

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE:
REFLECTIONS ON GREAT AMERICAN CATHOLICS: PART VII
TIMELESS TRUTHS, ETERNAL YOUTH:
ARCHBISHOP FULTON SHEEN AND MOTHER ANGELICA

I. Fulton Sheen demonstrated the American attributes of adhering to principles while adapting to new circumstances and being able to combine great learning with an appeal to the common man.

A. Fulton Sheen was raised in a devout Catholic family in Illinois amidst differing economic circumstances, but in a solid home.

1. Peter John Sheen was born on May 8 1895, the oldest of four sons of Newton and Delia Sheen from El Paso, Illinois. He was nicknamed Fulton after his mother's maiden name.
2. His father and uncle ran a hardware store, but they had to move when it burned down due to a fire that destroyed much of the city. The family moved to a farm near Peoria that his father had inherited.
3. Fulton grew up in Peoria and served as an altar boy at the Cathedral. Later in life, he often related one event in which he dropped a cruet after Mass celebrated by Bishop John Spalding. He was afraid that the Bishop would be furious, but instead he encouraged Fulton to pursue his devotions and consider the priesthood. He often contrasted that encouragement with a different experience of another altar boy, whom a priest kicked off the altar after he served Mass poorly; his name was Josef Stalin.
4. The Sheen family was very devout, prayed the rosary each night and had priests over regularly.
5. Fulton Sheen attended Spalding Institute for high school. He excelled at academics and was the class valedictorian.

B. Fulton Sheen entered seminary after high school and was on the track for a brilliant academic career.

1. He attended seminary and studied at St. Viator College. Illinois and then St. Paul Seminary in Minnesota. He resolved, starting in seminary to make a holy hour before Eucharist every day; and he held consistently to that resolve consistently until death. He would say later in life that that holy hour was crucial for everything else he did.
2. After ordination, now Fr. Sheen studied at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. and then the University of Leuven, Belgium, with residence at the American

College in that town. He earned a doctoral degree in philosophy in 1923 and won the Cardinal Mercier award for the best philosophical dissertation. That award had recently been established and was named for Cardinal Disere Joseph Mercier, a great Thomist who taught at the university and had strongly resisted the German advance in World War I.

3. Fulton Sheen then earned a second doctoral degree (S.T.D.) at the Angelicum University in Rome. At the time, one needed two doctoral degrees to be a full professor.

C. After ordination, Bishop Edmund Dunne sent him to be the assistant pastor at St. Patrick Church in London and a teacher of theology at St. Edmund College, a boarding school, which is the oldest continuous Catholic school in England.

D. Fr. Sheen was then assigned at the pastor of St. Patrick parish in Peoria. People were surprised at the appointment, given Fr. Sheen's academic credentials. However, he accepted it as a part of his ministry. Bishop Dunne later explained that he wanted to see how Fr. Sheen would obey an order that did not seem suited for his talents.

E. In 1927, Fr. Sheen then became a philosophy and religion teacher at Catholic University, a post he continued for 25 years. He taught such subjects as "Philosophy and Religion," "Religion and Society," and "God and Modern Philosophy." He was trying to find ways of connecting the timeless faith to the modern world.

- His classes and lectures became very popular. In 1929, he was the preacher for the Mass of St. Thomas Aquinas at the University, which was a high honor. He became a Monsignor in 1934, at the age of 39.

- In his role as a teacher, he strongly promoted engagement with the world and Catholics taking on roles as teachers across the boards.

- As early as the late 1920s he was opposing racial segregation and anti-Semitism, which were common at the time.

F. In 1930, he began his hour long radio broadcasts entitled The Catholic Hour. It was an immediate hit.

1. In 1926, a New York radio station asked him to give a series of Lenten reflections, which were well received.

2. In 1930, he was asked to help out for two weeks for The Catholic Hour, a weekly radio show. His talks were so popular that the station hired him full time.

