

A week with this generation's Fulton Sheen

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 11, 2009 All Things Catholic

I once had a church history professor who loved counter-factual thought exercises. A hypothetical question he asked us to ponder was the following: What if Fulton Sheen had been named Archbishop of New York?

Sheen, of course, was the 1950s-era TV bishop who, at the height of his fame, commanded an audience estimated at 30 million. In 1952, his show "Life is Worth Living" beat Lucille Ball and Edward R. Murrow for an Emmy award. The point of the question was to consider what the results might have been if the American church's most gifted natural communicator -- in effect, the Catholic Billy Graham -- had also been given the country's most important ecclesiastical post.

Would that have changed the culture of the church? Would it have raised the bar for the American hierarchy, putting a greater premium on evangelization, as opposed to the bricks-and-mortar emphasis of the 1950s? Or would it have backfired, since administrative skills sometimes aren't in the wheelhouse of charismatic personalities?

We'll never know, because Sheen's only opportunity to run a diocese came in the late 1960s in Rochester, New York, and by all accounts it wasn't a happy experience. (By that stage, Sheen had turned sour, disillusioned with some currents in Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council.) But these days we have an intriguing parallel to track, because if there is a Fulton Sheen of this generation -- meaning an American bishop with the same capacity to engage a national audience, to make Catholicism seem attractive to a secular world -- it's probably Timothy Dolan, who also just happens to be the new Archbishop of New York.

I'm spending this week in New York watching Dolan in action, as part of the research for a future book.

Sheen's success a half-century ago came at a critical moment, when American Catholicism was struggling to emerge from the ghetto. Similarly, Dolan's rise to prominence comes at a moment when the Catholic church is again struggling with its public image, this time because of factors such as the sex abuse crisis and divisive forays into politics.

Whether Dolan has any new vision to contribute to those challenges remains to be seen, but perhaps the most immediate thing that strikes the casual observer is this: He doesn't seem to be mad at anybody. Dolan just radiates hope, and that alone is sometimes enough to move mountains.

Comparisons between Sheen and Dolan are especially apt this week, since the 30th anniversary of Sheen's death fell on Wednesday. The occasion was marked by Dolan with a special Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral, and in his homily he delivered a sound-bite of which Sheen could be proud: "He wanted to get to Heaven, and he wanted bring the whole world with him," Dolan said of Sheen. (A sainthood cause for Sheen was launched in 2002 by the diocese of Peoria, Illinois, where he was born, and is awaiting judgment in Rome.)

Following Dolan around, it's easy to see glimmers of Sheen's charisma. Stories of Dolan's wit have already become the stuff of legend, so here's a couple to add to the collection.

On Wednesday night, Dolan mentioned that Sheen is buried in the crypt beneath St. Patrick's Cathedral, along with the former archbishops of New York. Dolan added that a slot is reserved for retired Cardinal Edward Egan of New York, and -- in a play on his own rather roly-poly physique -- "a slot and a half for me."

Another: Dolan told a fundraising reception for Catholic schools a joke about a nun who went to a baseball game. Three Protestants were sitting behind her, and decided to have some fun. One said, "I was thinking about going to Ireland for vacation, but there are too many Catholics there." Another said, "I was considering Italy, but there are too many Catholics." Another said, "I was going to go to Mexico, but there are too many Catholics." Whereupon the nun spun around and said, "Why don't the three of you go straight to hell? I hear there are no Catholics there."

Dolan is so relentlessly upbeat, in fact, that one risk is to reduce him to nothing but a series of one-liners and slapped backs. That was the thrust of a recent profile in *New York* magazine, which labeled Dolan the "Archbishop of Charm" -- suggesting, perhaps, that beneath Dolan's bonhomie, there's not much "there" there.

It doesn't help that Dolan has a self-deprecating sense of humor, deliberately playing off such impressions. I watched him drop in on a meeting of lay movements, in which he didn't make many statements but asked a lot of probing questions. When I commented on it later, he said: "I figure I can get away with acting dumb for about the first year ... until they figure out that I ain't acting."

Later that evening, I sat with Dolan in his study as he chatted with retired Cardinals Ted McCarrick of Washington and William Keeler of Baltimore, who had come down to New York to celebrate the Sheen anniversary. At one stage they were talking about all the receptions, dinners and fundraisers they all have to attend, and Dolan said he'd picked up a valuable piece of advice: When you show up at an event, never check your coat or valet park your car, because then you're dependent on someone else for your exit. He turned to me and said: "I don't know any theology, but I know all about this stuff."

Yet anyone who has spent much time in Dolan's company quickly realizes that beneath his wit, the guy is nobody's fool. In fact, few leading Catholics of any sort -- let alone bishops -- have such an appetite for Catholic teaching, tradition, and lore.

For example, on Wednesday morning I watched Dolan tape his regular weekly radio program, in this case devoted to Sheen. He was joined by a panel of experts, and off the top of his head Dolan was able to recite obscure facts about Sheen's biography that stumped everyone else in the room. (Dolan has a Ph.D. in church history from the Catholic University of America, where he studied under Fr. John Tracy Ellis, long considered the dean of church historians in the United States.)

At one point Dolan said of Sheen, "He was sometimes styled as a shallow popularizer, but deep down he had a towering intellect." It was hard not to suspect that at some level, Dolan may also have been thinking about himself.

To what extent Dolan's intellectual chops, and his keen love of the church, will translate into an effective tenure as the "American pope" is anyone's guess, but for right now, most New Yorkers I've met don't seem all that interested. After nine years under Cardinal Edward Egan, who often came across as embattled and isolated, most just seem thrilled to have an archbishop who seems like a hit.

At one point I trailed Dolan to a reception to thank donors who had "adopted" a Catholic school, and bumped into a school official who told a vintage Dolan story. The official had been present when the new archbishop made his first visit to an inner-city school in the Bronx, he said, and watched him greet every person in the place. (This, by the way, is a defining Dolan touch. When he walks into a room, he says hello to everybody,

including the cops working security, the waiters handing out drinks, the little kid waiting in a corner ... everybody.)

On that first school visit, the official said, a janitor found himself locked in a bear-hug with the archbishop. Dolan looked him in the eye, beamed, and said, "You have a beautiful building here. You obviously take great care of it." The official said the janitor walked on water for a week afterwards.

Having an Archbishop of New York with such a popular touch may not solve all the church's problems, but, as the saying goes, it beats a kick in the head. In an era when many Catholic prelates can come across as a bit "charm-challenged," perhaps being the "Archbishop of Charm" is actually a pretty good foundation upon which to build.

In any event, what we might call the "Tim Dolan Show" promises to be fun to watch.

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