

THE INTERVIEW/ JASON GRAY

“Mary and the Eucharist: The Pillars of Fulton Sheen’s Spirituality”

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Today, September 24, in Saint Louis, United States, the Venerable Fulton J. Sheen (1895–1979) will be declared blessed. The Mass of Beatification will be presided over by Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, representing the Pope. This beatification was first

announced in July 2019 and comes at the end of a troubled process that was only resolved in February of this year.

A great communicator of the truths of the faith through popular books and radio and television broadcasts, Sheen lived out his charism in total dedication to Christ and his brothers and sisters: in fact, thanks to his pastoral ministry, there have been over fifty thousand conversions to Catholicism. To explore this luminous figure and witness to the faith, *La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana* interviewed Monsignor Jason Gray, director of the Archbishop Fulton John Sheen Foundation, the organization promoting the cause for canonization of the American archbishop.

Monsignor Gray, on the day of his ordination, the young Fulton made two decisions: to dedicate the Holy Eucharist every Saturday to the Virgin Mary and to spend one hour a day in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, “like a body exposing itself to the sun to absorb its rays.” Are these, as with Don Bosco, the two fundamental ‘pillars’ upon which his pastoral zeal is rooted?

The Virgin Mary and the Eucharist are two fundamental pillars of Sheen’s spirituality. Regarding the Blessed Virgin, his episcopal motto *Da per Matrem me venire* reflects the importance he attached to closeness to Mary. Sheen wrote *JMJ*—an acronym for “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph”—on every sheet of paper: it is another sign of his profound devotion to Our Lady. He also recounted on several occasions, during Marian feasts, that he had fallen ill or had been given particular trials on such occasions. The Marian feasts thus represented an opportunity to offer up his sufferings, just as Mary did at the foot of the cross. Sheen also wished to die on a Saturday or on a Marian feast day. He died on Sunday, December 9, 1979, the day after the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It is providential that he died on the 9th and not on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, so that his liturgical memorial may be set for December 9. The Church announced his beatification on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 2026, and further designated September 24—the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy—as the date for the beatification ceremony. Regarding the Most Holy Sacrament, Sheen committed himself, from the day of his ordination in 1919, to observing the Holy Hour as a sign of perpetual Eucharistic adoration. I believe that the time he spent before the Tabernacle was fundamental to his knowledge of Jesus Christ and his understanding of the Gospel. He had earned many academic degrees, but I do not believe his genius stemmed from classrooms or libraries, but rather from prayer and, as he himself acknowledged, from “two knees on a kneeler.”

And his spirituality brought about many conversions...

Sheen is famous for having brought about the conversion of tens of thousands of

people, although he did not keep track of the number, because he said he might be tempted to think that it was he who had converted people rather than God. When he taught, he presented the faith without compromise, but he did so with great love and humility. His approach was successful because it was very personal. He also prayed and made sacrifices for those he sought to convert, often asking the Blessed Virgin Mary to intercede for the converts.

**“I have always been well cared for spiritually by Peter and by each of his Vicar.”
Regarding Sheen’s personal bond with the popes of the last century, is there one episode that is particularly dear to you?**

Sheen has great devotion to the Holy Father, for where Peter is, there is the Church. I am struck by the fact that Sheen never spoke out against any pope. I believe he had great respect for the burden that every pope bears in caring for the universal Church. He knew what it meant to bear such a burden as a bishop, so he always supported the Pope, who is most in need of our prayers for his apostolic ministry. In his autobiography, Sheen mentions several encounters with successive popes, having had the privilege of meeting each of them in his capacity as national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Pope Pius XII told him he was “a prophet of the times”. John XXIII emphasized that he had suffered greatly and would therefore have a high place in Heaven. Paul VI spoke to him about the difficulties encountered in serving the Church and praised his dedication to the Eucharist and the missions. John Paul II met with Sheen in 1979, two months before his death, and told him: “You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus. You are a faithful son of the Church.”

Fulton Sheen was undoubtedly one of the greatest radio and television preachers of his time. With the program *Life Is Worth Living*—in which he spoke about God, faith, and the Church—he reached 30 million viewers in six years and even won an Emmy Award in 1952 for his remarkable popularity. What were the secret and the formula behind his communication style?

Sheen was extremely intelligent and perceptive, but he did not speak at a level that was incomprehensible to his listeners. He had the ability to explain complex truths in a simple and accessible way. Following in the footsteps of the Master who used parables, he began his program by explaining common concepts drawn from history, literature, psychology, or science. By engaging the audience, he thus gradually led his listeners to understand divine truths. Furthermore, he did not keep notes from previous broadcasts to avoid sounding repetitive and boring. On the contrary, he always prepared each program with care, rehearsing over and over for many hours. He also possessed an authenticity that made his message powerful. Listeners could sense that he believed

deeply in what he was saying, that he lived his faith personally, and that he was a courageous man, capable of expressing even complex ideas with simplicity.

What are the main heroic virtues for which he has been recognized?

I believe his primary virtue was humility. This might seem strange, given his enormous success and his career in radio and television, for which he even won an Emmy. We certainly wouldn't expect most famous television personalities to be humble.

Nor would we expect a celebrity to be willing to devote time to ordinary people. Yet Sheen did not associate only with the wealthy, the political elite, or other celebrities. He felt at ease talking to ordinary people on the street—the taxi driver, the housewife—and he did not look down on people because he was humble.

In addition to the miracle recognized by Pope Francis on July 6, 2019—a miracle that occurred to James Fulton Engstrom, a baby born dead in 2010 who came back to life 61 minutes after birth without suffering any brain damage—are there other, lesser-known miracles that took place through his intercession that you'd like to share with us?

We have received reports of other significant miracles that could be presented for canonization. Since Pope Francis approved the beatification in 2019 and the ceremony was postponed, we can present any other miracles that have occurred since that year in preparation for canonization. We are currently awaiting the opinion of medical specialists before proceeding with a diocesan inquiry into these other potential miracles. Beyond the most striking ones, we receive reports from many faithful devotees who tell us that their prayers have been answered regarding healings from illness and the conversion of loved ones. The spiritual miracles of a soul's conversion are more precious than the physical miracles of bodily healing. The conversion of souls to God is, in fact, a continuation of the many conversions that Sheen brought about during his lifetime.