- In that broadcast, he denounced Hitler as the anti-Christ and promoted opposition to him.

- By 1936, he was receiving about 75 letters a week, a lot of them recommending topics. He also often went on speaking tours.

3. By 1946, the radio station was receiving 3000 to 6000 letters a week about his broadcast, which had four million listeners by 1950. Also in 1946, Time magazine said he was the Catholic Church's greatest evangelizer.

4. In the midst of this speaking, he still taught full time at Catholic University until 1950, as well as publishing 34 books.

5. In 1958, he became the national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which is to this day dedicated to support for missionary activity. He continued in this role for 16 years and in that time dramatically popularized its goals and guided it to raise hundreds of millions of dollars.

6. In June, 1951, he was consecrated as an auxiliary bishop for New York.

G. In 1951, Fulton Sheen began his very famous Life is Worth Living television series, which would bring the faith to the world.

1. Msgr. Sheen had celebrated the first televised Mass in 1940 and now he was preparing to bring his evangelizing message to television full time.

2. The show began on the Dumont Television network as simply a talk show that he would give live without notes. It broadcast at 8:00 p.m. on Tuesday night, which was not considered a prime slot; and it was broadcast in only three stations.

3. However, the show became very popular and was covered by twelve more stations within two months. About 8500 letters a week came in for the show, and tickets for the live audience were difficult to come by.

4. Soon, the show was at the top of the ratings, and Bishop Sheen won an Emmy award for The Most Outstanding Television Personality in 1952. In his acceptance speech, Bishop Sheen said that he wanted to thank his writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Time magazine called him in 1952 the first televangelist, which at the time was a novel and very complimentary term

5. The show climbed in popularity to 30 million and was at times the most watched television show in America.

6. For the show, Bishop Sheen would be dressed in the full regalia of a bishop, but would also try to present aspects of the faith to the general public. In later years, he wrote, "When I began television nationally and on a commercial basis, the approach had to be different. I was no longer talking in the name of the Church and under the sponsorship of its bishops. The new method had to be more

ecumenical and directed to Catholics, Protestants, Jews and all men of good will. It was no longer a presentation on Christian doctrine but rather a reasoned approach to it beginning with something that was in common to the audience. Hence, during those television years, the subjects ranged from communism, to art to science, to humor, aviation, war etc.”

7. On the show and elsewhere, Bishop Sheen vehemently opposed communism and secularist views on psychology as contrary to human nature. But he also made a study of such atheistic systems to show how Christianity was a better response to the problems of the modern world.

H. Fulton Sheen also continued publishing books, including his 1958 classic Life of Christ, which is a commentary on the Gospels that circulates widely to this day. He would eventually publish 73 books. He also had two syndicated columns, God Love You and Fulton Sheen Writes. He gave almost all of royalties from his broadcasts and books to charities, including \$10 million to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

I. Fulton Sheen was also active in giving spiritual direction and providing education for potential converts. The people whom he instructed in their process of coming into the Catholic Church include: Henry Ford II, liberal writer Heywood Broun, author Clare Booth Luce, the wife of the owner of Time Magazine, and a former communist leader Louis Budenz. He made the choice early on to focus on missionary work in bringing the faith to the general public, rather than focusing on academic accomplishment.

J. As a bishop, Fulton Sheen attended all of the Sessions of the Vatican II Council. Pope Benedict XVI said in a 2012 interview that Fulton Sheen “would fascinate us in the evenings with his talks.”

K. There was a conflict between Auxiliary Bishop Fulton Sheen and Archbishop Francis Spellman, both of New York, when the government donated millions worthy of milk to the New York Archdiocese for use in the missions. The Archdiocese then transferred the mill to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, but then wanted payment, which Bishop Sheen refused. The case went all the way up to Pope Pius XIII, who sided with Sheen. Neither of them spoke of the conflict in later, but there seemed to be some tension remaining.

