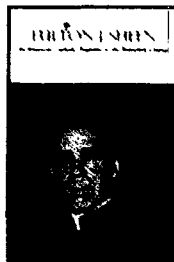
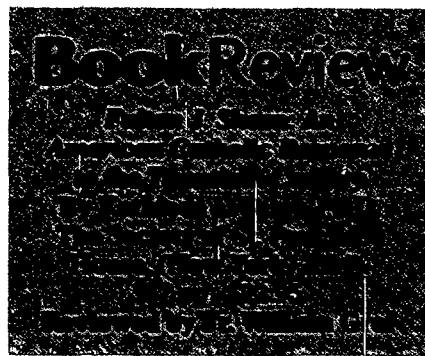


New Sheen book is well-researched

Almost 25 years after his death, Archbishop Fulton Sheen still plays a role in the life of a church he served faithfully more than 50 years as priest, bishop, teacher and preacher. His tapes, books and TV programs regularly appear in bookstores and on cable television. Some people are actively promoting the cause for his canonization. Ironically, while he was still living, some of them might have been vocal in protesting Bishop Sheen's theological stance as preacher, teacher of social justice and champion of the essential message of the Gospel: to preach the "good news" to the alienated. Saints, Bishop Sheen once wrote, come in different guises "to break up the monotony of life." He would certainly qualify for sainthood by that definition!

Kathleen Riley provides a well-researched study (based on her doctoral dissertation) of the life of Fulton J. Sheen. Her years of graduate study at Notre Dame University and diligent research in the Sheen Archives in Rochester gave her the tools and insights to produce a first-rate biography of one of America's most popular and eloquent Roman Catholic bishops. In successive chapters, Riley demonstrates how this golden-tongued orator utilized a solid intellectual and spiritual foundation for his engaging approach to the education of university students and countless Americans of diverse theological backgrounds.

For many Sheen was the encouraging voice of the church during the years of the Depression; a voice of hope during the years of World War II; a voice of revival and call to conversion in the 1950s; a voice for the poor of the world in the 1960s; a voice that took on flesh in the three years as Bishop of Rochester; and a less audible voice of reflection in the years prior to his death in 1979. To understand better the public Bishop Sheen, Riley demonstrates his innate desire to use his natural talents for public speaking to make the complexities of philosophy and theology simple. At times he spoke for effect assuming that his listeners understood fully the underpinnings of his message. The early chapters of the book describe his training, especially at Louvain, his deserved reputation as a brilliant Thomistic philosopher in the classrooms of Catholic University and his increasing output as an author. These well-crafted chapters prepare us to watch Sheen's life unfold naturally as a



teacher and preacher committed to making the "theory" of the classroom something really "worth living."

For me, Riley's early academic years gives a perspective of what he was all about, especially when he arrived in Rochester to test his theology of church and social justice. His new diocese had little personal understanding of the man. They knew nothing about him as a philosopher, and they only assumed that he was an able administrator. Hitherto they had listened admiringly to his radio and television monologues, but naturally with no chance to inquire further from the speaker himself. Riley gently helps the reader to understand these dynamics.

Even if Sheen had remained a professor for budding philosophers and theologians, he would have made a significant contribution to the intellectual life of the church. His choice to use the pulpits of churches, radio and television fulfilled an overwhelming need for him to use his intellectual aptitude to help ordinary people make sense out of their daily lives. The warm smile, the piercing eyes and the handsome demeanor served him well as a speaker who could embrace an audience as if he had a special message for each of his listeners.

Riley's compelling biography of Fulton J. Sheen judiciously guides the reader to a better understanding of who he was. Although a Catholic, he addressed millions of Americans of many faiths. He spoke, and he was heard.

Father Graf is chair of the religious studies department at Rochester's St. John Fisher College and pastor of Fairport's Church of the Resurrection.

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