

Timothy Sherwood. *The Preaching of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen: The Gospel Meets the Cold War*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010. 168 pages. \$40.00.

For Catholics of the baby boomer generation and older, the name Fulton J. Sheen evokes television images of a stately bishop standing before a blackboard, teaching and preaching the truths of the Catholic Faith in a stern yet pastoral tone. For more than 30 years Sheen was the most famous Catholic leader in the U.S. with a worldwide radio and TV broadcast ministry. To foster a deeper appreciation for the Catholic contribution to the study of preaching, Father Timothy Sherwood offers a scholarly analysis of Sheen's rhetoric, as well as an insightful consideration of the impact of his preaching on American society during the Cold War era (1947-1990).

Sherwood begins with a thumbnail sketch of the incredible career of Fulton Sheen, recounting not only his enormously influential ministry in radio with *The Catholic Hour*, but also his success as the first Catholic "Television Evangelist." *Life is Worth Living* is his memorable and award-winning weekly television program of preaching and catechesis. Broadcast throughout the 1950's, his preaching reached an estimated audience of thirty million people. Long before the age of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, Sheen categorized his program as a "kind of Christian humanism, not commercials for the Catholic Faith, but designed to suit people of all faiths and of none."

It is not only Fulton Sheen the TV and radio personality that Sherwood targets, but Fulton Sheen the pulpit preacher. He is well remembered for his Lenten and Good Friday preaching at St. Patrick Cathedral in New York, which continued without interruption from 1931 until his installation as bishop of Rochester in 1966.

Turning from his brief but informative survey of Sheen's life, Sherwood proceeds to a rhetorical analysis of Sheen, the public speaker, examining his rhetoric in the context of the neo-Aristotelian canons: Invention, Organization, Style, Delivery and Memory. *Invention*, which deals with the location and creation of ideas and material for speech, was for Sheen a matter of prayerful presence to the Divine. Homiletic preparation was always done in the presence of the Eucharist, where Sheen would talk his thoughts out loud.

Another key to effective preaching is the careful *Organization* of material. Sheen's organizational structure and flow of argumentation, his unity of thought and interwoven arguments enabled his hearers or viewers to easily follow and assimilate his thought. Sherwood notes that in addition to his clarity of thought, Sheen's careful use of simile, metaphor and alliteration were typical sources of vividness that enabled him to connect with his hearers. His *Style*, his "flare," was keyed to the ear, and he spoke in ways that captured the imagination of the hearer. One contemporary of Sheen remarked that his unique way of speaking was "very nearly poetry." In his personal, typed notes, Sheen summarizes his *Delivery*: Talk naturally, plead vehemently, whisper confidentially, appeal plaintively, proclaim distinctly, and pray continually. Finally, he was admired for his *Memory*, for he was able to speak with clarity and authority without needing so much as an index card to guide him.

Sherwood proceeds then to carefully describe the social context of Sheen's preaching, highlighting the way in which the Cold War shaped both the mission of the Catholic Church and Sheen's role as its loyal and ardent defender. "Godless Communism" was America's great enemy, and Sheen called people to "join him in a Holy War," the epic battle between the forces of good and evil. The author insightfully identifies Sheen's success as a preacher with a culture in which religion and patriotism went hand in hand. The "Red Scare" transcended

denominational boundaries, and the persuasiveness of Sheen's preaching was able to lead Americans to consider atheists as unpatriotic, un-American, and even treasonous. Using basic biblical imagery in his preaching, Sheen was able to assert that only a rejection of the evils of communism (the "Anti Christ") and a return to God would rescue the modern world. Sheen's dual world rhetorical vision, along with his exceptional abilities as a preacher, account for his popularity during the Cold War Era. The gradual ending of the Cold War, however, was paralleled by his own waning popularity on the national stage.

The strength of Father Sherwood's well-researched study (683 footnotes in a book of 120 pages!) is his ability to describe with succinct clarity the life, rhetoric and context of America's most famous Catholic preacher. Sheen is shown to be a master of understanding his audience and in persuading them that a God-centered life is indeed worth living.

Msgr. Michael A. Becker
St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church
Altoona, PA
St. Vincent Seminary
Latrobe, PA