

Catholic Homiletics and the Art of Constructing an Effective Homily

by Rev. Fr. Joseph J. ...



The Need to Improve Sacred Preaching



- Many surveys have shown that among the reasons why only 1 of 6 Catholics in the US attends Mass each Sunday is because people are drifting away from practice or leaving the Church altogether due to preaching that's poor and unprepared, uninspiring and sometimes obsessed about “bad news” instead of Good. Many Catholics leave for Protestant Churches where nourishing preaching applying the Bible to life sets them on fire.
- Pope Francis often decried the quality of Catholic homilies. “Please, the homilies: they are a disaster” (Jan 22, 2023).
- Pope Benedict: “Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies need to be improved” (SC 46).
- St. Bernardine of Siena’s 15th century contrafactual about the importance of preaching.



The Theology of Preaching



- God is logos: conversation, speech. The Trinity seeks to bring us into his interior eternal dialogue.
- Sacred preaching is meant to be a cooperation with the Holy Spirit, with whom we give joint witness.
- Tongues of Fire
- Not worrying about what we are to say, because the Spirit of the Father will teach us what to say.
- Preaching — “prophecy,” actualizing the word of God, together with “teaching” — is one of the charismatic gifts St. Paul describes.
- Jesus puts words on the first priests’ lips, to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand, to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins, etc.
- And Jesus himself gives us a model of preaching.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- Saint Augustine is generally considered the greatest preacher in the history of the Church in the West.
- He's one of the only Fathers to leave us a systematic treatise on Sacred Preaching, in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, in which he focused on the content (Books 1-3, written just after he became a bishop in 396-7) and method (Book 4, written 30 years later) of preaching.
- Since this Missionary Preaching Academy is taking place at the Augustine Institute, we can focus on some of what he he says in this must read for preachers today! We will focus mainly on what is happening when we preach, what the content of preaching is, and what eloquence involves.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- In preaching, God acts in two ways: on the outside (*extrinsecus*) through the preacher communicating the truth of Sacred Scripture, and on the inside (*intus*) of the listener through grace so that the Word may be fruitfully received.
- Because the interior action is the key to fruitful preaching, the most important thing a preacher can do is pray for himself and those listening! “It is more the piety of prayer than the ready facility of orators that enables him to [preach efficaciously]; by praying then both for himself and for those he is about to address, let him be a pray-er before he is a speaker.”



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- The ultimate goal of preaching, he says, is two-fold: for matters requiring the assent of faith, the preacher must convince the listeners of the truth of what he is saying; for matters that deal with a change of moral behavior, he must convince them more than just about moral truth but move them to change their behavior. That moral metamorphosis can only happen by the power of God; therefore, the need for prayer and Sacred Scripture.
- “It is the duty of the interpreter and teacher of the Holy Scriptures” — that is who a preacher is for him — “... both to teach what is good and to unteach what is bad, and in this task of speaking, to conciliate the hostile, rouse the careless, and tell the ignorant both what should be done and what they should expect.”



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- “If the hearers need to be taught (*docere*), it is to be done in the narrative style, if, that is, the matter at hand is unknown. ... If, however, the hearers need to be moved (*movere*) rather than taught, so that they may not be sluggish in doing what they already know, and so that they give assent to things that they profess to be true, greater powers of speaking are needed. Here there is need for entreaties and reproaches, exhortations and words that restraint, and whatever other things that avail for moving minds and souls.”
- To do this, the preacher must have assimilated what he’s trying to communicate. It’s not fundamentally a question of rhetorical skill but of knowing Christ.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- The content of Sacred Preaching is “wisdom,” and the style is “eloquence,” which means by convincing and moving.
- Cicero had taught, “Wisdom without eloquence is of little use to society, while eloquence without wisdom is frequently extremely prejudicial to it, never of any use.”
- For Augustine, there needs to be both, and wisdom means Christ incarnate Wisdom himself. After Christ’s ascension, wisdom is conveyed through the Scriptures. So wisdom means personal knowledge and worship of Christ and knowledge of Sacred Scripture. Only this two-fold wisdom will allow the preacher to preach well.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- Augustine says that the primary condition for preaching is wisdom, not eloquence. “For a man who has the duty of saying wisely even what he cannot say eloquently, it is supremely important that he should have the words of Scripture at his fingertips.” If one doesn’t know Sacred Scripture, he says, eloquence is useless and can be harmful.
- The source of what we have to say in our preaching is Sacred Scripture, about the person and the work of Christ. It’s not about other things, or even about our “what a passage means to me,” but the content of Scripture itself. It’s to look at the whole world through the lens of Scripture, revealing or unveiling the day-to-day by God’s wisdom, perceiving his action, and receiving his life.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- In a positive way, the preacher is meant to teach Scriptural revelation and unteach what is inconsistent with it.
- Augustine could have used all of pagan literature in making his points, but he emphasized Sacred Scripture. It has not just apposite images and stories, but divine power to change people!
- “Remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:14-16).



