchlight is on the blemish."

The bishop added, "If we just put our heads together — and what heads there are here tonight — we could wipe out the blemish on our nose in two years."

The following Sunday, according to newspaper accounts from that time, William S. Vaughn, Kodak's chairman of the board, attending services at his Baptist church, was asked by his pastor how he was feeling.

Vaughn reportedly responded, "I'm fine, thanks, except for this blemish on my nose."

Finks noted that Rochester's corporate leaders were not sure what to make of the Chamber address.

"It was met with stunned silence," he said. "The church had always been cautious, Irish American cautious, about getting involved in civic things."

The tension did ease between Kodak and FIGHT after the speech, and Finks credits the bishop in part for that.

However, Bishop Sheen also suffered long-term consequences from getting involved, Finks acknowledged.

"It didn't show up right away," Finks said. "As the bishop began to expand the whole business of what new things were going to be done, there was a hardening on the part of the corporate community."

And Bishop Sheen, who had raised millions for the missions and charity (as national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith) found himself struggling to find funding for his projects in Rochester, Finks noted, observing, "He found that Rochester was not a generous place."

### "Boat-Rocking Bishop"

The problems of the inner city and the poor were to remain on Bishop Sheen's mind throughout his three years. His efforts in promoting safe, affordable housing, for example, led eventually to the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, which thrives to this day.

But Bishop Sheen had other items on his agenda, many prompted by his vision of the reforms called for by the Second Vatican Council. As noted earlier in this series, he introduced a wide-ranging series of changes and initiatives. Among them were changes in the diocesan governing structure and in the faculty and governance of St. Bernard's Seminary. He became the first Rochester bishop to speak at a synagogue and he actively promoted ecumenical efforts. He also expanded roles for the laity and the power of priests in the diocese.

But he was to do and say even more.

On Feb. 13, 1967, he called for moving administration of the sacrament of confirmation to a later age than 10 to 12, the practice at that time.

In July 1967, he authorized the celebration of Masses in private homes on an experimental basis to help promote community and a sense of community outreach — setting clear guidelines for the celebrations. (On Aug. 16, 1968, he condemned some of the improvised liturgies that had subsequently taken place because the priests celebrating them had exceeded the guidelines.)

And on July 30, 1967, he unexpectedly called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

The reaction to this pronouncement, like that to his FIGHT speech, was surprise, Father Hogan noted.

"In general, it was agreed with," Father Hogan said. "This was right, but there weren't too many speaking out at that time."

It was so shocking a gesture that Bishop Sheen was even featured in an article titled "Left Wing Catholics" in the November 1967 edition of the now defunct liberal magazine, *Ramparts*.

The cumulative effect of his whirlwind activity in his first year in the diocese was to bring about change, but if newspaper accounts from the time are any indication, also to surface questions and criticisms.

A Sept. 12, 1967, article in *The Wall Street Journal* referred to him as a "Boat-Rocking Bishop" whose innovations produced "surprise and delight," but also "dismay."

And a Jan. 18, 1968 article in *The Citizen-Advertiser* of Auburn was headlined, "Bishop Sheen Liked, Disliked In New Diocese."

Critics increasingly attacked both the innovations he was making, and his approach, faulting him for being "dramatic."

"People who were to the right as to the way the church was run up to that time, they weren't happy with the activist way Bishop Sheen was going about things," Finks

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By Lee Strong, Associate Editor