L. In 1966, Fulton Sheen e became the Bishop of Rochester, where he served until 1969.

1. It was a very difficult time, and he had a lot of opposition from within the Church.

2. As Bishop of Rochester, Fulton Sheen opposed the Vietnam War, starting in July, 1967, before it became very unpopular.

3. He was also very involved in ecumenical activities, including the Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation.
4. There was trouble over one church St. Bridget which the diocese could not maintain. Because the church could no longer be supported, Bishop Sheen decided to give it to the government for housing for the poor. However, the opposition spread the tale that he was turning churches into homeless shelters, and so the arrangement was never completed.
5. After three difficult years, he retired from this office in 1969. He was then appointed the titular archbishop of Newport, Wales, an honorary title that gave him the status of an archbishop, but with no active diocese to run.

M. In his later years, Archbishop Sheen later began taping retreats.

1. In 1974, Cardinal Boyle of Washington asked Fulton Sheen to be the speaker for a priests retreat. The talks were taped and sold, which was a novelty at the time. This series was called Renewal and Reconciliation
2. Soon he and others began taping series of talks and selling them. To produce and distribute the tapes, a nonprofit company called The Ministr-O-Media was created and was soon thriving. Its profits were given to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.
3. In these retreats, he very much emphasized the need for prayer, conversion, and particularly a daily Holy Hour.

N. In 1977 his heart condition became much worse, and his work was very much curtailed. In addition, the chaos of the times very much contradicted his optimism about the future. However, he later said in his autobiography that this discipline and suffering was a very important part of his spiritual growth, leading him to stop relying on his success in the world.

O. On October 2, 1979, Pope John Paul II, in a visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, specifically asked for Fulton Sheen. When he came over, the Pope embraced Sheen and said, "You have written well and spoken well of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a loyal son of the church."

P. It was a crucial endorsement at a time when Bishop Sheen's evangelizing message had diminished in popularity. Bishop Sheen died on December 9, 1979. However, in his last days, Fulton Sheen finished his autobiography Treasures in Clay, which has become a classic.

Q The cause for canonization has been proposed and Fulton Sheen is just short of beatification. However, there has been an interruption due to the need to resolve some disputes about jurisdiction.

1. In 2002, the cause was filed in Rome by Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Illinois. The Congregation on Saints accepted the cause was accepted and allowed Fulton Sheen to be called Servant of God.
2. In 2012, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints declared that Fulton Sheen had lived a life of heroic virtue, enabling him to be called Venerable.
3. In 2014, the Congregation approved of a miracle on Fulton Sheen's behalf, the miraculous revival and complete recovery of a newborn apparently dead for 61 minutes.
4. The process for his beatification was to continue, but a dispute between the Archdiocese of New York and the Diocese of Peoria over who should have the body has put the process on hold. It does seem that a resolution is coming soon.

R. Archbishop Sheen's life and his writings and speeches thus exemplify the American ability to appreciate the value of learning, but also the importance of the general public. He demonstrated the reward of hard work and initiative in bringing the timeless truths of the faith to the modern world, as well as being a success in joining people of different faiths together in the pursuit of truth.

II. The great Franciscan nun Mother Angelica overcame the limitations of poverty and used entrepreneurial daring to build up a Catholic cable station and media presence generally.

A. Mother Angelica grew up in difficult circumstances, but her faith gradually grew and her determination showed itself from a young age.

1. She was born in 1923 as Rita Rizzo as the only child of John and Mae Helen Rizzo. She grew up in the Italian section of Canton, Ohio. However, her father abandoned the family, and the couple divorced in 1929.
2. Mae Helen and Rita were often in poverty, and a grandmother often had to take care of Rita. Her mother worked for a tailor and dry cleaner during the Great Depression. The neighborhood was run down and crime ridden.
3. Rita attended a local high school, where she learned to be a drum majorette. To earn some extra money, she also worked at a company that made liturgical candles. The struggles created academic problems, but she still graduated high school on time.