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- The preaching of Augustine and the Fathers on Sacred Scripture led to a truly Christian, Biblically-based culture. People were formed in a Biblical worldview and capable of understanding everything in its light.
- Even though less important than wisdom, eloquence is still very useful.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- “Would anyone dare to maintain that truth should stand there without any weapons in the hands of its defenders against falsehood; that those speakers who are trying to convince their hearers of what is untrue, should know how to get them on their side, to gain their attention and have them eating out of their hands by their opening remarks, while those who are defending the truth should not? That those should state their lies briefly, clearly, plausibly, and then we should state our truths in a manner too boring to listen to, too obscure to understand and finally too repellant to believe?”



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- Augustine says that eloquence should be learned by the young who are quick learners. The best way to learn is not by pouring over the rules of eloquence but by listening to eloquent preachers. No one can become eloquent without listening to good speakers at work, just as those growing up in a home that use good grammar learn good grammar.
- The most powerful form of eloquence — source of persuasion — is the moral character or “manner of life” of the preacher.



Saint Augustine: The Art & Theology of Preaching



- While the content of divine wisdom does not change, the means by which it is delivered must be adapted to the audience. It must be listener-centered, rather than method-centered. Effective teaching is that the audience learn, and so it adapts so that they learn. Sometimes this means letting go of polish — a “diligent negligence” — to ensure people get the point.



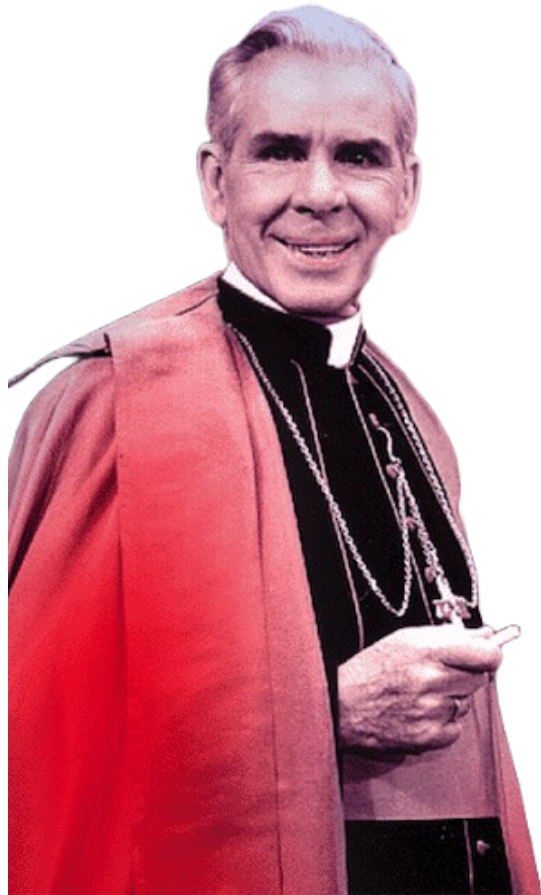
The Church Today on the Purpose of Preaching



- Vatican II: Priests have the “primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all.” The purpose of a homily is “to exhort all men” to “conversion and holiness” (PO 4).
- Pope Benedict XVI: “The homily is ‘part of the liturgical action’ and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful” (VD 59).
- Pope Francis: A liturgical homily promotes a heart-to-heart dialogue between God and his people, proclaiming the deeds of salvation and restating the demands of the Covenant. It is part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace that Christ pours out during the celebration (EG 137-138).



