

*****WORD COUNT: 1,393**

St. Thérèse: A Treasured Love Story

(Basilica Press, 2007)

by Archbishop Fulton Sheen

reviewed by Richard Grebenc

She was born in France; he was born in Illinois. She became a cloistered nun; he became a priest. In her lifetime, she was hardly known -- even to her mother superior; in his lifetime, he was known to tens of millions. She was required to talk about her life and spiritual journey through obedience; he wrote dozens and dozens of books. She lived a short, hidden life for twenty four years; he lived a long, public life for eighty four years. She is now a saint; he is on the way.

Little Peter John (Fulton) Sheen was barely a month old when Carmelite Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus offered herself to Christ as a sacrificial victim. Little more than two years later, she would be dead after suffering much both physically and spiritually. The memoirs she was ordered to produce soon became the classic, *Story of a Soul*. In this way, her hidden life, her "Little Way," became known to the entire world. Nine days after Fr. Fulton Sheen's thirtieth birthday, Thérèse was canonized. Archbishop Fulton Sheen had long since gone to the Lord when, one hundred years after her death in 1897, Thérèse was made the thirty third and most recent Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II. But the

archbishop's cause for canonization is underway, and he is now known as Servant of God Fulton Sheen.

It was in 1973, during the year of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of St. Thérèse, that Archbishop Fulton Sheen was invited to preach eleven sermons to the Carmelite community in Dublin, Ireland per the request of Carmelite Father J. Linus Ryan. By this time, well into his seventies, Archbishop Sheen was widely known. This popular speaker and writer had conducted radio programs from 1926 until 1952 in which he applied the Catholic faith to contemporary issues. With the advent of television, he continued his teachings in that medium starting in 1951 and was seen there for a good part of that decade and then again for most of the 1960s. He won an Emmy in 1953 (beating out the popular Milton Berle) famously thanking his writers "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." Thanks in large part to EWTN, resurgence in interest in the archbishop has happened through that Catholic network's repeats (aired several times a week) of these splendid television shows.

Archbishop Sheen, long an admirer of St. Thérèse, and a Third Order Carmelite himself, was delighted to do the talks for Fr. Ryan. The lectures he conducted were a walk through St. Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*. Thanks to the initiative of Father Andrew Apostoli, C.F.R., Vice-Postulator for the Cause of Canonization of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, these wonderful talks are now compiled in book form.

What does this cloistered nun from a little town in France have to say to persons from all walks of life today? Plenty. Archbishop Sheen's eleven lectures are devoted to various themes related to St. Thérèse's life – faith, hope, and perseverance, suffering, relationship with God, humility, sin and mercy, and more. The life experiences of St. Thérèse become reflections for modern man – a struggle for perfection in hope. As anyone who has seen or read his work will anticipate, the archbishop effortlessly moves amongst events in St. Thérèse's life, Scripture, history, contemporary matters, humor, and anecdotes. He does this brilliantly here.

Archbishop Sheen sets the tone in the first chapter, entitled “St. Thérèse the Little Flower: The saint for troubled times.” Here he talks about the need for all persons to become saints in whatever day and age in which they find themselves. He relates the story of St. Thérèse patient and loving care of a cantankerous elderly nun as an example of saintly behavior under difficult circumstances.

But how to be perfect? “*We must read Scripture*” (p. 49, emphasis in original) the archbishop exclaims. According to him, St. Thérèse was a biblical scholar. By learning about God through His revealed word, she could strive for perfection. One of the main ways she did this was through humility. The archbishop relates a wonderful sentiment of St. Thérèse's in which she likened herself to “a toy of no value, a ball, say,” at the Child Jesus' disposal. “He can

throw it on the ground, kick it about, make a hole in it, leave it in a corner or press it to his heart, however he feels about it.” (p. 61)

Thus, humility is the heart of St. Thérèse’s “Little Way.” To help our understanding, Archbishop Sheen explains Jesus’ humility in an incomparable and striking way: What if one of us were asked to become a dog, with all of its limitations compared to ours, in order to redeem all dogs? This is just a dim intimation of how Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, humbled Himself in becoming man.

Suffering is the other major theme of this book. St. Thérèse wanted to console Jesus, that is, His Church, invoking the apostle Paul who underwent “afflictions ... on behalf of [Christ’s] body, which is the church.” (Col 1:24) Here the archbishop relates a meeting he had with Pope Paul VI (the archbishop knew many popes personally) in which the archbishop recognized the suffering of the pope on behalf of the Church. The pope acknowledged this as a crown of thorns he had to wear. The archbishop brings this theme into contemporary times as he talks about a woman in an iron lung whom he helped over the course of several months to come to terms with her situation. “The one lesson you want to understand,” he says, “is that Christ is using you. He’s using [your sufferings] for others.” (p. 93)

All throughout the book can be found the archbishop’s classic humor (“In priest retreats, I talk five times a day for four or five days straight and 35-40

minutes each time. Well, that takes a lot of energy out of a 39 year old man. Why do you laugh?” (p. 114)), practical explanations (purgatory as the “deep, burning sensation” between a sense of unworthiness and a sense of attraction to God (p. 75)), anecdotes that often convey his vast learning (how Mozart composed his symphonies), spiritual exegesis (the shedding of blood for forgiveness of sins in the stories of Adam and Eve, Abraham, and Moses), wonderful insights (sometimes God says no to what we want), and provocative statements (“God HATES PEACE” (p. 100, emphasis in original)).

The editors have added some nice features to the lectures. Brief biographies of St. Thérèse and Archbishop Sheen introduce or remind the reader of these two luminaries. Twenty pages of black and white photos of both figures make a delightful addition (especially pictures of St. Thérèse as Joan of Arc and the archbishop with four pontiffs). The book concludes with a prayer for the canonization of the archbishop, another prayer for his intercession, a morning prayer of St. Thérèse, and finally a prayer requesting her intercession. Lastly, we find a word about the Archbishop Fulton John Sheen Foundation and its efforts in the cause for his canonization.

While one could comfortably read through this entire book in a single afternoon, its value lies more in reflection and meditation on the themes of individual chapters. This can be done from front to back, or one can go directly to a chapter that is relevant to one’s particular challenge at the time (suffering,

temptation, or perseverance, for example). This is a great book for the nightstand that can be read time and time again.

Working through this book will quite likely make the reader want to read or reread *Story of a Soul* and Archbishop Sheen's autobiography, *Treasure in Clay*, to get a fuller picture of the lives and spirituality of these two great figures. It will also help to watch an episode or two of *Life is Worth Living* on EWTN if possible. "Seeing and hearing" the archbishop in the lectures in this book, with all of his mannerisms and inflections, only adds to the experience of reading them.

What is found is that neither Fulton Sheen nor Thérèse of Lisieux is an intellectual or theological lightweight as has been the impression of some at one time or another. Their depth of knowledge, spiritual understanding, and love of God comes through in every page of this wonderful book.

SIDEBAR (STRONGLY RECOMMENDED):

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1976).

Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton Sheen* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

www.archbishopsheencause.org (The Official Website for the Canonization Cause of the Servant of God Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen)

Life is Worth Living is aired on EWTN Global Catholic Network
Television: 9:00 AM ET Fridays and 2:00 AM ET Saturdays
Radio: 7:00 AM ET weekdays