4. Rita always showed determination and initiative. And so, toward the end of her high school years, Rita spoke with the Mayor of Canton James Secombe, who agreed to find Mae a job if she passed the civil service exam, which she did.
- B. After graduating high school, Rita Rizzo worked at odd jobs and had to overcome a stomach ailment through prayer, an event that would awaken a much deeper life of faith.
1. At age 18, Rita worked in advertising for a local manufacturing plant that, among other things produced gun barrels for the war effort. She was already a devout Catholic and would regularly attend daily Mass and pray to the Stations of the Cross and the rosary. However, by her own account, her devotions were rather superficial.
 2. However, a stomach ailment that she had suffered from since age 16 got worse. She prayed a novena to St. Therese of Liseaux for a cure, and it came in January, 1943. It was when she started praying for a cure that her prayer life increased in intensity.
- C. At age 21, she began sensing a call to become a nun.
1. When she was praying in a church in 1944, she sensed this calling. Her priest recommended that she look into local convents.
 2. When visiting the Franciscan Poor Clares convent in Cleveland, Ohio, Rita felt that that was her calling. And the Poor Clares accepted her as a postulant.
 3. Her mother disagreed with her decision to enter the convent. And so she left in secret on August 15, 1944. She left her mother a note saying that, since her cure, she had wanted very much to live entirely with Christ,
- D. Her religious life began well, with the reception of the name Sister Mary Angelica. An accident seemed to stop her progress, but the injury was cured sufficiently for her to be productive; and she resolved to start a new convent in the south.
1. As a postulant, she joined in the prayers of the community. And manual labor, such as cooking, cleaning, and doing the laundry. Her knees began to cause problems with these chores, but she continued onwards, albeit with different duties. By 1947, these health problems were alleviated and she seemed to be progressing well.

2. A couple donated a house in Canton to the order. And so the Poor Clares established a new convent called the Santa Clara house, with Sister Angelica among the founding members. The convent was known for promoting interracial harmony.
 3. On November 8, 1945, she made simple vows and was named Sister Mary Angelica of the Annunciation. She made her final vows on January 2, 1953. In the meantime, in 1952, she received a visit from her ailing father John and there was reconciliation within the family.
 4. She demonstrated substantial administrative abilities as she helped out the convent. For example, in the fall of 1953, when the novice mistress Mother Mary Immaculate was away, the Abbess Mother Veronica asked Sister Angelica to step in and take over her duties in the interim.
 5. However, later in 1953, when using a machine to clean the floor, Sister Angelica suffered from a severe accident, in which the machine threw her against the wall. For almost two years after the accident, she was housebound and it was now clear whether she would ever walk again. The doctors proposed a surgery that had about a 50 percent chance of enabling her to walk. When she was about to have the surgery, she promised God that if she could walk again, she would build a new monastery in the south. The surgery was successful enough that she could walk, although the injury would still cause her problems for years to come.
- E. After the surgery, Mother Angelica and the Mother Superior agreed that she should found a new monastery. And so Sister Angelica made arrangements for a convent in Irondale in Birmingham, Alabama.
1. After several unsuccessful attempts to find land and a willing bishop, Archbishop Thomas Tooben of Mobile invited her to establish a house in Birmingham, pointing out the need to minister to blacks. The Bishop of Birmingham Emmet Walsh was reluctant, but eventually went along.
 2. The new convent was to begin with Mother Angelica and four sisters. They had to raise money to build the convent, which was done in part by selling fish lures. Despite leg problems, Mother Angelica supervised the fundraising and the building of this convent. Mother Angelica's mother entered as a postulant, and Sister Veronica, who had been the abbess in Canton, transferred to the new monastery.

