

A Modern Saint in the Making Auto-Hagiography and The Autobiography of Archbishop Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*

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Let it be said here at the beginning, that this is not my real autobiography. That was written twenty-one centuries ago, published and placarded in three languages, and made available to everyone in Western civilization.¹

– Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

The above lines appear on the first page of *Treasure in Clay*, the autobiography of American Archbishop and candidate for sainthood, Fulton J. Sheen. For those not familiar with Sheen, a few introductory remarks will be necessary. Born in El Paso, Illinois, Sheen was a devout Irish American Catholic who was ordained at age twenty-four before becoming a professor at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC, where he taught for some twenty-plus years. During that time he honed his skills as a charismatic lecturer, and also lent his voice weekly to the

1. Fulton Sheen, *Treasure in Clay* (New York: Image Books, 1982), 1.

Catholic Hour radio program, eventually becoming their most popular personality. In the early 1950s, after having been made director for the national Society for the Propagation of the Faith (SPOF), Sheen was approached by the National Council of Catholic Men (NCCM) to act as a host of a weekly television program. That initiative would culminate in *Life is Worth Living*, a half-hour prime-time television show where Sheen spoke about philosophical and political issues in a manner accessible to the average American. Watched by millions, he twice won an Emmy Award for Most Outstanding Television Personality. After his show was pulled off air at the peak of its popularity by Cardinal Francis J. Spellman, Sheen participated in the Vatican II sessions in Rome before being made diocesan Bishop at Rochester. After three tumultuous years he retired and sought to recoup some of his earlier television and radio fame, but without much success. He was made the titular Archbishop of Newport in 1969 and died in 1979 after a series of heart problems. Nearly twenty years later, the Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Foundation officially launched his cause for canonization under the supervision of the Diocese of Rochester. He has since been named Venerable, and his cause is currently awaiting a date for potential beatification.²

2. Sheen has had several potential dates set for his beautification, the most recent of which was Dec 21st, 2019. However, it was stalled by the Diocese of Rochester pending an investigation into several predatory priests who worked in the diocese during Sheen's tenure. While there is no suggestion of impropriety on his behalf, Rochester nevertheless urged for a review of his tenure. See "Beatification for Archbishop Sheen Postponed," *National Catholic Reporter*, Dec 3rd, 2019, <http://www.ncr.org/news/people/beatification-archbishop-sheen-postponed>.

Despite being a priest who lived a recognizably devout life, there are several aspects about Sheen that make him an atypical candidate for sainthood. His mid-career celebrity, propelled by his work in television and radio, made him for a time the most recognizable – and popular – member of the Catholic Church in America. Within the Catholic tradition, however, celebrity functions as something of a paradox. On the one hand, celebrity – the composite of fame and charisma – is often the very vehicle which drives a candidate’s acclaim and cause for canonization.³ This is certainly the case with Sheen, whose enduring celebrity (due in no small part to the continuing appeal of his television programs) has continued to endear him to successive generations of Americans, many of whom hope to one day see him canonized. On the other hand, fame tends to be viewed with suspicion by the wider institutions of the Catholic Church, with charisma and gravitas often seen as things needing to be reared in, reconfigured, or disrupted.⁴

3. Derek Krueger comments on this paradox, remarking “True saints seek anonymity, yet God wills their works to be ‘shown forth’ such that they can be known to the faithful” (“Hagiography as an Ascetic Practice in the Early Christian East,” *Journal of Religion* 79, no. 2 [1999], 227).

4. While Aviad Kleinberg refers to the origins of the tradition in the language of celebrity – as he states, “Christianity began as a personality cult” surrounding the figure of Jesus – later examples of the Church’s suspicion towards celebrity are numerous and continue into the modern era. See: Aviad Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word: Saints’ Stories and the Western Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9; Andrea Grauss “A Visit to Remember: Stigmata and Celebrity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *The Journal of the Social History Society* 14, no. 1 (2016): 55–72, and Natalie Heinich, “La Consommation de la Célébrité,” *L’Année sociologique* 61, no. 1 (2011): 103–123.

Sheen was certainly aware of the complicating factors of sanctity interwoven with celebrity, as is evidenced by his longstanding practice of self-deprecation and humility whenever the subject of his fame and celebrity were raised in his presence. This awareness is also clearly communicated in his 1979 autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*. Here, Sheen distances himself from his celebrity in a clear and purposeful manner, spending only a handful of pages discussing the aspects of career for which he was most well-known. Instead, he draws the reader towards his career as a missionary and a mentor to fellow priests, while also drawing attention to aspects of his work which would normally be but footnotes in the context of his larger career. Of interest to the present discussion is the way Sheen's work finds itself both implicitly and explicitly indebted to the tropes, structure and expectations of *holy writing*, of hagiography – this is clear in the way the work dwells on moments of his piety, his suffering, and even his witnessing of the miraculous. Accordingly, I will be arguing that *Treasure in Clay* appears as a text that sits uncomfortably at the intersection of hagiography and biography; as a text that is better suited as being read as a novel form of document which I hereby refer to as *auto-hagiography*.⁵

5. Among saints and those on the path towards canonization, Sheen is not alone in having composed an autobiography. Saint Augustine and Saint Therese of Lisieux both offer ancient examples of saints writing their own biographies which contributed to their saintly aura. Yet, neither the *Confessions* nor *Story of a Soul* can count as true *vita* in form or convention.

Auto-hagiography, I argue, differs from traditional hagiography in several manners. Historically, the vitae of holy men and women are products of their communities of devotees, the authors of these works often hailing from the same holy order or composed on commission.⁶ Auto-hagiography, by contrast, reverses the model in that it is both the practice and product of intentionally composing a text to serve as one's own *vita* for future readers – and perhaps more implicitly, for potential causes of canonization.⁷ Unlike traditional hagiography, which is explicit in its intentions and structures, auto-hagiography necessitates caution and subtlety. After all, while the pursuit of holiness is intended to be the aim of every God-fearing Catholic, sanctity is something which is recognized from without, a recognition declared by popular acclamation rather than personal admission.

While I am not arguing that Sheen sought to actively promote himself as a living saint, I do assert that his invocation of hagiographic tropes was a conscious and intentional choice. Sheen was an avid and well-documented perfectionist, someone who, throughout his career, actively and selectively controlled which elements of his life would be made public. He seems to have been all-too aware of how certain aspects of his

6. Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 513–4.

