The Sacrament of Baptism and the Call to Holiness and Catholic Worldwide Mission in the Life, Prayer and Thought of Blessed Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen[1]

Homily of Bishop John Barres

St. Mary's Church, El Paso, Illinois

Saturday, September 26, 2026

I. On November 6, 1897, *The El Paso Journal* reported on a meeting here at St. Mary's Church, at which plans were discussed to build "a new…house of worship" for the parish.[2]

The original church, the structure in need of replacing, was situated where the parish hall now stands. Sided in white boards, modest in length, and narrow in width, it was built in 1865. A small steeple rose over its front doors, and a picket fence enfolded the property.

For two generations, it was God's house in El Paso, but as the paper recounted, it "long ago lived out its day of appropriateness and usefulness."[3]

After that initial meeting, parishioners responded generously, funds were raised, and under the leadership of Father Jeremiah Quinlan, the pastor, plans were drawn up for a replacement. Work soon commenced, and it progressed swiftly.

By the end of 1898, *this* brick structure dominated the corner of Elm and West Third, and on Sunday, May 21, 1899, Bishop Spalding, Bishop Tylka's predecessor, consecrated the new church.[4]

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[1] Bishop Barres' homily is grounded in and draws directly on his September 8, 2026, Pastoral Letter entitled, "The Beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen and the Mission of the Catholic Church in the 21st Century." Available at www.drvc.org.

[2] *The El Paso Journal*, El Paso, Illinois, November 6, 1897, page 2. Accessed at www.newspapers.com.

[3] Ibid.

[4] *The El Paso Journal*, El Paso, Illinois, January 7, 1899, page 1. Accessed at www.newspapers.com.

We gather today in the new church, but on August 3, 1893, Newton Sheen and Delia Fulton gathered in the old. Inside its wooden walls, surrounded by family and friends, the couple exchanged vows and commenced fifty years of married life.

A newspaper notice announcing their nuptials says the new Mr. and Mrs. Sheen honeymooned in Chicago and returned soon after to El Paso, where they ran a hardware store on West Front Street, just three blocks south of here.[5]

We can imagine Newt and Dee, as they were called, delighting in the first months of their union.[6] Knowing that it takes *Three to Get Married*,[7] we can picture, too, this parish of St. Mary's being a regular part of their life, the place where they celebrated the Sacraments, heard God's Word, and offered their devotions.

The graces received in church overflowed into their marriage, their work, and into their apartment above the store. Those rooms housed a domestic church, where God was remembered in prayer and guests were made welcome. Undoubtedly, "the atmosphere of [the] home was Christian."[8]

On May 8, 1895, the couple was blessed with their first child, the first of four sons. Four days later, on May 12th, he was carried to the font of old St. Mary's church and baptized Peter John by Father Quinlan.[9] Before long, the child was known as Fulton.

II. 131 years later and immediately after his beatification, *it is good that we are here*.[10] For here, at St. Mary's, in the Sacrament of Baptism, Fulton Sheen became a new creation. Here, original sin was washed away and new life in Christ was bestowed.

Here is where the Holy Trinity entered his soul, where the adventure of holiness - the lifelong joy of following the Lord Jesus - was placed before him and where the call to mission – to be an ambassador of Christ - was conferred.

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[5] *The Daily Pantagraph*, Bloomington, Illinois, August 4, 1893, page 1. Accessed at www.newspapers.com.
[6] Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1980), 18.
[7] *Three to Get Married* is the title of Blessed Archbishop Sheen's classic book on marriage and family life. It was first published in 1951.
[8] *Treasure in Clay*, 16.
[9] In *Treasure in Clay*, Blessed Archbishop Sheen notes this fact on page 8: "Though I had been baptized Peter in St. Mary's Church in El Paso, Illinois, I was now called Fulton."
[10] Cf. Matthew 17:4.