3. In 1962, the convent was finished and the nuns moved in. The branch was named The Poor Clares of the Eucharist. They were open to nuns of any race, which was controversial and provoked a backlash, including one person shooting at the door of the convent.
 4. The convent tried various ways of raising money, but there were constant financial hardships. Among other things, Mother Angelica started taping talks and selling them, which produced some funds. She also developed a reputation as a speaker and a publisher of pamphlets about aspects of the faith.
- F. In the 1970s, Mother Angelica began taping programs for a local CBS affiliate station 41 in Birmingham. Pat Robertson also showed her programs on the Christian Broadcasting Network, which he had established.
- However, on 1978, CBS ran a movie called The Word, which Mother Angelica considered to be blasphemous on the grounds that it cast doubt upon the divinity of Jesus. When they insisted on running it, she refused to televise her show any more. That decision left the convent with no clear way to continue with the shows through which Mother Angelica was reaching an increasing audience.
- G. As the sisters in the convent were discussing how to go forward, one of them recommended that they convert the garage in the back of their property. Mother Angelica took up the recommendation and soon built not only a new studio, but Eternal Word Television Network.
1. In 1980, Mother Angelica began taping the shows from this simple studio and arranging for them to be aired on Christian stations.
 2. Satellite communications were beginning as a new form of communication. And so the convent purchased a satellite to broadcast the show, beginning on August 15, 1981.
 1. They had to raise the funds quickly, and everything worked out surprisingly well. For example, because they could not afford adequate lights for \$48,000, they arranged with a salesman to buy the cheapest available lights at \$14,500. These lights would have been completely inadequate, but the company did not have them in stock. And so it sent the \$48,000 brand instead.

2. Jim and Tammy Faye Baker had invited Mother Angelica to their show with the PTL network, and she had impressed the audience greatly. And so they sent assistants to her to help build the studio.
 3. Crucial to the effort was an Alabama lawyer Bill Steltemeier, who had been ordained as one of the first American permanent deacons in 1975. He joined her team to process the contracts and the licensing and soon became central to the operations.
 4. The operation expanded quickly, and Mother Angelic too on up to \$1 million in debt to expand the network and obtain the needed agreement and equipment.
 5. Once again, everything fell into place, often just in time. For example, in March, 1981, the satellite that the network needed arrived. However, the manufacturer insisted that the convent needed to pay the full price of \$600,000 for the delivery; and the convent simply did not have anything like that amount. She went to pray in the chapel while one of the sisters spoke to the delivery agent and showed him around the convent. At that very time, a rich man who was vacationing in the Bahamas called and said that Mother Angelica's books had greatly helped him. He offered a large donation, and Mother Angelica arranged for him to wire the money for the satellite.
 6. With the studio and equipment in place, the network, now called Eternal Word Television Network, was in place, broadcasting five hours of shows a day, including Mother Angelica live, Fulton Sheen's Life is Worth Living, some general Christian shows, and some family or Western movies. Gradually, the network was able to produce more shows and the secular programming diminished.
3. At first, some officials in the Vatican objected that a contemplative nun should not be running a business and travelling the world on fundraising tours. However, eventually Cardinal Silvio Oddi of the Congregation on the Clergy intervened for her and the objections were set aside for the time being. However, in 1993, her nuns instituted more traditional practices that would lead to their being entirely cloistered. The male Franciscans of the Eternal Word gradually took over the religious order aspect of the program.

H. Now directing not only a show, but the only Catholic television network, Mother Angelica was willing to cause a stir in order to emphasize traditional liturgy and Catholic teaching.

