

Mass set for Bishop Sheen

Tracy Early/CNS

NEW YORK — One person who is following the sainthood cause of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen with special interest and extraordinary personal knowledge about his life is a niece, Joan Sheen Cunningham of Yonkers. "I always thought of him as a saintly man," she said in an interview Nov. 16.

In this case, "always" includes from age 6, when she received her first Communion from him, until a visit the Friday before he died on Sunday, Dec. 9, 1979. In between, their lives were interwoven through visits, travel together and his help with everything from choosing her schools and clothes to finding her places to live, she reported.

"I didn't feel he was running my life, but he was picking out the things he knew I needed," she said.

Today, while she believes Archbishop Sheen was a saint, she thinks of him primarily as "a good, good priest" and "a good uncle," she said.

Cunningham, 77, was interviewed at the Manhattan offices of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, a familiar spot for her because the agency was in the same Fifth Avenue building when Archbishop

Sheen headed it from 1950 to 1966.

She was in New York to work on arrangements for a Mass to mark the 25th anniversary of his death. It will be celebrated Dec. 9 at St. Patrick's Cathedral, where the archbishop is buried in the crypt.

Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria, Ill., will be the principal celebrant; the homilist will be Archbishop Sheen's current successor at the Propagation of the Faith, Msgr. John E. Kozar, and the lector will be novelist Mary Higgins Clark. Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York will preside.

Although a sainthood cause normally originates in the diocese where the individual died, Cardinal Egan gave approval for Bishop Jenky to open this one because Archbishop Sheen was born and ordained in the Diocese of Peoria.

Cunningham said there was a study under way of reports of a miracle attributed to the archbishop's intercession, the unexplained healing of a boy named Fulton.

A principal goal now of the Sheen Foundation, which she serves as a board member, is raising money to pay for all the things canonization requires, Cunningham said.

Despite their closeness, she noted, she always called her uncle Father Sheen or later Bishop Sheen, if others were around.

When Archbishop Sheen had his popular television show, "Life Is Worth Living," in the 1950s, he was scheduled opposite Milton Berle, and some joked about whether people would watch "Uncle Miltie" or "Uncle Fultie."

Although Archbishop Sheen achieved success and popularity, beating Berle in viewer ratings, he also inspired "a lot of jealousy," his niece reported. It was one of the trials that made his life harder than people who saw only his public activities could have known.

She also said that Archbishop Sheen most enjoyed his work with the Propagation of the Faith.

After Archbishop Sheen had spent so many years operating as a national and international figure, he was named in 1966 to head the Diocese of Rochester. Some might have called it a questionable decision.

Cunningham said she thought Rochester was not ready for a personality like her uncle.

"What in heaven's name are they sending you there for?" she said she



Chris Sheridan/CNS

Joan Sheen Cunningham, niece of the late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, poses next to a portrait of her uncle in New York Nov. 16.

asked him. But he told her priests were supposed to go where they were sent, and he would not try to refuse the assignment, she said.

The time in Rochester did turn out to have its stormy moments, she indicated, and when he retired in 1969 he decided to return to Manhattan. He received the title of archbishop upon his retirement.

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