

Circular Letter to the Carmelite Family On the Beatification of Venerable Fulton J. Sheen

‘I want to cling onto Carmel, for I love its love of Jesus.’

Dear brothers and sisters in Carmel,

On 24 September 2026, the Church rejoices in the Beatification of Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in St Louis, Missouri. For the Carmelite Family, this is an occasion of particular joy. Fulton Sheen was not simply an admirer of Carmel or a preacher who found inspiration in our saints. He was a professed member of the Third Order of Carmel. On 17 July 1948, in the chapel of Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C., he made his profession, which was received by the Prior General of the Order, Fr Kilian Lynch, O.Carm.

As we celebrate his beatification, I would like to invite the whole Carmelite Family, friars and nuns, sisters, members of Lay Carmel (Third Order), those associated with our communities, and all who find a spiritual home in our churches, shrines, schools, and centres, to give thanks for this remarkable Christian life and to recognise in it something of the gift of Carmel itself.

A remarkable life

Fulton John Sheen was born on 8 May 1895 in El Paso, Illinois, into a family of Irish ancestry. Ordained on 20 September 1919, he would later serve the Church as a bishop and archbishop, while becoming one of the most recognisable Catholic teachers and communicators of the twentieth century.

He continued his studies first at The Catholic University of America and then in Europe, most notably at the University of Louvain, Belgium, where he completed a doctorate in philosophy and, in 1925, the prestigious *Agrégé en Philosophie* with highest distinction. He also taught theology at Saint Edmund’s College, Ware, in England, and gained formative pastoral and preaching experience in London, at Saint Patrick’s, Soho, and Westminster Cathedral. After further study at the Sorbonne in Paris and the Angelicum in Rome, he returned to the United States and in 1926 joined the faculty of The Catholic University of America.

The classroom was only one of the places in which his remarkable gift for communication emerged. From 1930 his voice became familiar to millions through *The Catholic Hour* on radio. In 1950 he became national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith; in 1951 he was consecrated a bishop; and his television programme *Life is Worth Living* soon brought him into millions of homes each week. In 1966 he became Bishop of Rochester, resigning that

office in 1969, after which he continued to write, preach, and teach until his death on 9 December 1979.

The scale of his public success can sometimes obscure the breadth of his intellectual formation. Sheen belonged to that extraordinary Catholic intellectual and literary renewal which marked the English-speaking world during the first half of the twentieth century. This was the world of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, Ronald Knox and later Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and others who brought a confident Catholic imagination into conversation with modern culture. In the United States, that wider renewal would find its own distinctive voices in figures such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Flannery O'Connor.

Sheen was a philosopher and theologian rather than a novelist, but he inhabited that same world of intellectual confidence and imaginative engagement. He read widely in philosophy, literature, history, psychology, and the sciences and had a particular gift for bringing together serious thought and memorable expression.

No writer influenced his style more deeply than G. K. Chesterton. The relationship began early. Sheen's first book, *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy*, published in 1925 from work arising out of his doctoral studies, carried an introduction by Chesterton. The young American philosopher had simply approached one of the most celebrated Catholic writers in the English-speaking world and asked him to write it. Chesterton agreed.

The connection was significant. Sheen learned much from Chesterton's delight in paradox, his ability to make familiar things appear new, and his conviction that Christianity enlarges rather than diminishes human reason and imagination. Sheen would bring those qualities into a new age of communication. The lecture hall, the printed page, radio, and television all became places where faith could meet contemporary human experience.

Sheen was a remarkably prolific writer, the author of sixty-four books and sixty-five pamphlets, as well as regular newspaper columns.

A Carmelite

Yet behind the public figure was another Sheen.

His profession at Whitefriars Hall on 17 July 1948 was not an isolated gesture. By then he had long been drawn to Carmelite spirituality. He knew the writings of Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint John of the Cross and developed a particularly deep and enduring love for Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

Already in the 1920s he had formed a friendship with the Carmelite nuns at New Albany, Indiana. In his correspondence with them we discover how deeply he valued the hidden apostolate of prayer. At a time when his own public ministry was becoming increasingly visible, he understood that the deepest fruitfulness of the Church often remains unseen.

One sentence he wrote to the sisters seems almost to explain his profession in Carmel:

‘I want to cling onto Carmel for I love its love of Jesus. I refuse to give it up and like the blind man of Jericho (Mk 10:46-52), I shall go on shouting on to you continually to cure my blindness and my ills.’¹

It is a wonderfully simple description of Carmel.

