



Publications featuring the late Archbishop Fulton Sheen are displayed among other artifacts and memorabilia at the Sheen Museum on July 15, 2026, in Peoria, Ill. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)



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September 24, 2026

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When Auxiliary Bishop Fulton Sheen's television program "Life Is Worth Living" debuted on the Dumont network on Feb. 12, 1952, it faced a tough road ahead. How many people would watch a middle-aged priest in traditional clerical garb deliver a half-hour homily at 8 p.m. on a Tuesday evening — especially when they could watch comedian Milton Berle's wildly popular show instead?

Despite the long odds, Sheen's show succeeded. It ran until 1957 and was eventually broadcast on more than 100 stations, attracting millions of viewers.

Sheen became so popular that he was featured on the cover of Time magazine, and was so charismatic that he won an Emmy as television's most outstanding personality, besting Lucille Ball, Edward R. Murrow and Arthur Godfrey. One writer even invented a word to describe Sheen: televangelist.

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The accolades, however, were only part of the story. Non-Catholics made up much of Sheen's audience, and for many of them, he was the first priest they had ever listened to. In a country historically skeptical of Catholicism, his down-to-earth homilies showed that Catholics were just as American as anyone else.

Less than a decade later, the country narrowly elected its first Catholic president. Is it then an exaggeration to suggest that without Fulton J. Sheen paving the way, there might not have been a President John F. Kennedy?

Born in 1895, Sheen was ordained in Peoria, Illinois, in 1919. He made his name as a teacher, homilist and author. He began hosting a radio program called "The Catholic Hour" in 1930, but by the early 1950s, television had eclipsed radio. Sheen saw the new medium as a way to reach a wider audience and, in his words, "help my sponsor, the good Lord."

Sheen's television program had no frills. The set was a book-lined study with a blackboard. He used no notes or cue cards and spoke for 28 minutes without commercial interruption. This simplicity, said New York Herald-Tribune television critic John Crosby, demonstrated that "a great teacher doesn't need film clips, dramatization, panels of experts, diagrams, charts or fancy lighting. He needs only himself."

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It was Sheen's appearance and bearing that first caught viewers' attention. His eyes were described as "penetrating, almost hypnotic" and like "deep coals." His voice was "vibrantly expressive," and he seemed to be speaking directly to each viewer — which was no accident, as he imagined his program "as just a tête-à-tête with people in their own home."

The substance of the show, Time noted, was "not dogma, but a mixture of common sense, logic and Christian ethics" that resonated with people of all faiths as he discussed topics like love, freedom, pleasure and peace.

In the 1960 presidential campaign, religion loomed large because no Catholic had ever been elected president. The only Catholic to ever even run, New York Gov. Al Smith, had been soundly [defeated](#) in 1928 amid a torrent of bigotry that cast the election as a crusade to "keep popery out of the White House."

Kennedy faced more of the same in a country whose population was still less than 25% Catholic. His critics insisted that if Kennedy were elected, the pope would dictate government policy because, as one non-Catholic organization phrased it, "we honestly doubt that a Roman Catholic President could or would fully resist the pressures of ecclesiastical hierarchy."

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Kennedy vehemently disagreed. "I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me," he [said](#) in an address to ministers in Houston two months before the election.

When the votes were counted in November, Kennedy had eked out a win with a [margin](#) of only 112,000 votes out of the 68 million ballots cast. Sheen's impact on the 1960 election cannot be quantified, but with such a razor-thin victory, it's fair to infer that the television priest who had reached the hearts of millions of viewers had some effect.

As journalist [John L. Allen Jr.](#), then Vatican correspondent for National Catholic Reporter, aptly noted in 2009 on the 30th anniversary of Sheen's death, Sheen

"clinched the deal with the general public, showing that you could be completely Catholic and completely American."

When Sheen is beatified in St. Louis this week, his role in gaining greater acceptance for Catholicism in the American public square should not be forgotten.

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