7. It should be noted that there is an appendix in *Treasure in Clay* titled “Vita.” This brief appendix reads more akin to curriculum vitae than biography, listing Sheen’s many accomplishments and the honours he accrued over his lengthy career and busy life. This, however, was almost surely added by one his later editors prior to the text’s publication.

life and fame could complicate his memory – both among Church insiders and the wider public.⁸ Thus, in the same manner that Sheen acted as a gatekeeper of sorts to his public image during his life, in the twilight of his years⁹ he composed a definitive “autobiography” which presented his life in a manner free from controversy and speculation.¹⁰ The end result is that Sheen almost completely avoids the conventions of the modern autobiography, instead composing a text which selectively details his life in the uncomplicated and ultimately familiar manner of a classical hagiography. As such, I argue that a close reading of Sheen’s autobiography reveals his attempts to mitigate the tension between his life as a celebrity and as a role model for fellow Christians, and, moreover, that by framing his life according to hagiographical tropes and expectations, he sought to firmly distance himself from the dangers of fame. This paper is thus an exploration of auto-hagiography, focusing on Sheen’s autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, as a case study. The structure and methodology of this

8. In the opening chapter of *Treasure in Clay*, Sheen seems to comment on the dangers of celebrity and their possible route towards vanity and the perception of it, when he remarks that: “Generally, the more we accept popular estimates, the less time we spend on our knees examining conscience. The outer world becomes so full of limelight as to make us forget the light within. Praise often creates in us a false impression that we deserve it” (Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 6).

9. *Treasure in Clay* was published posthumously.

10. There was no shortage of controversy during his lifetime, and this includes speculations about warring factions in the American Catholic Church. Most of these speculations involved either Cardinal Francis J. Spellman or Sheen’s tenure as Bishop of Rochester. Several of these will be discussed in some detail at a later point in this article.

paper will at times mirror that of a close reading. However, where it differs from other studies of biographical matter will be with my intent. I aim not to retrace or piece together an “authentic” or “complete” biography of Sheen – such pursuits are the work of biographers and/or devotees alike.¹¹ Rather, my purpose here is in examining some of the ways in which Sheen's autobiography can be viewed as a carefully crafted and tightly controlled narrative work of *auto-hagiography*, written expressly for the purpose of serving as *hagiography* for future readers. While the text contains numerous hagiographical tropes, I will focus on the three which I believe to be illustrative of his intentions, namely: the demarcation of childhood, the trials and tribulations of adulthood, and the prophetic calling. I hope to illustrate how Sheen, in implementing these conventions into his biographical narrative, sought to reshape the image of his life as free from blemish and devoid of vanity – the latter being a failing which has been frequently been ascribed to his person by detractors.¹² By examining the often

11. In Ch. 1 Sheen touches upon the difficulties of composing an “authentic” autobiography, stating, “there are three pairs of eyes,” each of which see a man's life under different light – there is the man in question, the eyes of others, and the eyes of God; any biographer will only be working with two out of the three (*Treasure in Clay*, 1).

12. Biographers Thomas C. Reeves and Daniel P. Noonan have both made frequent allusions to perceptions of Sheen's vanity, noting that Sheen was highly attentive to his image, in the area of personal grooming (he was never less than impeccably groomed) as well as with what was being said about him by others. According to Reeves, when Sheen was asked by actress Loretta Young why he was always so well-dressed and coiffed, he replied, “We dress for God, we are his representatives” (*America's Bishop: The Life and Times of Fulton J. Sheen* [New York: Encounter Books, 2002], 137). See also, Daniel P. Noonan, *Missionary*

apocryphal and contradictory passages from his autobiography, it is my intention to show that Sheen composed a novel document, one that tells not only of his life as he wished it to be viewed, but that also speaks to the precarious relationship between sanctity and celebrity, between religious men and the mythos surrounding them. Ultimately, it is my intention to demonstrate that a text such as this adds both a layer of depth and complication to the study of modern American sainthood.

The Demarcated Child

The demarcation of children from their peers is a common convention in hagiographical literature. From the Gospel of Luke showcasing Jesus teaching in the temple, to the pious Dominic Savio breaking up fights in his schoolyard, hagiographers have sought to portray the noticeable *difference* inherent in their protagonists from an early age.¹³ As Aviad Kleinberg remarks, “‘Sanctity’ implies separation, demarcation. When a thing is sanctified, it is separated from other things belonging to the same category.”¹⁴ In this case, it is a separation of the special from the mundane, where the protagonist’s demarcated childhood reveals their chosen nature. In many cases – whether it be Christ himself or a nineteenth-century schoolboy – childhood is depicted as proof

With a Mike: The Bishop Sheen Story (New York: Pageant Press, 1968).

13. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 20.

14. Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 1.

of God's miraculous presence in this world, and often signals the protagonist's future greatness and place in God's larger plans. Of course, just as there are saints with exceptional and pious childhoods, there are an equal number who are portrayed as being in conflict or opposition with the virtuous people they would become. Take, for example, Saint Jerome, whose hagiography contrasts his hot-tempered and licentious youth with his later years as an ascetic and powerful early apologist for the Church. Augustine, too, made no illusions about the distaste he held for chastity as a young man prior to his ultimate conversion to Christianity. Hagiographical stories such as these emphasize the transformative powers of the cross and serve to be contrasted with the future ascetic discipline and devoted life these figures later adopt. The trajectory of their personal transformation thus highlights their initial fallen state and hints at their future glorification and perfection through Christ and the Church.

In the case of Sheen's work, his narrative use of demarcation at childhood borders on the excessive (or perhaps, obsessive) and is deployed in a number of sometimes contradictory means in the first half of his autobiography. Right from the first pages Sheen avows that he was hardly a perfect child, and that he was someone who very much needed refinement in order to overcome his baser nature and better himself. When discussing his childhood, he refers to himself as clay in need of shaping, and emphasizes his parent's conviction that a strong education was to be the "determining mold" of his

upbringing.¹⁵ As Sheen recounts it, while of all his siblings enrolled at the local parochial school in Illinois, it was he, an unruly and troublesome youth, who was most in need of refinement. He remarks that he was once locked in a closet by a teacher as a disciplinary measure, and also that he once stole geraniums from the local grocery store and was harshly reprimanded for it afterwards.¹⁶ He further avows to being no stranger to horsing around as a child, having on occasion broken windows on the family home when playing ball in the yard. In another instance he remarks that he never earned one word of praise from his parents,¹⁷ and also that he constantly “struggled” to be a leader in class.

In Sheen’s telling, he was indeed a ball of rough clay in need of refinement. However, for every instance where he highlights his unruly behavior, he follows with either an

15. Referring to education as his “determining mold” is hardly an understatement when reviewing his hefty academic credentials and lengthy tenure as a professor at the Catholic University of America.

16. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 17.

17. Lest the readers think Sheen wishes to speak ill of his parents, he quickly concedes that his mother once explained that his father’s lack of vocalized praise was due to his father not wishing to “spoil him” – he did, she asserts, speak of his son’s accomplishments to their neighbours in secret (Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 10). Christopher Owen Lynch, however, sees through Sheen’s tacit explanation for his parent’s behaviour and suggests they were in fact “firm disciplinarians” (Lynch, *Selling Catholicism: Bishop Sheen and the Power of Television* [Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998], 17). For instance, Sheen himself admits to having been hit by his father, but plays it down in a lighthearted manner by stating “there is nothing that develops character in a young boy like a pat on the back, provided it is given often enough, hard enough and low enough” (Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 16).

ambiguous or contradictory story that upends his own self-deprecating recollection. For example, Sheen states that he had difficulty spelling and couldn't figure out how to use the word "which" – however, when discussing his participation in a spelling contest, he avows that he lost "*first place*" rather than being eliminated in one of the initial rounds. In pointing out how he failed at a mathematics contest later on in high school, he recounts that he only stumbled when it came to a tie-breaking problem for the top marks in the class.¹⁸ In examples such as these, Sheen seems to be attempting to portray his childhood as demarcated in both senses common to hagiographical literature – as the child in need of refinement, and as the exceptional child who was chosen for greater things.

