



InnerView



With Mother M. Vaclava Ballon, FSJB, Archivist at the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Museum

Mother, tell us about your community, the Franciscan Sisters of John the Baptist, which is a relatively new community founded in 2006, and how you came to be in Peoria.

Our community was established on October 2, 2006 in Peoria by Most Rev. Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C. The establishment of our community was the result of an intensive process of renewal in striving to live authentic religious life in our previous community. Through this renewal God revealed to us the plan He had for us from of old. He wanted us to prove our love for Him and He called us again to leave everything for Him. For those of us who said “yes,” again, it meant leaving the security of the well-established life in a congregation of pontifical right and to start a new community in complete dependence on Him. We live out our spirit with Franciscan simplicity and in imitation of John the Baptist. We witness to the primacy of God by our constant effort toward conversion and transformation of mind and heart in order to conform ourselves to Christ: “He must increase, and I must decrease.” We witness to Christ in a spirit of joy as brides of Christ, since we rejoice above all at the voice of the bridegroom. In calling on John, we remember not only the necessity of humility, but that this decreasing “is my joy, and it is complete.” Our charism is “Trusting God in profound humility and joy.” In our apostolate

work we are in healthcare and diocesan ministries and we plan in the future to be involved in teaching.

In 2008, your community was asked by Bishop Jenky to help with the diocesan Office of Archives and with setting up the diocesan museum, including the Venerable Servant of God Fulton J. Sheen Museum. What historical ties does Archbishop Sheen have with Peoria?

Sheen was about 5 years old when his family moved to Peoria from El Paso, Illinois, where he was born, since his parents wanted their children to receive a Catholic education. Young Fulton was enrolled at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception parochial school and became an altar server. After grade school, Fulton enrolled in the Spalding Institute in Peoria and was top in his class. On September 20, 1919, he was ordained a priest at the Cathedral. His first and only parish assignment was at St. Patrick Church in Peoria where he proved himself a zealous shepherd and teacher. Although working outside the diocese, he was a priest of the Peoria diocese until 1951 when he was consecrated auxiliary bishop of New York. Fulton Sheen never forgot his Peoria roots. Many years later, he would proudly mention Peoria as his home diocese in his television programs or in his books. He also returned to Peoria numerous times for various occasions.

What can people see when they come to the museum?

The museum houses a large collection of items that belonged to Archbishop Sheen, such as his pectoral cross, vestments, chalice, his handwritten reflections, his First Communion prayer book and his ordination holy card. There is also the original World Mission Rosary, a large crucifix from his TV shows and the original 1954 *Life is Worth Living* film reel—to name just a few. The exhibit is accompanied by several slide shows of numerous photos of Archbishop Sheen and by many of his books that are available for purchase.

Does the community have a special affection or devotion to Venerable Servant of God Fulton J. Sheen?

Our first encounter with Archbishop Sheen happened through Rev. Andrew Apostoli, CFR, who gave us a retreat in our previous community. During the retreat, he went to talk to the Bishop about opening the cause of canonization of Archbishop Sheen. The cause opened in 2002 and Father Apostoli became vice-postulator. We believed in the cause from the beginning. When we were looking for the saints whom we would like to venerate in our new community, we decided that it should be someone local and Archbishop Sheen came up as a natural choice. Sheen was known for making a daily Holy Hour from the day of his ordination

until his death. We were inspired by our future patron and we decided to offer our daily Holy Hour for priests and seminarians. One of the stained-glass windows of our Motherhouse chapel depicts Archbishop Sheen.

Archbishop Sheen wrote many books. Which works would you recommend?

I would recommend two biographies. The first is his autobiography *Treasure in Clay* where you can get to know him. And if you want to know the person of Jesus Christ on a deeper level, on the level that Sheen knew Him, read his book *Life of Christ*. You will not be disappointed.

Tell us about the miracle story of little James Fulton Engstrom and how this could lead to the Archbishop's beatification.

Travis and Bonnie Engstrom of Goodfield, Illinois, were familiar with the Archbishop and decided that if their baby was a boy his middle name would be Fulton. On September 16, 2010, after a routine pregnancy, James Fulton Engstrom was stillborn at home and without a pulse. Bonnie asked family and friends to seek Archbishop Sheen's intercession. In spite of his speedy transfer to a hospital in Peoria, James was without a pulse for 61 minutes. But when doctors were ready to call the time of death, his heart started beating. Doctors nevertheless warned Bonnie that James might be severely handicapped.

For Sheen to be beatified, an approved miracle is necessary. In September 2011, a tribunal was sworn to investigate the healing of James Fulton. James was medication free, had just been released from physical therapy, and continued to meet growth milestones as any other child.



In March 2014, a seven-member board of medical advisers at the Vatican unanimously approved the miracle as scientifically unexplainable. A Vatican theological commission confirmed the alleged miracle as genuine and supernatural and awaits the final affirmation of the Holy Father. Today, James Fulton is a healthy almost 8-year old boy!

What impact can Archbishop Sheen's life, legacy and holiness have on the world today?

All that Archbishop Sheen preached in the 1950s has a great relevance today. His prophetic words regarding abortion, liberalism, communism or faith crisis do not come only as warning, but also as hope. He readily offers a remedy for them, especially in a personal loving relationship with the Lord. His first and foremost proof of this was his daily Holy Hour before the Eucharist, the best spent time of his day. That is why he titled his autobiography *Treasure in Clay*: human life is just a lump of clay in the hands of the Divine Potter. But if pliable and docile, it can be made into a beautiful vessel which holds the Potter's treasure of grace. Fulton Sheen's life shows that everyday holiness is real and doable, provided

we are rooted in the Cross which he preached so fearlessly. Today's young people love him and seek his advice because he offers nothing less than the truth for which they hunger.

You were born in Slovakia when the country was under Communist rule and sisters had to live "underground." What do you say to young women discerning a possible religious vocation? For in many respects, people do not see religious life visibly in our country today too!

My call to religious life came through a priest who did not even know me, except from hearing my confessions. Since I believe that God talks to us through people, I took the priest's suggestion to consider religious life very seriously. Of course, God can use other ways also and there is a discernment process to make it clear if what we hear is a call to religious life, but we should not prolong it. A call to consecrated life is an invitation to unite ourselves with Jesus in carrying His cross. But since hearing the Bridegroom's voice fills us with joy, there cannot be any other response than to say "yes" to His invitation. God will always give us graces to fulfill what He has begun.

Where can people find out more information about the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Museum?

The museum is located at the Spalding Pastoral Center, 419 NE Madison Ave., Peoria, IL 61603 (309-671-1550), CDOPmuseums.org. Schools or parish groups are welcome. For more information on the cause, please visit Archbishop-SheenCause.org. To learn about our community, go to our website, SistersofJohntheBaptist.com. 