

**Anniversary of the Death of
Fulton J. Sheen
December 9, 2009**

Eminent Cardinals and brother bishops,
brother priests and deacons,
consecrated women and men religious,
brothers and sisters all in Christ Jesus:

Praised be Jesus Christ for the life, teaching, and example of Fulton John Sheen!

Welcome to this cathedral so dear to his heart!

How appropriate that we would gather for this greatest of all prayers, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the very heart of his life, which he celebrated so faithfully every day of his sixty years of priesthood, on this thirtieth anniversary of his passing into eternity, on the feast of a man, like him, so very close to the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Juan Diego, in the middle of the city he loved, whose citizens still smile at the mention of his name, usually quick to share a story of an encounter with him.

It is in this sanctuary that, on October 2, 1979, Pope John Paul II embraced him and called him "the preacher to the world" only nine weeks before his death, and it is here he was interred on December 13, 1979, in the crypt below the main altar, where he awaits the resurrection of the dead with two other servants of God -- Pierre Toussaint and Cardinal Terence Cooke -- in company of previous archbishops and bishops of New York. (Just so you know, there is also space for Cardinal Egan ... and a space-and-a-half for me ...)

What a blessing to have with us today so many of his family, friends, admirers, and those we may call "clients," who look to him still with love and gratitude, eager for the wisdom

he so effectively imparted, always in the name of Christ Jesus, whom St. Paul reminds us today, is the very "wisdom of God." As members of a supernatural family, the Church, we gather to thank God for him, eager to swap stories about a particular episode, a witty comment, a word of advice, a particular quote, his hypnotic eyes, his soothing yet challenging voice, or an occasion when we were with him.

How good that we would have with us the Bishop of his beloved home diocese of Peoria, the Most Reverend Daniel Jenky, and his successor as national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Monsignor John Kozar.

Would that we could return to that innocence and simplicity extolled by the Master in this evening's gospel, as we gratefully recall listening to him on the radio or watching him on TV as children or youth, a man who, while indeed clever and wise, still realized he was at his best when but a child in the arms of his blessed mother, or on his knees for an hour before the Real Presence of the Way, the Truth, and the Life, magnetic eyes closed, and renowned voice reduced to a sigh.

It was a damp winter day in 1973 when I was walking through St. Peter's Square, then a seminarian at the North American College, only to see a small but excited crowd near the obelisk. Over I went only to see in the middle of the dozens of excited people himself, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. Among the handshakes, flashbulbs, and autographs, someone shouted,

"What are you doing in Rome, Archbishop Sheen?"

"I just came from an audience with Pope Paul VI," he replied.

"What did the Holy Father say to you?" inquired another in the crowd.

Archbishop Sheen blushed a bit and replied, "The Holy Father looked at me, took my hand, and said, 'Fulton Sheen, you will have a high place in heaven'."

"What did you say back?" pestered another.

"Well" responded our man with that familiar sparkle and grin," I replied, 'Your Holiness, would you mind making that an infallible statement?'"

Which I propose to you is the key message of Fulton J. Sheen: *He wanted to get to heaven; he wanted to bring the world with him.*

During this *Year for Priests*, Pope Benedict XVI has suggested that we reflect on the life of the patron saint of priests, St. John Vianney, the Curé of Ars.

Remember the story of Father Vianney's arrival in Ars? He got lost in the hills getting there, only to come across a little fellow on the path.

"Little boy," asked the Curé, "do you know how to get to Ars?"

"Sure," the child replied. "I live there."

"Well," remarked the Curé, " I tell you what: You show me how to get to Ars, and I'll show you how to get to heaven."

Voilà, Fulton J. Sheen. All of his philosophy and theology, all of his radio and TV, his avalanche of books and articles, his tapes, retreats, and conferences ... all for one *purpose*: to help us discover *the purpose* of life -- eternal union with God.

As he was fond of saying, he'd give up all his degrees, his *agregé*, his honorary doctorates and awards, his emmy and the high ratings, as long as he could cling to the third "q & a" from the *Baltimore Catechism* he had learned from Sister Alexene in second grade at St. Mary's grade school in El Paso, Illinois.

"Why did God make you?"

God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next."

As he would have read from St. Augustine in the Divine Office on the very day he died, "God has promised humanity divinity, mortals immortality, sinners mercy, the poor glory."

There it is, folks: the "righteousness, sanctification and redemption" spoken of by St. Paul in this evening's Liturgy of the Word.

Fulton J. Sheen wanted to get to heaven.

Fulton J. Sheen wanted to bring all of us with him.

Fulton J. Sheen wanted to be a saint.

Fulton J. Sheen wanted us to be saints, too.

His pivotal insight, central to revelation, was that Jesus Christ was the way to heaven, the truth about how to get there, the life we hope to share for all eternity.

The first time I was able to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I asked three renowned scripture scholars at The Catholic University of America to recommend what they considered to be the best book on Jesus. Each one responded immediately, "Fulton Sheen's *Life of Christ*."

When asked why his TV show got higher ratings than Milton Berle's, Bishop Sheen answered, "Because I have better writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John."

The Life of Christ, the gospels ... the person and message of Jesus ... with his *voice* Fulton J. Sheen gave us the story of Jesus, the "greatest story ever told," the way the stained glass windows of the medieval cathedrals, or the brush strokes of a Raphael, a Fra Angelico, a Giotto once did.

For him, this Jesus was *alive*, still *active*, still *powerful*, still *teaching*, still *healing*, still *leading* us to heaven, because, you see, the *incarnation* was still going on:

The Word was still taking flesh; God was still becoming man ...

So this Jesus is as alive in His Church, so faithfully handing-on His teaching, as He was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee;

So this Jesus is as tenderly available now in the arms of His Mother Mary, to whom he had such a deep devotion, as He was in the crib of Bethlehem;

So this Jesus is as present in the Most Blessed Sacrament, before whom He knelt in prayer for an hour every day of His priestly life, as He was at the Last Supper;

So this Jesus is as discoverable in the faces of the poor, hungry, and suffering of the world as He was so wretched on the cross.

So this Jesus is still inviting, as He does in this evening's gospel, "Come to me ... come to me ..."

Come to me for peace, for meaning, for purpose, for salvation.

Come with me forever to heaven!

And no one, my brothers and sisters, more effectively extended that sacred invitation in this land than Fulton J. Sheen.

May Jesus Christ be praised!