In this matter, Sheen's recollections of, and musings about, his childhood appear to be at odds with those of his teachers and peers – recounted by other biographers – who remember the young man as having been particularly bright and pious.¹⁹ Indeed, the historical record (along with details from his own recollection) suggest that Sheen was an avid student and overachiever.²⁰ Not only was he the valedictorian of his high school class, he also won a national scholarship competition which would have allowed him to enter virtually any university of his choice – examples which point to the

18. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 14. Emphasis mine. Sheen further states that both he and his opponent had earned 100 per cent marks in the class up until this point (*Treasure in Clay*, 14).

19. Kathleen L. Riley, *Fulton Sheen an American Catholic Response to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alba House, 2004), 2; Reeves, *America's Bishop*, 12.

20. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 16; Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 17.

early academic potential carried by Sheen as a young man. However, under the advice of his debate coach (who also happened to be a local parish priest), Sheen declined his university scholarship in order to enter the Saint Paul seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. In doing so, Sheen effectively eschewed the prestige that entering a secular institution could have afforded his academic career in lieu of a humbler and ultimately more pious education.²¹

Sheen's clumsy attempts to paint himself as an underachieving, undeserving child while also being exceptionally devout can easily be read as serving hagiographical purposes.²² As stated earlier, hagiographers have often extended the theme of demarcation beyond emphasizing sanctity, employing it as a wider trope to single out the uniqueness of their protagonist. In following suit, Sheen plays with some obvious symbolism. He emphasizes his rural, salt-of-the-earth upbringing – one which saw him digging fields and working with animals – while contrasting these things with the adoration he would acquire for his spiritual education at seminary and beyond.²³ Though he touches upon elements of his burgeoning scholasticism, structurally, Sheen

21. Reeves, *America's Bishop*, 26; Riley, *Fulton Sheen*, 3.

22. In a study on Medieval sainthood, John Kitchen argues that hagiography is not necessarily history, but literature meant to promote the cult of the central figure first and foremost. I would argue that his observation continues to apply into the current era. See John Kitchen, *Saints Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

23. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 18, 20. While Sheen wears his rural upbringing as a badge of honour, it is no secret that he disdained farm work. By contrast, he remarks that he adored his classes on scriptures

appears to be more focused on depicting a mundane childhood upbringing, one that can be contrasted with his eventual recognition and celebrity. While his efforts are not entirely successful and are even at times contradictory, by attempting to paint his childhood as one that was both remarkable and unruly Sheen is allowing his narrative to more easily adhere to the hagiographical trope, while also showcasing his transformation and foreshadowing the trajectory his own life would take thanks to his devotion to Christ – and, in doing so, avoid sounding like a braggart by lingering too much on his accomplishments or piety.

The attention and significance Sheen brings to describing his demarcated childhood is also extended to his body. As when discussing his behaviour, Sheen calls attention to his body by focusing on two somewhat contradictory aspects. First, he highlights his youthful vigor and vitality by discussing his duties on the farm. He reminisces about how he “plowed corn, made hay... broke colts to harness, curried horses, cleaned their dirty stalls, [and] milked cows,” among other responsibilities, highlighting that, though often unruly, he understood the importance of hard work and labour even as a youth.²⁴ He also offhandedly remarks that he enjoyed playing baseball in the yard.²⁵ These images of Sheen as a hardened country-boy serve to contrast with his later life, where he found himself performing “softer” duties as a priest, scholar and

and moral theology at seminary, and would eventually pursue his education in that direction as far as it could take him.

24. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 18.

25. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 20.

academic – perhaps intoning to his readers that he carried some of this heartiness and humility with him even as he found himself becoming something of an aristocratic dandy through his fame.²⁶ However, even as Sheen highlights his constitution, he also claims to have been consistently sickly – and even tuberculotic – without realizing it. He recounts how some “thirty or forty years” after his childhood he was taken to a hospital after collapsing during his radio show. There, he was informed by a doctor about the true extent of his medical history, something he had apparently been unaware of as he suffered silently throughout the years.²⁷ On a similar note he also recounts how he developed and suffered from ulcers when he began seminary – one of which was so severe that it required he undergo surgery.²⁸

Much like the act of singling out one’s childhood, illness – and childhood illness in particular – is a consistent trope in hagiographical literature, with tuberculosis being one of the quintessential ravages of the body that the elect endure. Hardly relegated to medieval saints and those from the ancient world, modern saints and those on the path continue to be afflicted bodily ravages.²⁹ As Robert Orsi has remarked, for

26. There was and continues to be a fascination with Sheen’s body and his rural origins, particularly among his fans and devout. His country-boy origins were notably emphasized in the 2011 documentary *Fulton Sheen: Servant of All*, as well as becoming the subject for a children’s colouring book about Sheen’s youth produced by the Diocese of Peoria.

27. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 9.

28. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 20.

29. Among twentieth century saints and saintly men and women, numerous childhood sufferers come to mind. The Venerable Arcangelo Biasi, a confidant to Saint Maximilian Kolbe, was born to a poor rural

mid-century American Catholics, “pain [had] the prominent character of a sacrament,” and suffering revealed the almost “thrilling” mark of divine favour.³⁰ Ongoing textual reminders of suffering and illness in the lives of saints point to acts self-mortification, of disciplining the flesh to bow to the spirit.³¹ The ongoing fascination with suffering being recounted through the bodies of the saints reflects the earlier, ancient suffering of the martyrs and Christ himself.³² In other words, physical illness and injury form a bridge through the body, allowing for a more direct identification, emulation and ultimately connection with Jesus as the first and most emblematic of all sufferers, along with every holy model since.³³ As such, there are many examples of pious young men

family and contracted tuberculosis yet managed to overcome his illness so that he could be ordained as a priest in 1922. The Blessed Chiara Badano – a devout Italian teenager currently on the road towards sainthood – developed a form of bone cancer, suffered for two years and then passed away in 1990. And perhaps most famously, the young Italian saint Maria Gemma Umberta Galgani (known more simply as “Gemma Galgani”), who passed away in 1903, perfectly epitomized the suffering child saint. Consistently sickly, she developed spinal meningitis as a teenager and later succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 25.

30. Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 22.

31. Moments of suffering and ascetic discipline in hagiography inevitably serve as reminders of ideal Christian behaviour to the faithful. See Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 85.

32. In his suffering and death, Kleinberg remarks that Jesus became for future Christians the “ultimate, the one true model” (Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 15).