The Church Today on the Purpose of Preaching



- Archbishop Sheen: There are two types of preachers: those who have something to say and those who have to say something.
- US Bishops' Preaching the Mystery of Faith (2012): "One of the most important teachings of Vatican II in regard to preaching is the insistence that the homily is an integral part of the Eucharist itself. ... The homily is meant to set hearts on fire with praise and thanksgiving. It is to be a feature of the intense and privileged encounter with Jesus Christ that takes place in the liturgy. ... The homilist connects the two parts of the Eucharistic liturgy as he looks back at the Scripture readings and looks forward to the sacrificial meal. This is why it is preferable for the celebrant of the Eucharistic liturgy also to be the homilist."



Pope Francis on the Preacher of the Word of God



- Pope Francis says that people today thirst for authenticity, for credible witnesses, for preachers who speak of a God they know.
- He says that the preacher should be close, approachable, welcoming, warm, joyful, unpretentious, ready for dialogue, and patient.
- He says that the preacher should enjoy passing on the faith to others, looking beyond people's weaknesses and failures to see what Jesus sees and loves in them.
- He must strive to know those whom he addresses, the heart of the community, where God is alive and ardent and where the loving dialogue has become barren.
- He should be striving for holiness: "The greater or lesser holiness of the minister does impact the proclamation."



Pope Francis on the Content of Sacred Preaching



- Quoting John Paul II, Pope Francis says that the message is the “joyful, patient, progressive preaching” of the incarnation, birth, life, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Preaching, he says, must begin and emphasize above all the kerygma: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (EG 164).
- To preach the kerygma, the preacher must believe it. He must know God loves him, that Jesus has saved him, and that love has the last word.
- The Gospel is a gift before a task!



Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching



- Pope Francis says that good preaching is not just about knowing what to say but how to say it (EG 156). Method is a profoundly spiritual concern.
- He says it's an expression of love of neighbor to refuse to offer a product of poor quality.
- What are the elements of a good homily? He gives 13 characteristics:
 - **Well prepared** — a preacher who doesn't prepare is not "spiritual" but dishonest and irresponsible.
 - **Prayerful** — calling on the Holy Spirit in prayer.
 - **Scriptural** — based on the Word of God with which the preacher is intimately familiar, not just intellectually but existentially.



Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching



- Elements of a good homily (*continued*)
 - **On fire** — They should be words that set hearts on fire.
 - **Humble** — Christ's message must penetrate his entire being so that the Holy Spirit can really work in him.
 - **Simple** — Everyone should be able to understand the language used.
 - **Clear** — Our language can be simple but not clear. There's a need for thematic unity so that people can grasp the point.
 - **Practical** — It should use familiar, practical, every day images, so that people can understand and savor the message and know what they're being asked.



Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching



- Elements of a good homily (*continued*)
 - **Positive** — Each word of Scripture is a gift before a demand. He should point out not what shouldn't be done, but rather what we can do better. He should be a joyful messenger of challenging proposals, showing the attractiveness of a life of wisdom, rather than experts in dire predictions and dour judges.
 - **Beautiful** — Preachers should help people recognize what Christ is teaching is not just true but beautiful, capable of filling life with joy even in difficulties. Preaching is more than communicating abstract truths. We can only love what is beautiful.



Pope Francis on the Style of Sacred Preaching



- Elements of a good homily (continued)
 - **Eschatological** — The preacher should help people grasp they live in between the baptismal and eternal embrace.
 - **Maternal** — The Church preaches like a mother evangelizing her family, loving her children, listening to them, teaching them what is for their benefit, counting on their trust. A spirit of love guides conversations and corrections. Preaching is better understood in the “mother tongue.”
 - **Brief** — The homily must not become more important than the celebration of faith or violate its balance or rhythm. He normally says that Sunday homilies should be 8-10 minutes.



