

Inside the beatification of Fulton Sheen

Around 50,000 people journeyed to St. Louis, Missouri for the historic beatification of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

On Thursday, September 24, Archbishop Fulton Sheen was officially beatified, and is now recognized as Blessed Fulton Sheen, marking an important next step towards canonization as a saint.

The celebration also has a direct connection to OSF HealthCare. The miracle recognized by the Catholic Church for Sheen's beatification involves a newborn boy who was stillborn, whose heart began beating after 61 minutes. He revived and received care at OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria, Illinois.

James Fulton Engstrom was born in 2010. After his birth, his family and others prayed, asking for Archbishop Fulton Sheen's intercession.

Now a teenager, Engstrom was in St. Louis for Sheen's beatification. In a full-circle moment, he walked toward the altar with his family during the Beatification Mass, carrying a vessel containing relics of Sheen.

In 2019, then-Pope Francis approved the miracle attributed to Sheen's intercession, clearing a major requirement for his beatification. Seven years later, Sheen has officially been declared Blessed.

Thousands of Catholic clergy, seminarians and religious attended and participated in the Beatification Mass. Thousands of individuals witnessed the beatification as well.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, pro-prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Evangelization, presided as Pope Leo XIV's representative at the Mass, held at The Dome at America's Center in downtown St. Louis.

During the ceremony, the Most Reverend Bishop Louis Tylka of the Catholic Diocese of Peoria formally requested the beatification of Archbishop Fulton Sheen. After a brief biography of Sheen was read, Cardinal Tagle read an apostolic letter from Pope Leo XIV in Latin, with Bishop Tylka reading it in English. The letter formally declared Sheen "Blessed."

Pope Leo, a Chicago native, grew up watching Archbishop Sheen on television. While Sheen was born in El Paso, Illinois, he was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Peoria in 1919. He later became one of the most recognizable Catholic figures in American media. His television program, "Life Is Worth Living," reached up to 30 million viewers per week during the 1950s.

Bishop Tylka oversaw the official cause for canonization and beatification. He reflects on Sheen's mission.

"His desire was to save souls. He was the convert-maker, whether it was the person of notoriety or fame, as well as the person on the street," Bishop Tylka says.

Millions of people around the world have been impacted by Fulton Sheen, including Michele Konecki of Metamora, Illinois, just outside of Peoria. Konecki volunteers at Fulton Sheen's tomb at the Cathedral of St. Mary in Peoria, as well as with the pastoral care staff at OSF HealthCare, visiting people receiving care at OSF Saint Francis Medical Center.

"Because I've been active in the cause for the beatification, this is kind of putting the cherry on top," Konecki says. "Because I have been praying for the beatification and spending time with him at the tomb, it's very important to me."

Konecki attributes an important moment in her life to Fulton Sheen.

"He says in his book Treasures of Clay, 'what do you do for your church? And what do you do with the talents that God gave you?' Right after that I met someone that was related to Fulton Sheen, like 30 minutes after that conversation I had in my car," Konecki says. "It was almost a sign that he heard me, and that pushed me forward to what I'm doing."

Monsignor Jason Gray, also with the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, is the executive director for the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Foundation. He says while Sheen's messages were broadcast nearly 80 years ago, they remain relevant today.

"Young people who were not alive when he was on television are discovering him now," Monsignor Gray says. "He really left a legacy we can be proud of. He came from this local territory and went to serve the Church throughout the United States and throughout the world."

Bishop Tylka agrees, stressing that Sheen asked an important question that should still be considered today.

"He asked a question, 'Quo Vadis America?' Which means 'where are we going, America?' His reach was to all homes that were willing to turn on the TV and tune in to him," says Bishop Tylka. "He had a significant following, but not just among Catholics. Protestants and those of the Jewish faith (followed him), and he just spoke to the world."

Monsignor Gray notes Sheen's missionary work as an inspiration to all.

"Archbishop Fulton Sheen had some personal stories that were really fantastic. For example, he would look after leper colonies, that was part of his missionary work," Monsignor Gray says. "He talked about a time that he was distributing little crosses, and he would actually go and touch their hands. Because it's important to practice the virtues like charity, but to do so in practice, it's not just something you talk about, you actually have to do that."

While the Beatification Mass began before 2 p.m. at The Dome, the celebration started hours earlier, with thousands of people lining up to get inside. Visitors could participate in Eucharistic adoration and confession and walk through the Sheen Expo, which featured Catholic ministries and organizations, including OSF HealthCare.

The celebration now returns to Peoria with more events are scheduled Friday and Saturday, including Masses of Thanksgiving, a festival, the Sheen Awards Gala and other celebrations honoring Blessed Fulton Sheen.

Beatification leaves Sheen one step from sainthood. Canonization ordinarily requires the Catholic Church to recognize another miracle attributed to Sheen's intercession following his beatification.

Bishop Tylka says multiple potential miracles are being considered and hopes to have more information to share in the near future.