33. According to Kleinberg, stories recounting the ongoing suffering of the saints and Christian martyrs serve as “memory and example” to the

and women in the twentieth century whose horrific and/or life-threatening ailments acted to collapse the space separating their era from the glorified Christian past, reminding the devout of the ongoing possibilities for elevation and the potential for sanctity that only suffering affords.³⁴ The almost ritual de-escalation of the body is in fact a reversal, placing the body and its ravages front and center in the narrative qualification of sainthood. The community of the saints is therefore very much a communion bound by pain and physicality, and Sheen subtly navigates his own narrative to point to these ancient precedents.³⁵

Sheen also recounts one episode that mirrors a gospel story. Recounting his days as a doctoral student, he states that the most brilliant professor he had ever known, a certain Dr. Leon Noel, advised him to read the works of, and then meet, a recently published scholar named Dr. Alexander. After being invited for tea, Sheen discovered that Dr. Alexander had

Christian community. He remarked that “each generation had the moral obligation... the martyrs must not be forgotten” (Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 24, 25). See also Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 24.

34. During times when there are relatively few martyrs, Christians have historically found new ways to “change the present to make it more like the past” (Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 34).

35. In the conclusion to his lengthy study on hagiography, David Williams ponders the question of ancient precedents being remade in the twenty-first century. As he remarks, “it is the essence of tradition to minimize change. Faith communities by the nature of their shared beliefs... are capable of transcending the differences that the historical process introduces without, however, needing to negate them” (David Williams, *Saints Alive: Word, Image, and the Enactment in the Lives of Saints* [Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010], 200).

actually set up a debate between himself and the plucky grad student in a massive auditorium in front of hundreds of students. Though Sheen avows that he was clearly out of his depth compared to the professor – as he states, he “did not yet have [his] doctorate” – he nevertheless accepted the debate and challenged the professor’s views.³⁶ When Dr. Alexander responds by retorting that Sheen had failed to “read [his work] with any degree of intelligence,” Sheen goes on to deconstruct the professor’s work and elaborate on the flaws of its arguments in front of the audience.³⁷

While this episode hints at the prowess of Sheen’s scholastic mind and builds up to his eventual – and highly decorated – thesis defense and graduation, it is also a clear moment of auto-hagiography, mirroring the gospel episode where Jesus as a youth enters the temple with his parents and astonishes everyone when he sits among teachers listening and asking questions.³⁸ While Sheen is certainly older than Jesus was during the gospel event, the young scholar is nevertheless contrasted with the brilliant teachers he sought to emulate. Like Christ who revealed an uncanny intellect and awareness and was able to teach the teachers, Sheen not only matches the mind of the professor, but also seems to understand his own works better than the man himself. In this episode, Sheen thus seems to have found a way to depict a novel re-imagination of

36. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 25.

37. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 26.

38. For the story of Jesus teaching in the temple while still a child, see Luke 2:41–52.

the Biblical story in a way that fit seamlessly into his own recollections.

As these stories of his upbringing convey, Sheen seems to be cautiously aware of the weight of his fame and the complications it could have, while simultaneously playing it up with a wink and a nod to his future success. For instance, in one story that provides a clear contrast with his later expertise in public speaking, he avows that he was unable to properly recite the rosary on stage at school because he was too nervous and uneasy under the public gaze.³⁹ In another, he tells us that as a young school boy he utterly lacked the chops to become an actor, even though he had “excellent training in Shakespeare” – ultimately arguing that the fault for inadequacy lay with him.⁴⁰ As such, he was only barely able to earn a role in the school play, and this was owing to the financial support his family was giving to the project. He even recounts that three of his more talented classmates later went on to become famous radio personalities – and perhaps there was a fourth talent at that school, “if the reader is charitable.”⁴¹

It is unlikely that anyone reading *Treasure in Clay* would not be familiar with the much-celebrated television and radio career of the author.⁴² However, Sheen depicts his early

39. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 16.

40. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 14.

41. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 12.

42. While Sheen actively sought to distance himself from his television fame, it was through this celebrity that his fans came to know and adore him. It is thus no surprise that virtually all his obituaries (both religious and secular) open with mention of his celebrity alongside his career in the Church. A large collection of such clippings can be found in the archives of the Archbishop Fulton Sheen Museum in Peoria, Illinois.

childhood as one of bumbling un-remarkability, without any explicit hint of the talents that would enable him to become adored by millions of fans as an Emmy Award-winning television personality and radio star. By his recollection, he was simply “one of the people” or an “every man” just like anyone else – he was not a man born to become a celebrity, but one enabled through happenstance or fate or God’s miraculous power. Thus, his self-deprecation here can be read as serving to shield himself from the accusations of vanity and pride that came with his celebrity. By downplaying any latent talents, training or skills he might have acquired as a youth that would hint at his future success, Sheen is effectively suggesting to his readers that his transformation from performance-shy youth to star adored by millions had little to do with his own agency and was nothing short of miraculous – making himself, as a devout man, the site of God’s transformative work in the world.

The Trials and Tribulations of Adulthood

The ongoing theme of demarcation transforms into trials and tribulations, which become a defining element of the narrative recollection of his early career and adulthood, particularly at two notable moments. The first of these is during his tenure as a lecturer at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. The historical record suggests that, although Sheen was an enduring fixture at the university, he was frequently at odds with his peers and the administration, his willfulness and strong ideas causing him to butt heads more than once. In recounting his tenure, Sheen describes himself as

having been branded an “outcast” almost immediately into his posting.⁴³ He suggests that he faced opposition among his fellow members of the Faculty of Theology after advocating for changes that would re-invigorate the faculty, but which were strongly opposed by his colleagues and the rector.⁴⁴ In another incident, the succeeding rector decided that all professors in the Faculty of Theology needed to have a Doctorate of Divinity under their name in order to continue teaching.⁴⁵ One of the popular professors, a certain John A. Ryan, did not have this credential, and a document circulated demanding that he be removed from his post. Sheen refused to sign it, feeling it was “unfair.” However, soon after he found

43. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 44.

44. According to Sheen, the rector of the university – Bishop Shahan – met with the faculty to discuss whether they should open undergraduate courses to complement their graduate offerings. Apparently there were few grad students, and, in Sheen’s own words, the faculty was “not sufficiently occupied and challenged.” Sheen proposed instead to expand their graduate offerings and seek prospective students and priests from across the country to come study. The immediate reaction was seemingly hostile by both his peers and the Bishop, resulting in a quick end to their meeting (Sheen *Treasure in Clay*, 43–44). While Sheen is overall sparse and selective with his details, other biographers provide a more detailed account of his tenure at the CUA – see Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, and Riley, *Fulton Sheen*.