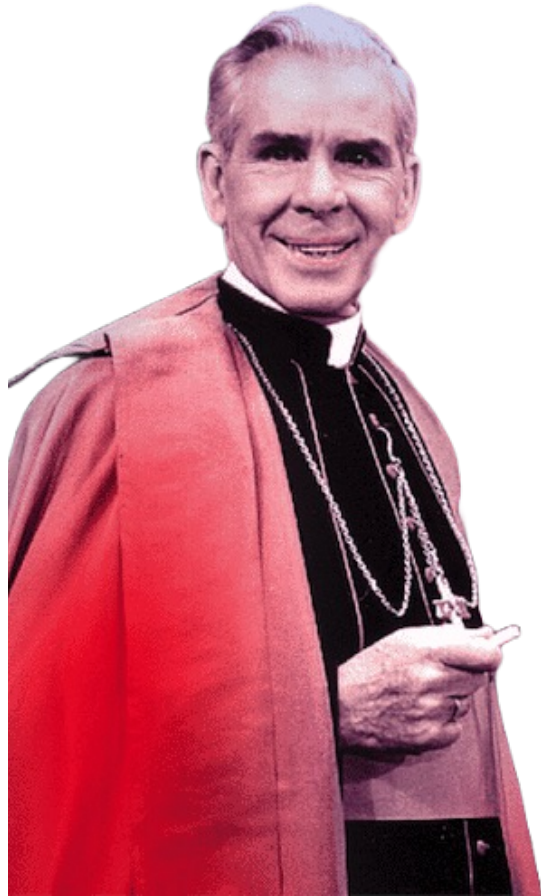
Blessed-to-Be Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979)



- Greatest Catholic Preacher in American History.
- Hugely important for the growth and integration of the Church in 20th Century America.
- His television programs drew 30 million a week, leading to 10,000 letters a day.
- His Lenten Sermons at St. Patrick's Cathedral in NYC packed 6,000 with thousands listening in the streets.
- In 1959, 115,000 came to listen to him at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.
- Recordings of his retreat tapes, courses on the faith and more have helped millions.



Blessed-to-be Fulton J. Sheen and Zeal to Preach



- He has much to teach preachers of every age.
- He treated preaching as a solemn duty: “The priest at ordination was told to preach. The office is to be taken so seriously as to make every priest cry out with Paul, ‘Woe to me [it would go hard indeed with me] if I did not preach the Gospel’ (1 Cor 9:16).”
- It was a duty he loved, because he was preaching fundamentally about Someone he loved. He wrote at the end of his life, “I beg [the Lord] every day to keep me strong physically and alert mentally in order to preach His Gospel and proclaim His Cross and Resurrection.”



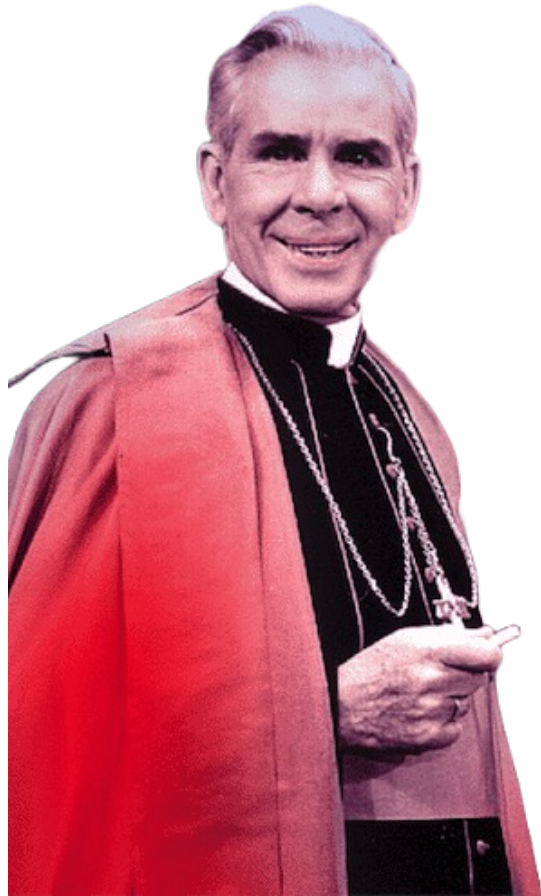
Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen & Love in the Pulpit