At the heart of our tradition is not first a method of prayer, a particular ministry, or even the great history we have inherited. It is a Person. Carmel exists to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ, to seek his face, to remain in his presence and, transformed by that encounter, to serve his people.

This was also at the heart of Sheen’s spirituality. The source of his extraordinary activity was a life of prayer, centred especially upon the Eucharist. Throughout his adult life he remained faithful to his daily Holy Hour. Before the words, there was silence; before communication, communion; before the apostolate, the encounter with Christ.

There is something profoundly Carmelite in that rhythm.

‘You can only love a person’

It is perhaps Saint Thérèse who allows us to see most clearly the meeting between Sheen’s own spirituality and that of Carmel.

He recognised that her ‘Little Way’ was not a programme of spiritual self-improvement. It was a way of looking away from ourselves towards Christ. As he told his listeners when speaking of Thérèse:

‘You can never fall in love with an abstraction. You can only love a person.’²

¹ <https://ocarm.org/en/item/6844-fulton-j-sheen-new-blessed-with-carmelite-ties>

² Fulton J. Sheen, *Archbishop Fulton Sheen’s Saint Thérèse: A Treasured Love Story* (Irving, TX: Basilica Press, 2007)

For Sheen, this was Thérèse's great discovery. Holiness begins not by becoming preoccupied with our own perfection but by falling in love with Jesus Christ. From that relationship everything else gradually takes its proper place.

There is an important message here for our own Carmelite life. It is possible even for religious practice to become self-centred: our successes and failures, our plans, structures, and concerns. Thérèse continually redirects our gaze. Sheen understood her well. Begin with Christ. Look at him. Love him. Let him change you.

And then something else happens.

Love becomes mission.

Sheen was fascinated that Thérèse, enclosed within a Carmelite monastery and never travelling to the missions, could become Patroness of the Missions. His explanation went straight to the heart of her vocation: she loved Christ so much that she wanted him to be known everywhere. *'Love makes one a missionary. When we cease to love, we cease to be a missionary,'* Sheen concluded.³

Here Sheen found in Thérèse something that also explained his own life.

His years with the Society for the Propagation of the Faith took him across the world and brought him into close contact with the missionary life of the Church. He preached and travelled through Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania and Latin America, from the UK and Ireland to Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa; from China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam to Australia and New Zealand; and from Argentina to Brazil. He raised enormous sums for the missions, but fundraising was never the deepest meaning of that work. Mission meant making Christ known.

Contemplation and mission were, therefore, not opposites for him. They belonged together.

That insight remains precious for Carmel. The contemplative heart is not closed in upon itself. The deeper the encounter with Christ, the wider the heart becomes.

A friendship deepened in Carmel

³ Fulton J. Sheen, *Archbishop Fulton Sheen's Saint Thérèse: A Treasured Love Story* (Irving, TX: Basilica Press, 2007)

Sheen's relationship with Carmel found a particularly warm expression in Ireland, the land of his ancestry, and, above all, at the Carmelite Church in Whitefriar Street, Dublin. He came there on four visits during the final decade of his life.

In July 1969, he preached during the Novena of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In August 1971, he returned as the Carmelites in Ireland celebrated the seventh centenary of their arrival in the country. In October 1973, he came again for the centenary of the birth of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Finally, during Holy Week 1975, he returned once more, preaching in a particular way on Good Friday, 28 March.

The 1973 visit deserves to be remembered in particular. At Whitefriar Street he delivered a series of eleven conferences on Saint Thérèse, marking the centenary of her birth. Those talks were later published as *Archbishop Fulton Sheen's St. Thérèse: A Treasured Love Story* (Irving, TX: Basilica Press, 2007).

They remain among the warmest and most accessible expressions of his Carmelite spirituality. The Thérèse whom Sheen presents is not sentimental. She is courageous, intensely alive, missionary, and passionately in love with Christ. Her 'Little Way' opens onto something immense: the transformation of ordinary life by love.

That these conferences were given in a Carmelite church in Dublin seems especially fitting. Sheen was speaking about one of Carmel's great saints, among Carmelites, as himself a professed member of the Carmelite family.

Mary and the Eucharist

Two other features of Sheen's life will be immediately recognisable to Carmelites: his love for Mary and for the Eucharist.

