

# CONTINUED...

## Sheen

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observed.

### A monument to failure

The most public repudiation of Bishop Sheen's efforts came in the spring of 1968 when he offered St. Bridget's Parish to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development for the construction of low-income housing.

Finks noted that he had begun to get indications that Bishop Sheen was planning some such gesture in May 1967. Bishop Sheen did nothing with his ideas at the time, but a few months later, the bishop mentioned to him the idea of giving a church and its property to the federal government for low-income housing. Then in the fall of 1967, Finks received a call from a friend in Washington, D.C., reporting that Bishop Sheen had met with HUD secretary Robert Weaver to invite him to Rochester to select an inner city parish that would then be donated to HUD. Finks wrote to the bishop urging further study. He received no response.

On Ash Wednesday, Feb. 28, 1968, Bishop Sheen announced that he was donating St. Bridget's Parish to HUD.

The pastor, Father Francis Vogt, who had been informed of the decision just two

days earlier, said, "To me, it was kind of a shock."

The pastor noted that the parish was providing a community service, a neighborhood center for health and social services. In addition, he said, there was plenty of vacant land and boarded up properties in the neighborhood for housing sites.

"It didn't make sense to me," Father Vogt said. "He was very sincere and all, but he wasn't practical."

Negative reaction was immediate. Students from Monroe Community College began picketing in front of the chancery. Diocesan phones were flooded with calls.

Bishop Sheen recalled in his 1980 autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, "... when I visited a school, I was surrounded by several hundred people who had been organized to protest against 'the destruction of our parish.' Many threw pebbles at the car as I passed."

The day after the bishop's announcement, 22 priests met to discuss the decision.

"It wasn't some ragtag (group) of revolutionaries," Finks said. Indeed, according to Finks, present that night were Msgr. George Cocuzzi, former chancellor of the diocese; Msgr. Charles Boyle, the former superintendent of diocesan schools; and Father Henry Atwell, the editor of the *Catholic Courier-Journal*, forerunner of the *Catholic Courier*.

Among the group's objections were that

the bishop did not consult diocesan priests, or the parish's staff and parishioners.

The group produced a statement asking Bishop Sheen to reconsider the donation. Group members then tried to contact Bishop Sheen. They were told he was on retreat and was "unavailable," Finks recalled.

But the deal was scheduled to go through on Monday, March 4, Finks said, so on March 2, the group released the statement to the media.

Bishop Sheen withdrew the offer.

"He was so disappointed that the priests would go so public to protest what he had done," Father Hogan recalled. "He said, 'I've kind of lost the support of the priests.' That was a very dark moment in his life."

Bishop Sheen wrote in his autobiography that the parish stands as "a monument to my failure to do anything about housing."

### "Forgive me"

Observers of Bishop Sheen's years in Rochester note that the St. Bridget's affair effectively marked the end of his efforts in the diocese.

"He was hurt by the reaction," acknowledged Bishop Joseph Hogan, brother of Father Hogan and successor to Bishop Sheen in 1969. "Things seemed to weigh heavily on him" after that.

"He didn't talk to me, but I would say that was the turning point, the thing that

made up his mind," Father Hogan said.

"He began talking about that for a bishop, it was not a position of high glory and authority," Finks said. "It was a kind of Calvary."

A little over a year later, though he was only 74 and not canonically required to retire, he asked Pope Paul VI's permission to retire. The pope granted his request Oct. 15, 1969.

Bishop Hogan said that Bishop Sheen's basic problem was that he had had no pastoral experience before Rochester, and thus had difficulty working with others.

"He very often did the dramatic," Bishop Hogan said. "He didn't work collegially."

Bishop Sheen even acknowledged his failures in part when speaking at his farewell luncheon Nov. 28, 1969, at the former Cardinal Mooney High School in Greece.

"For things I have said to you priests, and should have left unsaid, forgive me ... For the things I have done which you felt I should not have done, forgive me ... For the times when I monologued when you felt I should have dialogued, forgive me."

"He was a man of great vision," Bishop Hogan noted of Bishop Sheen. "He was well ahead of his time in his ideas. If he had learned how to consult, to have his ideas accepted, he could have accomplished many things which were not accomplished."

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