

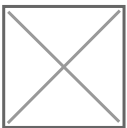
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Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen is seen in an undated photo posing with women who worked at the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in New York City. (OSV News/Pontifical Mission Societies USA Archives)

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When Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen is beatified Sept. 24 in St. Louis, attention will rightly fall on the celebrated television preacher whose broadcasts brought Catholic teaching into millions of American homes.

But for almost two decades, behind Sheen's extraordinary reach stood a largely unknown group of women who opened thousands of letters, recorded donations, thanked contributors, and helped transform his words into material support for missionaries and young churches around the world.

Sheen served from 1950 to 1966 as the national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, one of the four Pontifical Mission Societies. The society coordinates World Mission Sunday, the annual worldwide day of giving that supports the church's work in more than 1,100 mission territories.

It was a responsibility central to Sheen's priesthood and public ministry. Alongside his radio and television work, he traveled, preached missionary appeals and served as editor of MISSION Magazine, which began being published by the national office of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in 1951.

When Sheen spoke about the missions on TV, preached an appeal or published a new issue of the magazine, the response would arrive in the form of 8,000 to 10,000 letters a day, filled with thank-you notes and donations.

Envelopes poured into the society's national office in New York. Some contained large checks. Others held a few dollars, coins saved by children or brief notes explaining the sacrifice behind the gift.

And behind the scenes, a small army of women opened those envelopes, recorded the offerings and made sure the donors received a response.

Helen Fitzpatrick was one of "the gals," as she still affectionately calls them.

Now 89, Fitzpatrick began working part-time at the society in 1954, while a senior at St. Vincent Ferrer High School in Manhattan. After graduation, she joined the staff full-time and remained for about a decade.

Her principal responsibility was ensuring that acknowledgment notes were sent to those who supported the missions. The work was constant.

"No matter where he [Archbishop Sheen] was, the office was never without work," Fitzpatrick recalled. "Every time he would send out an appeal or print the magazine, our office would be swamped."

Bernadette Schumann, also in her 80s, remembers that the women worked across two rooms, surrounded by correspondence that connected ordinary American Catholics with the missionary church.

"There were so many letters and so much work, but we knew every envelope represented someone who cared about the missions," said Schumann, who goes by "Bernie." "We were proud to be part of it."

Sheen also made sure the staff understood the spiritual purpose behind the paperwork.

"At 3 every afternoon, we stopped whatever we were doing and prayed the world mission rosary together," Schumann said. "Bishop Sheen made sure that the work we did for the missions was always rooted in prayer. He also took the time to introduce us to visiting missionaries, to make sure we could 'see' who we were helping, even if we couldn't all come to the missions with him."

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For Beatriz Mendoza Orlansky, the path to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith began with exile and an unexpected change of plans.

One of 10 children, she left Cuba with her family in 1960 and resettled in Miami after Fidel Castro came to power. Later that year, she traveled to New York with a cousin and a friend because, she said, "that was the dream we all had."

Her family already knew Sheen. Before the Cuban Revolution, he had traveled to the island to celebrate the marriage of one of her relatives. Sheen also arranged a

scholarship for her sister Sofia to attend Rosemont College, a Catholic women's college in Pennsylvania then operated by the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus.

Young, single and hoping to become a flight attendant, Mendoza approached Sheen with a request. TWA (Trans World Airlines) — which he had dubbed "Travel With Angels" — sponsored his television program, and she wondered whether he might put in a good word.

"He told me that I wasn't going to be a stewardess," she recalled.

Instead, Sheen put her to work for the missions.

"My job was to open the letters, collect the money and send the thank-yous," she said. "It was a gift to work there with him."

By the time she joined the staff, the daily rosary was no longer part of the office routine. But the 3 p.m. pause remained.

"He would always come out at 3 p.m. and share with us a three-minute reflection that would remind us why what we did mattered," she said.

During those years, the office began producing donor acknowledgments in-house, an operation substantial enough to resemble a small print shop. A sign at its entrance captured the staff's spirit: "The impossible, we do immediately. Miracles might take a little longer."

Mendoza and her husband, Hector Orlansky, an Argentine whom she married 52 years ago, both came to regard Sheen with deep admiration.

Dozens of women helped sustain the Society for the Propagation of the Faith during Sheen's 16 years as national director. Some of the women married and raised families. Others entered religious life. Most are no longer living, and their contributions were often known only to their colleagues and families.

Mary Regis McLoughlin, who died in 2022, served as the working editor of MISSION Magazine during the 1960s, managing its day-to-day production while Sheen remained its named editor.

Sr. Marlene Brownnett, a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus who died in 2024, worked in the Propagation of the Faith office before entering religious life. She

later became Sheen's close friend and served on the board of the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Foundation.

None of the women interviewed by OSV News expects to be in St. Louis for the beatification. But the celebration will also belong, in a small way, to them -- and to the many women whose names are now lost to history.

Unknown to the millions who tuned in each week to hear the man dubbed "God's microphone," their work helped ensure that his missionary appeals produced more than admiration. Letters were answered, donors were thanked, missionaries received support and countless small sacrifices were joined to the Church's global mission.

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