His mother dedicated him to the Blessed Virgin at his baptism, and Sheen renewed that dedication at his First Holy Communion. Marian devotion remained a constant throughout his life. He prayed the Rosary, wrote and preached frequently about Mary and chose as his episcopal motto, words taken from the ancient hymn, *Stabat Mater*, *Da per Matrem me venire*. ('Grant that I may come to Thee through the Mother')

His love of Mary was always Christ-centred. That, too, is the Marian instinct of Carmel. Mary draws attention away from herself towards her Son. She teaches us to hear the Word, to ponder it, to make room for God, and to respond.

The Eucharist likewise stood at the centre of Sheen's life. His daily Holy Hour was the hidden thread running through decades of teaching, travel, writing, and public communication. It reminds us of a truth Carmel must never forget: the fruitfulness of our lives does not finally depend upon how much we accomplish but upon the depth of our communion with God.

Sheen also had a real affinity with the Christian East. As a priest, he was among the clergy who participated in the Byzantine Divine Liturgy celebrated by Blessed Nicholas Charnetsky during the 1932 Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, Ireland. Later, in 1955, he celebrated the Pontifical Divine Liturgy in English at the pilgrimage to Mount Saint Macrina, Uniontown, within the Ruthenian Byzantine Catholic tradition.

Life is Worth Living

The title of Sheen's most famous television programme, *Life is Worth Living*, could almost stand as a summary of his message.

For Sheen, life is worth living because it comes from God and tends towards God. The human person cannot finally be understood in terms of usefulness, productivity, pleasure, or social function. We are made for more.

That conviction enabled Sheen to speak beyond the boundaries of the Catholic community. Jews and Protestants, believers and non-believers listened to him. He could begin with something universal, a desire for happiness, the experience of loneliness, love, suffering, fear, guilt, or hope, and lead the listener towards deeper questions.

He was capable of doing so because he took both faith and the human person seriously.

His intellectual formation allowed him to engage philosophy, psychology, sociology, literature, and science without allowing any of them to reduce the mystery of the human person. His gift was to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from ordinary life towards the eternal.

This remains a challenge and an encouragement for the Carmelite Family today. We live amid forms of communication Sheen could hardly have imagined. Yet the question is essentially the same: how can the ancient Gospel be spoken in such a way that the people of our time recognise that it concerns their lives?

Carmel has something distinctive to contribute. In a culture of extraordinary noise, distraction and speed, we bear a tradition of silence, listening, and interiority. But contemplation is never an escape from the world. It enables us to see the world more deeply and to love it more truly.

Sheen himself embodied something of this paradox: intensely contemplative and extraordinarily communicative; rooted in tradition and alert to the possibilities of today.

In this sense, Sheen was a pioneer of what the Church would later call the *New Evangelisation*: presenting the perennial Gospel with fresh ardour, fresh expression, and imaginative use of the means of communication available to his age. Yet for Sheen the starting point was never technique, but a personal encounter with Jesus Christ from which the desire to make him known naturally flowed.

A place in the family of Carmel

Dear brothers and sisters, beatification is never simply about honouring someone who lived in the past. The Church places a life before us so that the Gospel may be recognised afresh in the present.

Fulton Sheen lived through immense social, political, and technological change. He saw the emergence of new forms of communication, the growth of secularisation, the struggle between great political ideologies, and profound questions about human freedom and dignity.

He met that world not by retreating from it, but by bringing to it what he had first received in prayer. He prayed deeply. He thought seriously. He communicated imaginatively. He loved the Church. He loved Mary. He loved the Eucharist. He loved the missions. And, at the heart of everything, he loved Jesus Christ.

That is why Carmel spoke to him. And perhaps that is why, on the occasion of his Beatification, his own words can speak with particular force to us: *'I want to cling onto Carmel for I love its love of Jesus.'* May that be true of us also.

May our religious communities and homes, our churches, schools, shrines, and centres be places where Jesus Christ is known and loved. May our prayer make us more attentive to the needs of the world. May contemplation deepen rather than diminish our missionary desire. May Mary teach us to listen, to ponder, and to respond. And, with Saint Thérèse and Blessed Fulton Sheen, may we rediscover that when Christ is truly loved, the heart cannot keep him to itself.

With fraternal affection and in joyful thanksgiving,

Fr Desiderio Garcia Martínez, O.Carm. Prior General
Rome, 24 September 2026