Here he was given to *The World's First Love*, the Virgin Mary.[11] As the Blessed Archbishop relates in his autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, "When I was baptized as an infant, my mother laid me on the altar of the Blessed Mother in St. Mary's Church, El Paso, Illinois, and consecrated me to her."[12]

Blessed Fulton Sheen's first years were lived here, in the town and parish, before the family moved to Peoria. It is where, in ways unknown to him as an infant and child, the clay began to be molded.[13]

We celebrate in these days one who knew well that *Life is Worth Living* and who lived well the upward call of Christ during his 84 years on earth.

We rejoice that one who responded to grace, who was docile to the Holy Spirit, who entrusted his gifts and talents to the Lord, who served wholeheartedly as a priest and bishop, who persevered through adversity and faithfully carried the Cross, and who boldly lived the missionary mandate is now counted among the Blessed.

We praise God that Blessed Fulton Sheen kept the light of Christ burning brightly.

So, as we celebrate and contemplate the arc of his life, it is indeed right to return to where grace began, to come back to St. Mary's and offer this Mass of Thanksgiving.

III. Now, you might be wondering why the Bishop of Rockville Centre is celebrating this Mass. Why did Bishop Tylka so graciously invite me? After all, my diocese on Long Island, New York, is a long way from El Paso, Illinois.

The reason is simple. I was baptized by Blessed Archbishop Sheen on October 2, 1960, at Saint Augustine's Church in Larchmont, New York, at a time when my father, Oliver Barres, was working for the Archbishop as a writer for the Propagation of the Faith.

Now, by God's providence, at this historic moment, I also have the privilege of serving as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Pontifical Mission Societies

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[11] *The World's First Love: Mary, Mother of God* is the title of Blessed Archbishop Sheen's book on the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was originally published in 1952.

[12] *Treasure in Clay*, 316.

[13] See Chapter 2 of *Treasure in Clay*. Entitled "The Molding of the Clay," it documents the beautiful impact of Blessed Archbishop Sheen's parents on his formation. The chapter begins, "Clay has to be molded, and that is done primarily in the family, which is more sacred than the state."

in the United States, which includes the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, and as the Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Catholic University of America. Archbishop Sheen was intimately linked with these institutions and an ardent champion of their missions. With his deep connection to them and my role of service for them, these days have added significance for me.

Pondering the day of my baptism, I can only imagine Archbishop Sheen's riveting voice saying, *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*, as he poured water over my head in the presence of my parents, godparents, four older sisters, and family friends.

Providentially, in a certain sense, he was not only baptizing me but sending me out as a future Successor of the Apostles and Diocesan Bishop on Catholic worldwide mission.

As we know, the logic of the Sacrament of Baptism for every member of the faithful is the call to *Holiness and Mission*.[14] For a Catholic Bishop who was baptized by Blessed Archbishop Sheen, that call carries a particular and humbling responsibility: to be a Spirit-driven instrument of Catholic evangelization.

Reflecting on that responsibility caused me to consider Archbishop Sheen's message to us while he was living and his message to the 21st century. I believe it is really quite simple yet profound. Here it is:

When we pray, sacrifice, and carry Crosses for Catholic mission in every continent, we evangelize much more effectively our spouses, our children, our families, our parishes, our communities, our secular networks, workplaces, and forums. The heart of every individual Catholic is called to be as large as the world! We are called to be missionaries!

IV. I am forever grateful to my parents, Oliver and Majorie, for enlarging my heart and showing me the vastness of the mission field.

They were both ordained Congregational Protestant ministers from the Yale Divinity School but converted and entered the Catholic Church in 1955. My father's book

[14] *Holiness and Mission* is the episcopal motto of Bishop Barres, taken from Pope Saint John Paul II's 1990 Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*.

One Shepherd, One Flock describes how they gradually embraced the truth claims of the Catholic Church, truth claims that are the fulcrum of the Church's call to worldwide mission.

Soon after his conversion, my father began working with Archbishop Sheen. He wrote for *Mission* magazine, teaching the Faith and relating the beauty of proclaiming and living it.