45. This episode is likely more complex and nuanced – perhaps even embarrassing – than what Sheen is suggesting took place. The historical record shows that, while Sheen held a Doctorate of Sacred Theology, he never acquired a Doctorate of Divinity (DD). Despite this, Reeves notes that – at least for a period of time – a DD appeared on his resume, either through falsification or clerical error. Reeve’s conclusion is not that Sheen necessarily sought to mislead people of his credentials, but rather that he couldn’t bear also being singled out for having different credentials. See Reeves *America’s Bishop*, 66–69.

himself punished for his stance by having his classes suspended. To make matters worse, while Sheen swears that he stood by Ryan, a “rumour” circulated that Sheen had been the one to oppose Ryan and speak to the rector about removing him from his post. The end result saw Sheen feeling ostracized by his peers as well as the colleague he sought to defend.⁴⁶

The second time in his life where he found himself surrounded on all fronts occurred in the twilight of his career during his largely disastrous tenure as the Diocesan Bishop of Rochester. Like many of the chapters in *Treasure in Clay*, the details here are sparse, and the historical record has considerably more to say than our narrator.⁴⁷ Rather than closely chronicle his event-filled three years in Rochester, Sheen fills the first half of this chapter with solipsistic musings about the nature of the priesthood, jokes about eating chicken, and praise for seminarians. We know from the historical record that he came in with big ideas from Vatican II and sought to implement many of those immediately. He renamed the chancery office the Pastoral Center, formed councils of priests and laypeople to share a voice in diocese governance and priest

46. Sheen details, in his often-grandiose fashion, the extent to which these rumours apparently spread. At some unspecified point Sheen’s name was floated to be the rector of the university, but he was blocked by Archbishop McNicholas, who stated that after what he did to Ryan he would “not let Sheen in charge of a doghouse.” The rumours flew so high up the chain of command that apparently even Cardinal Pacelli – the future Pius XII – asked Sheen for details of the situation during a meeting (Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 46–47).

47. Thomas C. Reeves provides a detailed exposition of Sheen’s troubled time in Rochester, aptly titling his chapter in his biography of Sheen as “Exile.” See Reeves, *America’s Bishop*.

selection, appointed an urban vicar to address poverty in the city, and opened an ecumenical dialogue with the local Protestant divinity school.⁴⁸ He would also give joint talks with Rabbis and address crowds and synagogues.⁴⁹ Although many of his ideas bore fruit, even more did not, and it is only within one of the final pages that he cautiously avows he ran into some difficulties in Rochester. He mentions that his plan to reform the local Catholic press – which required months of planning before being summarily declined – failed owing to a simple technicality, and states it that “it had to be abandoned.”⁵⁰ He had also planned to launch an emergency ambulance service for the city's poor, however when no hospital volunteered any medical staff, he states that his idea simply “proved to be more clay than gold.”⁵¹ Finally, in speaking of his plan to rent space in town where he could dedicate a small chapel to Mary, he states that “it was impossible to find [a place] to rent.”⁵²

In virtually every case, it would seem, the fault for his failures lay elsewhere, owing to chance or circumstance. He does, nevertheless, avow that he “failed in the area of

48. Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 28.

49. Reeves, *America's Bishop*, 307.

50. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 178. Here, Sheen also remarks in an off-handed manner that once the plan was devised, it came up that the local press had an existing contract that locked them into previous obligations for two more years. That no one raised this earlier in the months of investigative work into the project points to a remarkable oversight.

51. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 178. Again, this was another plan that Sheen worked hard to implement without actually consulting any of the hospitals beforehand.

52. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 178.

housing.”⁵³ Though to simply state that his plan failed, effectively *fails* to tell the whole story of what transpired. According to the historical record, Sheen put together an ambitious plan to expand social housing for the city’s poor by donating an older parish and all of its structures to a federal program.⁵⁴ In total, the donation would have provided several hundred housing units and alleviated the burden already placed on the federal program. While planning, Sheen spoke with Robert C. Weaver, the Secretary of Housing, who gave the plan his enthusiastic blessing.⁵⁵ On paper the plan seemed strong, and there had been talks by the priests of closing the parish since the 1950s due to its low attendance. However, while Sheen worked out the logistics and received permission from all the necessary boards and delegations – including from Rome itself – he failed to consult the people who frequented the parish. When he finally presented his plan, he discovered, “to [his] great surprise, there was opposition,” coyly adding that protestors even chucked “pebbles” at his car.⁵⁶

53. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 178.

54. The land was valued at \$680,000 and included a church, a rectory, and a school which would be demolished or refurbished as needed. See Daniel P. Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1972), 163.

55. *Treasure in Clay* includes verbatim a letter Sheen apparently wrote the Secretary. In his letter Sheen uses very Vatican II inspired language, declaring the Church’s responsibility in the world and outlining his plan to provide a free gift of Church property to be used for housing for the poor. See Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 179.

56. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 180. See also Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 310–316, and Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 163–164.

While Sheen downplays the reaction to his plan, the sense of betrayal felt by the parishioners was palpable and well-recorded.⁵⁷ During the initial phases of the project, one of his advisors had recommended Sheen open a discussion with the parishioners and take their feedback before going further, but Sheen refused to hear their voices.⁵⁸ Following that meeting rumours spread that the bishop was planning on giving away Church lands without consultation, and soon protests formed outside his office along with picket lines with parishioners begging Sheen to save the parish. Still, Sheen pressed ahead, but when he made his formal announcement he was met with boos rather than applause. A letter of protest was drafted and signed by 130 of his priests, declaring that the parish already served the poor through its outreach and sermons.⁵⁹ One outspoken critic went so far as to accuse Sheen of hypocrisy, stating that “If the bishop wants to make some grand gesture, he could move in with the poor and live among them. Then maybe he would be selling his books instead of giving away Church property.”⁶⁰ One of his closest allies

57. Reeves has observed – in what is perhaps a tragic irony – that many of the parishioners were more angered at not having been consulted than they were with the parish being donated. He surmises that had Sheen consulted with them during the planning phase, his plans would have most likely succeeded. Instead, Sheen was depicted as a controlling and ultimately heartless administration who ignored the voices of the people he sought to serve. See Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 320.

58. Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 316.

59. Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 30.

60. Although Sheen donated his salary from his years on television, he was nevertheless known to have lived a remarkably affluent life in New York City prior to arriving in Rochester. It did not help that the members

during the early months of his posting – a parish priest named Father Finks who was known for his social activism and earlier support of Sheen – turned against him, and led the call urging Sheen to backtrack.⁶¹ Sheen eventually retracted his offer, but by then it was too late and he resigned shortly afterwards.

It is understandable that Sheen would rather not revisit the pain and utter failure of Rochester in his memoirs – particularly as the tragedy of his administration may not have painted the most flattering image of himself. Nevertheless, Sheen does find the means of inverting his failures to serve an auto-hagiographical purpose. Regarding the sum of his failures in Rochester, Sheen makes a curious observation, referring to his plans as “clay vessels that broke in my hands as they did in the hands of the potter whom Jeremiah visited.”⁶² In drawing a comparison between himself and that episode from the book of

of the parish were among the city’s poorest inhabitants, with many coming from Rochester’s minority black and Hispanic communities. See Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 166, and Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 316.

61. Finks – one of the first priests appointed by Sheen after he became Bishop – was deeply involved with the civil rights movement as a member of Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today (FIGHT), a group which opposed income disparity and corporate greed. Led by Finks, FIGHT called out and chastised Eastman Kodak for discriminatory hiring practices in the city. Sheen sided with Finks, and this cost him the support of much of the local city business council. See Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 301, 316; Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 29.

62. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 180–181. In this excerpt, Sheen is referring to several passages from Jeremiah 18. In the Biblical story, Jeremiah is sent by God to visit a potter. There, the prophet witnesses how the craftsman can tear down and remake his pots when they do not fit his expectations. God then informs Jeremiah that he does the same thing to kingdoms when its people refuse to listen to listen.

Jeremiah, it would appear that Sheen is suggesting that in the same manner that the people of Israel were not ready to follow God's plans, neither were the people of Rochester with his. Such a comparison puts Sheen on a similar playing field as the prophets of old, of tireless men sent by God to turn an often-rebellious people around. That the prophets and their work met failure just as often as success is surely how Sheen hopes that this episode will be remembered. In this case, though Sheen was unsuccessful in enacting his plans at Rochester, he was nevertheless successful and obedient in attempting to implement them. After all, if his actions were directly influenced by the Church's reform attempts through Vatican II, Sheen was effectively attempting to get his parishioners to follow these same God-ordained reforms – but to no avail.

Sheen, ever the perfectionist, also further absolves himself of his failures at Rochester by remarking that “a wrong impression would be created by dwelling on failures which were generally outside the general practice of episcopal administration.”⁶³ It is an interesting statement, as it at once suggests these failures were outside of his control, but also that the initiatives themselves were outside of the norm – hinting at his ambition and innovation. It follows that he doesn't want his readers to linger on his failures there or wonder whether he still bore any hard feelings with what happened in Rochester. By dismissing his failures with a quick turn of phrase, it not only tells his readers that he does not wish to cast blame, but also that the whole matter was much more trivial than it was

63. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 181.

perhaps made out to be.⁶⁴ Instead, similarly to how he depicted himself during the chapter discussing his tenure at the CUA, Sheen is eager to linger on the positive and present himself as something of an ambitious, innovative outsider – as a man who wasn't afraid to challenge the existing order if the order could be re-arranged for the greater good. Indeed, when considering the historical record, there is no reason to believe that Sheen arrived in Rochester with anything other than optimism and a head filled with good ideas and interesting initiatives he planned to implement. He had, after all, participated in Vatican II and his appointment was at the time considered to be the first diocese in America that would attempt to live up to the reforms of the council. That he came to Rochester with all the promise of Vatican II – of the Church's plans to throw open the doors and air out its ancient institutions – and it resulted in failure is telling of the aftermath of that council. It also lends itself quite handily to being read under a hagiographical lens.

Opposition to saints is a benchmark element of hagiographical narratives. In storytelling, opposition creates conflict and conflict drives the narrative forward, encouraging the reader to root for the protagonist. People are captivated by stories that grip us and move us and cause us to hold on hoping even when the ending may be foreshadowed before us. The travesty of justice and unjust opposition, so commonly found in the stories of saints, can be traced to the gospels, where Jesus

64. As mentioned previously, Sheen's time in Rochester has been unanimously referred to as a failure by biographers and commentators. See Reeves, *America's Bishop*; Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*; Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*.

as an innocent man suffers the greatest injustice – a betrayal by one of his closest companions followed by martyrdom at the hands of the people he came to save.⁶⁵ In the hagiographical tradition, opposition serves to highlight how the saints have been singled out from their peers for a higher purpose – one which they might not understand, but that is ultimately demanded by God. If we take into account Sheen’s recollection of events within *Treasure in Clay* and the historical record of his time at Rochester, the subtle picture that appears to be painted is that Sheen was not only a prophet figure fighting to turn the eyes of the people back towards God’s plan, but also, by his failure, someone who experienced a certain allegorical martyrdom.

Martyrdom is the true marker of any saint, as it is by sharing in the suffering of Christ that saints can attain true identification with their saviour – there is no greater form of emulation than to shed their blood for the Church. The gospels were thrilling and extended passion narratives that necessitated in the culmination of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, and the earliest hagiographies also recounted the lives of the martyrs under Roman rule, emphasizing their glorious suffering as the ultimate Christian ideal and mark of sanctity.⁶⁶ Although martyrdom remained a consistent trope in the lives of medieval saints and those during the Age of Exploration, martyrdom

65. The Gospel of Luke, more than the other canonical gospels, presents Jesus’ death as a tragedy of justice, particularly evidenced by the difficulty Pontius Pilate had in reaching his decision condemning Jesus to death and then afterwards washing his hands of the matter.

66. Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 13. See also Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 22.

became more difficult in modern times – particularly for saintly lives spent almost entirely in industrialized, peaceful nations such as the United States.⁶⁷ While the relevancy of martyrdom in the modern world might be a question best left to theologians, we can nevertheless see a restructuring of the ancient act into a more allegorical interpretation in the life of Sheen.

In the mirroring of his life with that of Christ, Sheen frequently alludes to his own suffering in a cryptic manner. In the opening chapter while discussing his biography, he refers to enigmatic “scars” that he endured and carried with him.⁶⁸ Later, in a chapter entitled “Things Left Unsaid,” Sheen remarks that Christians are shaped through three purifications: crosses, cups and tensions – each one pointing towards Christ’s martyrdom. The crosses are the burdens placed on us that we did not deserve, but that we are forced to carry; the cups are those burdens handed to us that we cannot pass; and the tensions are those that “come within the Church.”⁶⁹ When asked by Mike Wallace on *Sixty Minutes* why he was never offered a cardinal’s hat, he replied that he would have gladly moved up within the Church but that he refused to “pay the price” demanded of him.⁷⁰ He remarks that it was “God Who

67. This is not to suggest that martyrdom did not happen in the twentieth century; several twentieth century saints experienced martyrdom, not the least of which was Maximillian Kolbe, the polish priest who suffered and died at Auschwitz during the Second World War.

68. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 3.

69. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 309–310. Here, Sheen clearly references Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, and his approaching passion. See also Luke 22.

70. Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 67.

made certain people throw stones at me” and that “the curious would like me to open healed wounds; the media, in particular, would relish a chapter which would pass judgement on others.”⁷¹ As to the specifics of all these trials, Sheen is conspicuously silent, as “any discussion of conflicts within the Church diminishes the conte of the Christ... as the hand excessively rubbing the eye diminishes vision.”⁷² While Sheen is silent on the matter, the historical record along with his own omissions on the subject suggest that his posting at Rochester and his feud with Cardinal Spellman wounded him deeply.

Sheen’s relationship with Spellman over the years seems to have had two sides. Publicly the two men put on a pleasant face and spoke politely of one another. They were, on the one hand, America’s most powerful Catholics, and the other, her most popular. In New York, Sheen was feted as the successor to the Cardinal for a time and saw his career flourish. However, all that initial goodwill seems to have crumbled shortly after Sheen’s program hit its peak. Between 1950 and 1966 Sheen acted as the national director for the Society of the Propagation of Faith, and this placed Sheen in yet another position under Spellman’s direct authority. Where Sheen’s natural charisma lent itself well to his fundraising efforts – he managed to secure \$200 million in sixteen years, double what the rest of the world had raised during that same period – this success opened the door for Spellman to dip into society funds for his other “pet charities.”⁷³ In 1957, Spellman used the

71. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 314; 310.

72. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 312.

73. Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 22.

Society to distribute a surplus of milk donated by the federal government. After the milk was distributed, Spellman decided it would be appropriate for the Society to give up a cash equivalent for the milk. He insisted that he had paid the government for the surplus and that a refund from the Society was only natural. Sheen refused, knowing that Spellman received the milk for free, and, accordingly, that the Society owed him nothing. Neither man budged, and in the end Pope Pius XII had to personally intervene – settling the “Milk Incident” in Sheen’s favour and trapping Spellman in a lie. This would mark the first and only time Sheen could claim a victory over his superior, and Spellman, for his part, would have none of it. Giving a lecture at Dunwoodie Seminary in New York, Spellman told the assembled priests that Sheen was the most disobedient priest in America.⁷⁴ Sheen’s show was soon taken off the air, and he was removed as director for the Society for the Propagation of Faith. Then, one year before his death, Spellman had Sheen assigned to Rochester.

In *American Bishop: The Life and Times of Fulton J. Sheen*, Biographer Thomas C. Reeves entitles his chapter about Sheen’s time at Rochester “Exile,” and remarks that while Sheen put on a strong face, after his resignation he seemed to many to be a “broken man.”⁷⁵ For his part, two-time biographer Daniel P. Noonan notes that “few saw Sheen’s appointment as a promotion,” and he questions whether Sheen was being

74. Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 82.

75. Rochester has been referred to as a “Diocesan Siberia” owing to its relative remoteness and cold weather. After Sheen’s resignation, Reeves remarks that he had the appearance of a “broken man” (Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 321).

“kicked upstate” on Spellman’s behalf.⁷⁶ In his second work on Sheen, Noonan refers to Sheen’s posting in Rochester as his personal “Calvary” – again drawing a comparison to Christ’s martyrdom.⁷⁷ Considering Sheen’s cautious approach to his trials and tribulations – and also how these have been viewed by his biographers – the picture of his later life and career is one that seems to mirror the betrayal and abandonment of Jesus before the cross. In light of this, one might ask “what could be considered more quintessential for a martyr than to carry their cross and suffer in silence?” If anything, this episode demonstrates that Sheen was obedient until the very end, carrying his own “cup” as it was handed to him without refutation.⁷⁸ And so it seems, then, that despite all of Sheen’s accusations of vanity, yearning for success, and insecurities about his status, there was evidently something about his character which he was unwilling to give up, and whether he intended it or not, he came to identify with Christ in a very personal way through his own quiet suffering.

76. Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 161. Even if their relationship was not as strained as sources suggest, in all of *Treasure in Clay* Spellman is mentioned by name less than a handful of times – despite having a personal and working relationship with Sheen of over twenty years – and the Cardinal’s face was also conveniently cropped out of a publicity photo of Sheen that was used to grace the cover of his 2004 critical biography by Kathleen L. Riley. The original photo can be viewed in the photograph section of Noonan’s *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*.

77. Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 161.

78. See note 65.

The Prophetic Calling

The third major element of hagiography that I will be addressing in this paper is that of the central figure's prophetic calling. In hagiographical literature, the protagonist's destiny is often made evident to the character and reader alike through moments of anointing and prophecy. In *Treasure in Clay*, Sheen is twice made the focus of such moments. These not only act to single him out from his peers, they also foreshadow the fact that he has been chosen for God's plan. The first occasion occurred while Sheen was still a boy. According to Sheen, one Sunday after Mass while he was serving as an altar boy, Bishop Spalding asked him to help carry a wine cruet. Sheen promptly and unceremoniously fumbled and dropped the item on the floor, comparing the apparent catastrophe to "atomic explosion." Although Sheen feared he would be punished, Spalding instead surprised him by coming over and kneeling by his side. In an apparent non-sequitur, he asked Sheen: "Young man, where are you going to school when you get big?"⁷⁹ Sheen's rather coy answer was that he envisioned attending the Spalding Institute – a local high school the priest had been instrumental in founding.⁸⁰ Unperturbed by this sycophantic response, Spalding changes course and asks Sheen

79. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 12; Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 15.

80. Bishop Spalding oversaw the founding of numerous schools and had a role to play in the establishment of the Catholic University of America. Sheen would indeed attend the Spalding Institute in Peoria and later the CUA (Lynch, 16). See also Jay Dolan, *In Search of American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2002).

whether he had ever heard of Louvain, to which he replied he had not. In response, Spalding told Sheen – in what he explicitly refers to as a “prophecy” – to “go home and tell your mother that I said when you get big you are to go to Louvain, and someday you will be just as I am” – signaling that Sheen would too one day become a priest and a bishop of some renown.⁸¹ The “prophecy” was later fulfilled: in 1919 Sheen would be admitted to the University of Louvain to complete his doctorate (and then again in 1921 for his post-doctoral *agregé*), and in 1951 would be consecrated as a Bishop.⁸² The second moment occurred during his troubled tenure at the CUA. I previously discussed how early in his tenure, Sheen was branded an “outcast” and reprimanded by the rector for proposing reforms which no one viewed favourably and which would have increased the faculty’s workload. Following this event, Sheen remarks that he spent a week or two feeling insecure before the rector called him to his office. There, rather than receive a fresh series of reprimands, the rector apparently had Sheen follow him to his room where he put on his cassock, zucchetto, and other ceremonial regalia. Then, according to Sheen, the rector said to him “‘Kneel down, young man.’ I knelt before him and he put his hands on my head and said: ‘Young man, this university has not received into its ranks in recent years anyone who is destined to shed more light and luster upon it than yourself. God bless you.’”⁸³ Whether such

81. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 12; Riley, *Fulton Sheen*, 2.

82. It has also been observed that childhood encounters with holy figures who serve as models for the protagonist are a common element of hagiography (Weinstein and Bell, *Saints and Society*, 56).

83. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 44.

an event took place or not is irrelevant. After Sheen's tenure at the CUA, he would go on to achieve national fame with his television series and be recognized across America. The placing of the rector's hands on his head can thus be seen as a process of anointing, whereby Sheen the outcast is further demarcated by his superior. As such, the story highlights to the reader that while Sheen was ostracized, the highest authority at the university nevertheless took his side in private, ultimately showcasing that he was in the right all along and was destined to continue to be in the right even when opposed.

Prophecy is rarely inconsequential in the lives of saints. As a narrative trope, it foreshadows where the story will go, and also places a certain importance on the character receiving the prophecy. In the Gospels, notably that of Matthew, the reader is presented with all the myriad ways in which Jesus fulfilled prophecies, while also being presented with the events which would foreshadow his eventual crucifixion. The same convention continues into the Acts of the Apostles and the larger tradition of hagiographical literature as a whole, where pivotal narrative moments – such as impending martyrdom – are suggested to the reader or broadcast to the saint through a vision, dream or other revelation. Of course, the importance of prophecy as a hagiographical trope also extends beyond the narrative realm and serves as a means of highlighting the chosen nature of the protagonist and their part in God's master plan. In this case, Sheen's prophecy not only proposes a future career within the Church (where he would attain the rank of Archbishop, exceeding Spalding's expectations), but also singles him out as a person *chosen* to

have their life's trajectory prophesied for him. In doing so, Sheen paints himself as having something in common with both the apostles and saints before him – as someone who God had a carefully constructed plan for that the world would see come to fruition.