1. For example, when the new initial new translation of the Catechism was going to use gender neutral language in 1992, Mother Angelica openly criticized it. She even spoke with Cardinal Ratzinger who was in charge of the Catechism. He agreed and the Vatican itself published a translation with more gender specific language.
2. Also in 1992, Mother Angelica called for the inclusion of Latin in the Masses televised by the network.
3. Likewise, during a papal visit to Denver World Youth Day 1993, a woman played Jesus in the Stations of the Cross that the Pope and networks, including ETWN, were broadcasting nationally. Mother Angelica strongly denounced this crossing of male and female on her program. She took the occasion to make the vows of the convent stricter and the habit more traditional. This process was associated with the sisters becoming more completely contemplative, as was their original calling.
4. In 1996, Cardinal Mahoney promulgated a letter on the Eucharist and the liturgy, which Mother Angelica believed downplayed the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. She condemned the letter on television, which led to a feud with Cardinal Mahoney. She retracted her call that the letter should not receive obedience, but still criticized it as confusing. Cardinal Mahoney called upon the Vatican to require her to read out a scripted apology, but the case languished.
5. Mother Angelica also wanted the televised Masses to be celebrated *ad orientum*, which means that the priest faces the altar (sometimes called liturgical east) when saying the prayers, rather than facing the people. However, the local bishop David Foley refused to give permission for this form. The Vatican Congregation on the Discipline of Divine Worship and Sacraments eventually ruled that a bishop cannot forbid Mass from being celebrated *ad orientum*, but could regulate which Masses are televised. Bishop Foley could thus require that the televised Mass be celebrated with the priest facing the people.

- I. During the late 1980s and 1990s, ETWN expanded rapidly. And in 1992, ETWN allied with Radio Guadalupe to found radio stations across America and then other countries. In 2011, ETWN bought the National Catholic Register, a leading American Catholic newspaper, from the Legionaries of Christ, and thus expanded into print news as well.

- J. Over the course of the 1990s, Mother Angelica received visions that would guide future projects.
 1. She had a vision of St. Michael the Archangel in 1989 and again in 1990, indicating the place where the first radio station should be built.

 2. She also saw visions of the Child Jesus while on trips in Columbia. She said that Jesus instructed her to have a new temple built in Alabama. That temple would become The Shrine of the Holy Eucharist in Hanceville, Alabama, where the nuns would reestablish their contemplative community. After a great deal of effort and expense, the vast shrine was completed and then consecrated on December 9, 1999.

- K. In the late 1990s, Mother Angelica would complete here active ministry with a recovery of health problems, a provision for the future of EWTN and a final celebration before disability set in.
 1. Her legs had given her problems for years for she had never recovered from the accident fully. But then, in January of 1998, after prayers with an Italian mystic, she was suddenly cured. For a short time, she was more active than ever.

 2. In March of 2000, she and the board of directors revised the corporate charter to make EWTN an independent company, rather than one under the control of her order. She agreed that the company would now be controlled by its own board of directors, with Bill Steltemeier as the chairman of the board. The idea was the network was to be independent of any outside control, and thus able to continue taking risks for Jesus.

 3. On December 12, 2000, there was a joyous celebration on the program for the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Relieved of the burdens of running the network, Mother Angelica seemed to be full of joy.

 4. However, illnesses were already starting to set in. On July 3, 2000, Mother Angelica had a seizure that almost resulted in her death. She recovered remarkably from that event. However, starting in April of 2001,

she had a series of strokes that limited her ability to engage in public speaking. She continued the program, but on a more limited basis.

5. On Christmas Eve, 2001, Mother suffered a disabling stroke that ended her ability to program regularly. Her last great effort was a 2003 taping of her and the sisters praying the rosary, which airs to this day

K. Her final years were spent in contemplative prayer and suffering illness for the sake of the network and the church.

1. She lived for her final 15 years at the Shrine of the Most Holy Eucharist in Hanceville.

2. In 2005, EWTN main broadcaster Raymond Arroyo published Network of Miracles about Mother Angelica and the network.

3. In 2009, she and Bill Steltemeier received the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice award from Pope Benedict XVI. Bill Steltemeier died of cancer in 2013.

4. Mother Angelica herself died peacefully on Easter night, 2016. At the time of her death, EWTN broadcast across America and in 144 countries around the world.

L. Mother Angelica combined the Catholic faith, with an American entrepreneurial spirit, a willingness to take great risks, a determination to stand up for principle, and a desire to connect with the common people here and around the world. She was able to unify many different cultures and nations in the common pursuit of truth.