In addition to their own witness and their relationship with Archbishop Sheen and his mission work, my parents were friends with great Catholic missiologists like Maryknoll Father John Considine, M.M., and his confrere Bishop William McNaughton, M.M., of Incheon, Korea.[15] Through these special bonds, it seemed like the whole world was at our dining room table.

The holy lives, ecclesial missions, and inspirational teachings of these great Catholic figures impacted me at a young age and have inspired my life and mission as a 21st century American Catholic Bishop.

They also illuminate the Church's teaching on mission and evangelization and inspire our own integration of that teaching in our 21st century Catholic witness.

V. In the late 1990s, while a graduate student priest in Rome, I made my annual retreats on the campus of the Pontifical Urbanianum University at the *Centro Internazionale di Animazione Missionaria* - the International Center for Missionary Animation. I always loved that name; it is a proclamation in itself.

The first time I entered the chapel of that retreat house, I found large statues of Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux – co-patrons of the Church's global mission work. I also discovered a large bust of Archbishop Sheen in the library.

I thought to myself how beautiful that our American Saint Paul of Catholic worldwide mission is at the very heart of this retreat house that primarily serves priests and religious from developing countries.

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[15] See Bishop John Barres, "Tribute to Maryknoll Missionary Bishop William J. McNaughton, MM," *Long Island Catholic* (March 2020), 3-5.

A few years later a more knowledgeable priest said to me: “Bishop Sheen’s bust is in the library because he paid for the retreat house!”

It was a humorous reality check, but the placement is still fitting. Archbishop Sheen is rightly and forever linked to the Church’s missionary efforts.

Of course, the remarkable fruitfulness of those efforts also reflects the generosity of countless American Catholics who have prayerfully supported the Church’s mission throughout the world.

As Catholic Americans, we can be humbly proud that our philanthropy has supported the Pontifical Mission Societies, the Propagation of the Faith, and the World Mission Sunday second collection scheduled this year for weekend of October 17-18.

This prayerful financial support has advanced the global mission of the Catholic Church on every continent in so many powerful ways and it is important that we continue and increase that history of generosity in the 21st century.

Our generosity is crucial, but more so is our personal investment in living the missionary mandate. All Catholics – whatever their state in life - are called to be missionaries. *Go and make disciples of all nations*, the Lord commanded.[16] The task is clear.

Today, this also means being constantly open to what Pope Leo XIV calls “missionary conversion,” a way of examining continually our lives and our efforts to ensure they are focused on proclaiming the Lord. Every Catholic and all Catholic dioceses, parishes, universities, hospitals, and institutions must seek to deepen this spirit of “missionary conversion,” so the world will know Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.[17]

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[16] Matthew 28:19.

[17] See Pope Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, June 1, 2026: “My dear brothers and sisters, the Second Vatican Council insisted that the “Church on earth is by her very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Ad Gentes*, 2). Mindful of this, I invite you all to appreciate the urgency of embracing an **ongoing missionary conversion** and to look together for ways of being a missionary Church for the healing of our world, so fraught with tensions, conflicts and wars. In this important task, the work of the Pontifical Mission Societies remains essential. Let us therefore continue our missionary journey with joy and renewed zeal.” (Emphasis added.)

VI. The Beatification Mass we celebrated in St. Louis on Thursday ignites our celebration of Archbishop Sheen's role in American Catholic Church history and his role in the unfolding and development of Catholic contemplative global missiology from the Second Vatican Council's *Ad Gentes* to Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*.[18]

May the Beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen help to renew our understanding and commitment to Catholic contemplative missiology.

May the Church be blessed with a rich harvest of vocations and holy priests who imitate his example.

May each one of us respond to our baptismal call to "holiness and mission" and may we be vibrant instruments of "missionary conversion" in the daily life and mission of the Church we love.

Our Lady, Queen of missionaries, pray for us!

Blessed Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, pray for us!

[18] See Bishop Barres' article "Embracing the Missionary Call," in *Mission: A Magazine of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, Fall 2024, 34-36.