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## Sheen

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motions," noted Father Robert McNamara, the diocese's archivist and the author of the diocese's official history, *The Diocese of Rochester: 1868-1968*. "He was no longer the progressive bishop with big ideas."

Indeed, in his unpublished continuation of the history, Father McNamara wrote that "from March 3, 1968, on, Fulton J. Sheen was a 'changed man.' He ceased thereafter to play the public catalyst, simply busying himself with the routines of office."

"In general, he seemed to be less effervescent than he'd seemed before," observed Bishop Dennis Hickey, who served as Bishop Sheen's vicar general. "I guess he felt he'd gone as far as he could in Rochester."

He apparently also felt that he had gone as far in the church hierarchy as he could, Father Hogan suggested.

Cardinal Francis Spellman, archbishop of New York, died Dec. 2, 1967. Bishop Sheen had long been mentioned as a possible successor. But Cardinal Terence Cooke was appointed the archbishop of New York March 8, 1968, just days after the St. Bridget's incident in Rochester.

"I think it had been in the back of his mind," Father Hogan said. "I think that may have been a great disappointment."

### Begging for retirement

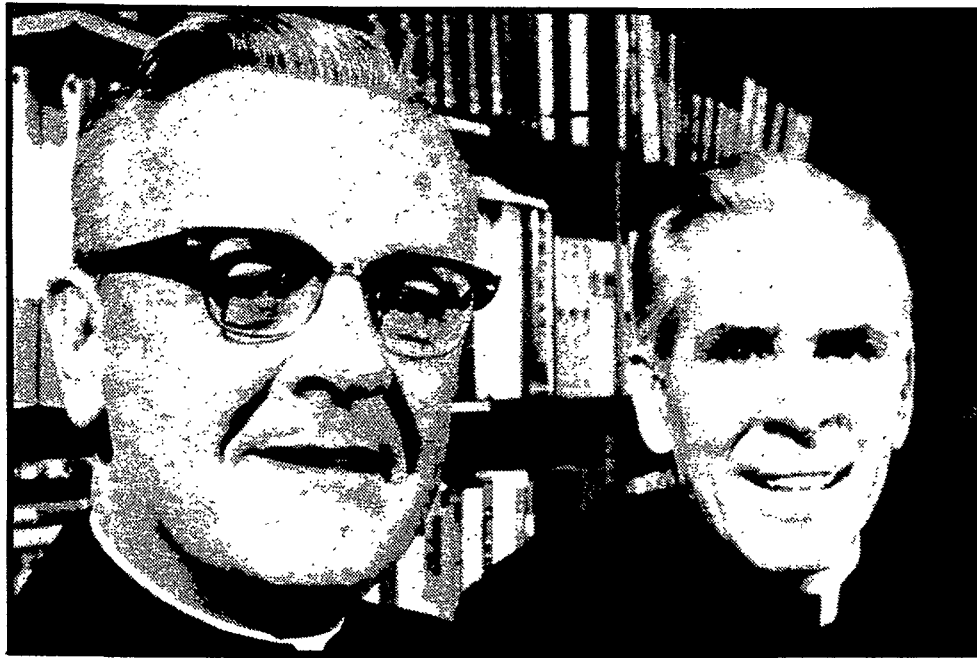
Still, no one in the diocese had any idea that Bishop Sheen was thinking of stepping down as bishop of Rochester before the mandatory retirement age of 75 — an age he would not achieve until May 8, 1970.

But on May 8, 1969, he met with Pope Paul VI in the Vatican. In his resignation announcement (Oct. 15, 1969), Bishop Sheen said that he had "begged him to accept my resignation." He also pushed for then-Mgr. Joseph Hogan to succeed him.

In the Oct. 17, 1969, issue of the *Courier-Journal* (the *Catholic Courier's* predecessor), Bishop Sheen reported that the pope had asked him when he would like his retirement to begin. Bishop Sheen said he replied Sept. 8, 1969, the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood.

"The Holy Father smiled," he recalled, "wrote the date on a pad and put a question mark after it. When I asked what the question mark meant, he answered: 'Oh, it won't be long after that.'"

Bishop Sheen returned to Rochester not



File photo

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen introduces his successor, Bishop-elect Joseph L. Hogan.

certain of the date — and gave no indications to others what was going to happen.

