



Nuns pray at the tomb of Archbishop Fulton Sheen at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception in Peoria, Ill., on July 15, 2026. Sheen is to be beatified Sept. 24 in St. Louis. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)

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Bonnie Engstrom believes a long-deceased TV priest helped save her son's life after he was born in 2010 without a pulse.

The Catholic Church agreed, declaring the boy's resuscitation a miracle after Engstrom and others sought the heavenly prayers of the late Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who died in 1979. That determination made Sheen — a towering presence in 20th-century Catholicism, with pioneering broadcasts on radio and TV — eligible for beatification.

Now after years of delays to his formal beatification, Engstrom and many others from around Sheen's hometown of Peoria are eagerly preparing for a service on Sept. 24 that will designate the late prelate as "Blessed Fulton Sheen" — one step away from sainthood.

"We will all be at the beatification, and we're super excited," said Engstrom, of nearby Washington, Illinois. Her son James Fulton, who is now a healthy teenager, will carry a relic of Sheen at the ceremony.

"The whole family will accompany him, which is special because in a lot of ways the whole family has walked with him through this whole process," Engstrom said.

Tens of thousands are expected to join them. Too large for Peoria, where his tomb is a worldwide draw for pilgrims, Sheen's main beatification ceremony is being held across the state line in St. Louis. Smaller events will be held in Sheen's hometown.

Pope Leo XIV — a native Illinoisan like Sheen — [greenlighted the beatification in February after years of delays](#).

'The first televangelist' was a pioneer in religious broadcasting

With the rise of television in the 1950s, Sheen entered millions of American living rooms with his show, "Life is Worth Living." Dressed in a cassock, cape and skullcap, he stood at a chalkboard and delivered moral and religious lessons without a narrowly Catholic focus.

The show competed favorably against entertainers Milton Berle and Frank Sinatra on other networks. In an Emmy acceptance speech, Sheen thanked his writers — Gospel scribes Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

"He was probably the best and, in many ways, the first televangelist in the United States," said Msgr. Jason Gray, executive director of the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Foundation, which advocates for his sainthood.

Sheen's devotees from far beyond Peoria are also hoping to attend the beatification.

"He's the TV saint," said Patricia Stephen of Edmonton, Alberta, on a July visit to Sheen's tomb with her husband. "I've heard about him since I was a young kid. His message is very relevant to today."

The foundation and the diocese are working on a major, high-tech expansion of the Sheen museum, which already displays his books, holy objects and other memorabilia.

"Sheen plays in Peoria!" proclaims a foundation newsletter headline encouraging pilgrims to visit. It's a takeoff on the old expression, "Will it play in Peoria?," which locals trace to the city's reputed role as a Middle America proving ground on the vaudeville circuit.

John Kelly, a city councilor who recalls how his parents admired Sheen, says his beatification demonstrates the potential for anyone to become holy. "Being a hometown boy, he's a regular guy. He didn't walk on water," Kelly said.

Sheen's prayers sought during a childbirth crisis

Engstrom knew little about Sheen as she grew up in the same Central Illinois region. That changed while she was pregnant with James, the third of her eight children.

She discovered online videos of Sheen's broadcasts and began asking for his prayers during her pregnancy — in keeping with Catholics' practice of seeking the intercession of those they believe are in heaven.

"That was kind of the beginning of a beautiful relationship," Engstrom recalled.

Her prayers became urgent on Sept. 16, 2010, when Engstrom gave birth to James at her home with the help of a midwife.

The baby was born without a pulse. Attendants quickly began chest compressions, and he was rushed to a Peoria hospital.

Dr. Juanita Aguila-Corrales, a specialist in neonatal perinatal medicine, was on call and hurried there as resuscitation efforts continued for some time.

They prepared to record the time of death but then detected a faint heart tone, she said. The heart began beating normally. The baby was put in therapeutic hypothermia, which helps prevent damage from extended oxygen loss, she said.

"I think it's a miracle he survived without major setbacks," said Aguila-Corrales, a Catholic.

Engstrom waited for James to successfully reach various developmental milestones before calling the Sheen Foundation, triggering the lengthy, formal inquiry that prompted the church to call his survival miraculous.

"I attribute the miracle to Jesus Christ," Engstrom said. "But I firmly believe that Jesus allowed Fulton Sheen's prayers and presence to play an integral part in it."

James enjoys basketball, bike rides and studying meteorological reports. He also remains devoted to Sheen. "He's my protector," the teen told Catholic media.

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Sainthood recognizes a "heroic witness of faith," Peoria Bishop Louis Tylka said. The church typically requires authentication of one miracle for beatification — such as what it deems a medically unexplainable cure attributed to prayers to the candidate.

"We have five potential miracles to investigate" for a second one attributable to Sheen, which would qualify him for sainthood, the bishop said.

A long road to the beatification ceremony

Sheen was born in 1895 in the small town of El Paso, Illinois, and raised in Peoria. After seminary, ordination and a doctorate in philosophy, he had a short pastorate in Peoria before becoming a professor at the Catholic University of America in Washington.

He became known both for his academic lectures and his plainspoken addresses from the pulpit and the studio, first on radio and then on TV.

Sheen appeared in a Time magazine cover article. He guided celebrities and others converting to Catholicism.

He met with popes and spoke at the reformist Second Vatican Council. He railed against communism, though he opposed the Vietnam War.

Sheen raised funds and traveled the world on behalf of Catholic missions. He served as a bishop in New York state, retiring as an archbishop. After his death at 84, he was buried at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York until his niece won a [court battle in 2019 to move his body](#) to Peoria's Cathedral of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception.

Pilgrims today place crucifixes and other items on his marble tomb, giving them status as relics.

Although Pope Francis confirmed the Engstrom case as a miracle attributed to Sheen's intercession, the [Vatican postponed a scheduled 2019 beatification ceremony](#).

The Diocese of Rochester — which Sheen led in the late 1960s — [requested the delay](#) due to legal investigations into the oversight of priests accused of sexual abuse across New York state.

Church officials later concluded that Sheen's record gave no cause for further delay, and plans for the ceremony resumed.

The Engstroms have found an informal community of those who believe they've also experienced Sheen's miraculous interventions, even if the church hasn't formally designated them as such.

Their new friends include Joe and Lizzy Taggart of Bloomington, Illinois.

After being told it was "nearly impossible" medically for Lizzy to conceive and carry a child to term, Joe said he prayed before a crucifix: "Fulton Sheen, if you're up there, we could really use a miracle right now."

Soon afterward, Lizzy conceived their oldest child — named Fulton, now a healthy 8-year-old boy.

The Taggarts firmly believe they're not alone in experiencing a miracle.

"We're hoping to meet some more Fultons when we go down to the beatification," Joe Taggart said.