- “To be a good speaker, there must be imagination, there must be fire. There cannot be fire and passion unless there is tremendous love — a love of truth, a love of country, a love of a cause... If men are indifferent to any great ideal, they can never be on fire.”
- “The preacher who bores others in the pulpit is a bore before he ever gets into it. He is not in love. He is not on fire with Christ.”



Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen and Preaching Prep



- He always thoroughly prepared to preach, with both remote and proximate preparation. He thought good preparation was a moral duty.
- He prepared with prayer, almost always working on his homilies before the Blessed Sacrament.
- “How much more our words would burn as we preach if we prepared our sermons before the Eucharistic Lord; ... if, before preaching, we prayed for five minutes to the Holy Spirit for Pentecostal fire; if we kept the Scriptures ever open near us, that we might gird ourselves with their truth when mounting the pulpit!”



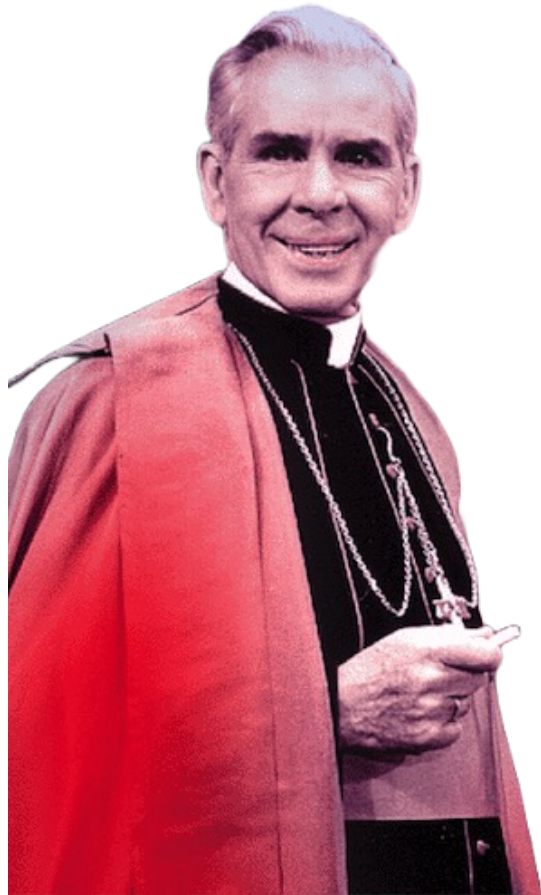
Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen & Preaching Themes



- “Preaching is not the act of giving a sermon; it is the art of making a preacher. The preacher then becomes the sermon.”
- “What answer to judgment shall the priest give who squanders hours a day on newspapers, television and magazines yet cannot spare half an hour of the Lord’s time to prepare his soul for the pulpit?”
- In preparation he would also study Sacred Scripture, commentaries, literature, psychology, history, architecture, art, music, popular culture.



Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen & Preaching Themes



- He was ambivalent about the use of stories.
- He would practice his homilies ahead of time, not just in English but also in French, so that he would learn them without memorizing and be more capable of adapting them according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- The major themes of his preaching were Christ crucified, the power and wisdom of God, and the conversion that flows from meeting him. He likewise preached about our need to share the Good News with others.