"Nobody had any idea he was retiring," Bishop Hogan observed. "There were certain signs that he was terribly hurt, but nobody had any idea."

In fact, he added, "There were signs that he was going to be around. He rearranged the chapel in his quarters, so that it looked that he was going to be around for a while."

But Bishop Hogan and his brother found out differently in late September.

Bishop Sheen told Father Hogan he had received permission to retire, and said he wanted to get in touch with his brother, Bishop Hogan. Bishop Hogan was at that time down at a cottage on Honeoye Lake for his weekly support group meeting with fellow priests.

"He called me to tell me that I would get a telegram, and he hoped I would give a favorable answer," Bishop Hogan recalled. But Bishop Sheen also swore the future bishop to secrecy — he could not tell even the priests with whom he was staying.

"It was a restless night, I'll tell you," Bishop Hogan recalled.

### 'Regenerating'

On Oct. 15, 1969, Bishop Sheen formally announced his resignation and unveiled his successor.

"I am resigning the diocese, I am not resigning work," he declared. "I am not retiring, I am regenerating."

In introducing Bishop-elect Hogan, Bishop Sheen noted that the future bishop had been one of the highest vote getters when he polled the priests of the diocese early in his tenure about whom they would like to see in leadership positions. Bishops Hickey and John McCafferty had been made auxiliary bishops as a result of that poll. But Bishop Sheen did nothing with Bishop Hogan at that time.

At the installation luncheon Nov. 27, he reported that he had stayed away from Bishop Hogan "for a year and a half, because I knew that he was a man who should be given the leadership of this diocese — in order that no one could ever say that I had chosen a friend. I wanted to choose a leader."

Father Hogan said Bishop Sheen was changed after making the announcement.

"I was happy for him," Father Hogan said. "He seemed so relieved and happy himself."

Finally, at the installation dinner, Bishop Sheen issued his plea for forgiveness.

"I felt sorry for the guy," Father Hogan said. "He didn't really need to say that. He wanted to leave with people he did hurt knowing that he didn't mean it."

"I was a little surprised to hear it," Bishop Hickey said. "It took a lot of humility."

After leaving Rochester, Archbishop Sheen remained active, preaching and writing while living in New York City.

Bishop Sheen returned to the diocese several times. One of those visits was to

dedicate the Bishop Sheen Archives — which are currently housed at the diocesan Pastoral Center in Gates. Bishop Hickey served as chauffeur for Bishop Sheen and the people who had come with him.

"He wanted to be sure to drive by St. Bridget's. He was as convinced then that he had been right on it at the time he did it," Bishop Hickey recalled. "He was thoroughly convinced up to his demise that he had been right, and subsequent events proved him right."

Indeed, just this year, St. Bridget's Parish relocated to the former St. Theresa's Church, and the property that Bishop Sheen had tried to give away is now for sale.

The passage of nearly 30 years has allowed some of the dust to settle from Bishop Sheen's three years in Rochester.

As Father McNamara noted in his continuation of the diocesan history, Bishop Sheen left a legacy of postconciliar reform and focused attention on the poor.

"I think he wanted to bring everyone together and give lay people a chance to know they were the people of God," Father Hogan said. "I was honored to be part of it."

"I think it helped us to see that Rochester is part of the bigger scene," Bishop Hickey commented. "The church is bigger than Rochester."

He also brought a new model of church leadership, Bishop Hickey added.

"The bishops of the country (before that time) were kind of autocratic and ruled their diocese like tyrants," Bishop Hickey said. But Bishop Sheen broke down barriers, inviting priests to eat with him, for example. "I felt free to walk into his office any time, even down to his apartment. This man was a nationally known figure, but I found him very personable."

In his continuation of the diocese's history, Father McNamara noted that on Oct. 2, 1979 — just two months before Bishop Sheen's Dec. 9, 1979, death due to heart failure — Pope John Paul II, during a visit to New York, met with Bishop Sheen.

"Asked afterward what the pope has said," Father McNamara reported, "he replied, 'He told me that I had written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus, and that I was a loyal son of the church.'"

"No words of commendation could have been more pleasing to the sixth bishop of Rochester," Father McNamara wrote. "To preach Christ and to serve the church faithfully had been the sole aim of his extraordinary life."

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