While Sheen is quite keen on incorporating hagiographical tropes and conventions into his autobiography, he nevertheless departs from classic hagiographic conventions in a manner that is simultaneously rather subtle yet somewhat blunt. Hagiographical authors generally allow the prophecy to remain implicit, counting on the knowledge and expectations of their reader to fill in the blanks and connect the dots to the Biblical parallels. Sheen, however, *explicitly* labels Spalding's speech as "prophecy." That Sheen chooses to bluntly state the trope he is deploying suggests two possible scenarios. The first is that he did not entirely trust his readers to make this connection without his guidance. The second is that he simply wanted to emphasize this point and the miracles which occurred in his surroundings. If it is the former, this hints at an author who likes to be in control and wants to leave little to chance, who wants to hold his reader's hands and ensure that they do not deviate from the message being imparted – nor the hagiographical elements within.

Conclusions

In this paper I have sought to outline three aspects of Sheen's *Treasure in Clay* which are heavily indebted to – and in some cases directly mirror – hagiographical tropes and

conventions, rather than purely biographical ones. Though Sheen never explicitly states that he intends for his work to be read as hagiography or act for the promotion of his cause, Sheen's indebtedness to the genre is evident in the manner in which he deploys these tropes – and in the fact that he deploys them at all. As Robert Bartlett has remarked, hagiography is a genre built on trope, convention, and expectation.⁸⁴ All works of the genre follow a structure first charted out in the gospels and reproduced faithfully throughout history, from Antiquity to the present day. Importantly, while hagiography recounts the lives and actions of individuals, hagiography is not biography. As narrative works, hagiographies record and recount the stories of lives deemed to be sacred and worth remembering.⁸⁵ While these works certainly contain biographical elements of the individuals in question, unlike the modern biography which seeks to illuminate the nature and historical truth of the figure in question, hagiography is concerned instead with expounding upon truths of a largely spiritual nature. In doing so, they often avoid the wholesale chronicling of the central figure's life from birth to death.⁸⁶ While both birth and death bookend the story of the saint, it is much more pressing that the stories offered

84. Bartlett remarks just as one generation of saints might take inspiration from the previous, so too does hagiography owe itself to past examples (Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things*, 511).

85. Eric Brook observes that one sometimes overlooked element of hagiography is its function to preserve and perpetuate Christian *memory* from one generation to the next. See Brook, "Writing the Holy Image: The Relationship between Hagiography and Iconography," *International Journal of the Image* 1, no. 1 (2011), 13.

86. It should also be noted that unlike most autobiographies, Sheen's *Treasure in Clay* contains an account of both his birth *and* his death,

are thematically cohesive and present the image of the saint as they are intended to be conveyed.⁸⁷ In this manner, with reference to its stylistic choices, use of tropes and structure, Sheen's autobiography is firmly a work of auto-hagiography.

Aviad Kleinberg once remarked that Athanasius' *Life of Anthony* was "a sermon masquerading as biography,"⁸⁸ essentially arguing that all hagiography serves a purpose other than chronicling the life of its central figure. Like the traditional hagiography upon which it is based, *Treasure in Clay* serves the larger purpose of acting as a definitive and carefully selected *vita* for the would-be saint. Sheen's recollections of his childhood and the special emphasis he places upon his demarcation bear the marks of a tall tale when placed alongside the historical record, but they nevertheless serve the hagiographer's purpose of singling him out to the reader as a child born for higher purposes. Equally so, the trials and tribulations he underwent through his workplace clashes give the impression of Sheen being a man set apart, surrounded on all sides and unjustly punished all for his obedience to God's will. The two moments of prophecy and anointing in the text, while possibly apocryphal, are nevertheless spelled out for the reader as significant moments not only in Sheen's life, but also

owing to its insertion by an editor as the manuscript was being prepared for publication (Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things*, 518).

87. On this note, *Treasure in Clay* is not organized purely chronologically. The first chapter opens with an essay espousing Sheen's own unworthiness as a biographer – much in the vein of classical authors – and mid-way through the book shifts to being organized by topic rather than the period of his life (Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things*, 518).

88. Kleinberg, *Flesh Made Word*, 152.

in God's plan for this chosen individual. Taken together, these three conventions make it clear that this text is less interested in historical biography than it is in following the cues and conventions of hagiography – conventions which his Catholic readers would already be intimately familiar with.

Unfortunately, due to the nature of this brief study, I was not able to touch upon other aspects of the text that support my central thesis. In *Treasure in Clay* there remain numerous elements of auto-hagiography waiting to be explored in future studies, such as: his focus on ascetic disciplines; the ongoing emphasis on his humility and obedience to Church hierarchy and orthodoxy; the telling of his numerous (and typically successful) attempts as a convert-maker and missionary in the vein of the apostles. However, in considering the three tropes I have examined, I believe I have demonstrated that Sheen's text can be seen as a continuation and adaptation of this historic and religiously significant genre. Of course, as previously stated, there are two main differences between Sheen's work and other hagiographies. The first is that the composition of hagiography traditionally takes place after the death of the would-be saint, and is composed by a separate author, such as a member of their ecclesiastical community, parish, or even a third-party employed on behalf of a benefactor or foundation for the support of their cause for canonization. The second is that these texts typically serve to promote the would-be saint to audiences wider than their original community. Again, while Sheen took the unusual and novel step of composing a biographical work that could act as his *vita*, I do not assert that his intentions were to promote his own cause, but rather that

this can be viewed as an extension of his perfectionist desire to control his image.

Ultimately, the study of auto-hagiography is much indebted to the study of hagiography, and this case shines a light on a text largely overlooked by academia outside of a handful of critical biographers and this very same researcher. As *Treasure in Clay* is a decidedly modern work, it should be of interest to researchers examining the broader making of would-be saints in the contemporary era, and of this era of American Catholicism in particular.⁸⁹ I might venture that it is a sign of change in the category of modern saint-making, one which allows the ancient precedent of third-party authorship to be subverted and chronicled by the would-be saint themselves.⁹⁰ Indeed, authors of hagiography have historically tended to self-deprecate themselves or subdue the marks of their own authorship, in order to distance themselves from the narrative and direct attention to the saint rather than themselves. As such, it poses interesting questions about agency that deserve to be further explored when the narrator is the would-be saint themselves. In the case of Sheen, we can witness intersections between religion and celebrity, and also the complications that celebrity brings to figures of religious importance.

89. The possibility of performing similar studies may in fact readily lend it itself to examining the work of other modern American Catholics authors, such as Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton.

90. See Krueger, *Hagiography*, 221.