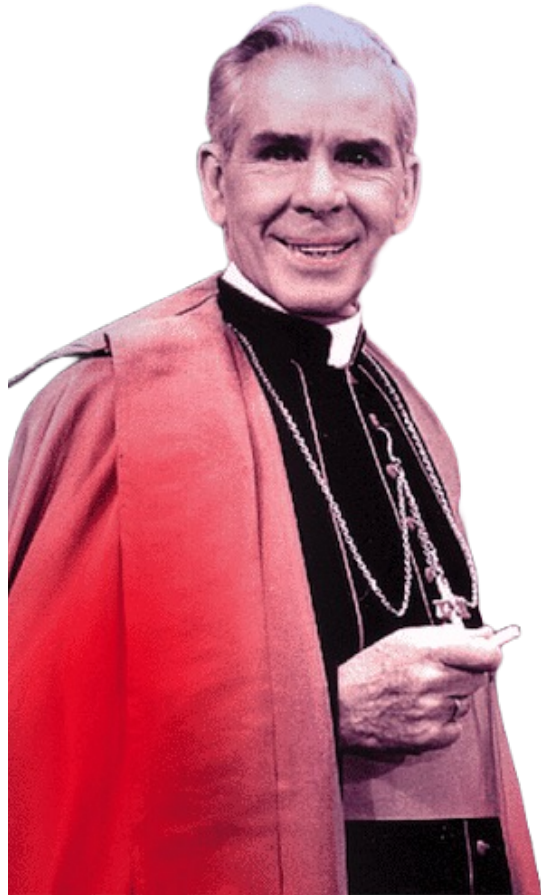
Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen & Preaching Style



- “I don’t concentrate on style. My worry is in getting the idea across. That is my style.”
- He taught that what was needed in terms of style were sincerity, clarity and flexibility.
- He sought to challenge people to change, to rise up.
- He used humor fundamentally toward self-deprecation so that people would not feel inferior.
- He focused always on a gripping beginning and a conclusion that was strong, inspiring and elevating.



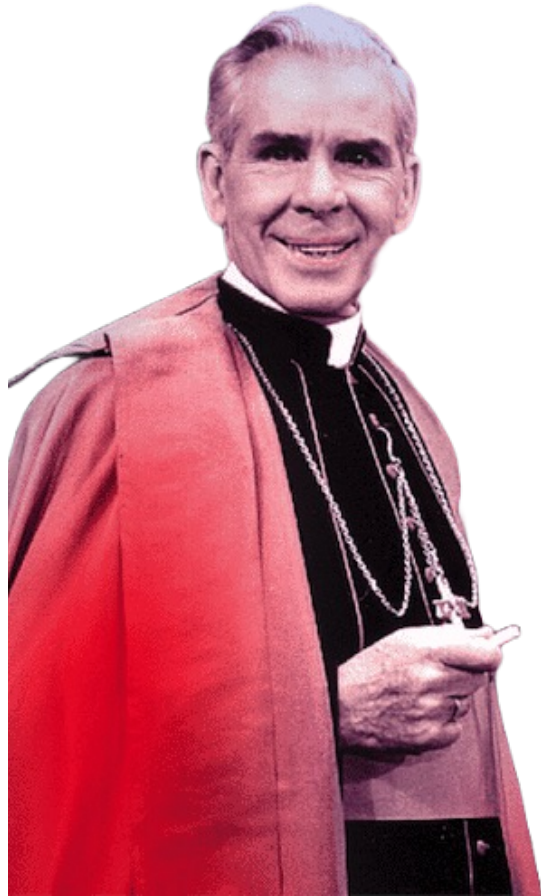
Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen: Preaching Pointers



- In terms of the audience, he worked hard to know them and to pray for them.
- Finally, toward the end of his life, he gave various pointers about speaking:
 - Tone of voice
 - Breathing
 - Mixing cadence
 - Being natural rather than having a "pulpit voice."
 - The importance of pauses.
 - Changing volume.
 - Knowing when to end.



Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen: Preaching Missions



- He would also regularly preach the Missions and Missionaries.
- “Hardly a day passed without our hearing the story of these ‘heralds of the Gospel’ as they brought inspiration to my life and to my office and to my pen.”
- “The time of ‘preaching’ religion is over, that is, as preaching only. From now on there is solely the Word — the Word made flesh in saints, who make unbelievers ask, ‘Why is he different from me?’ ... That inquiry in the face of a saint opens the door to the Church.”



Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen: Preaching Missions



- “Prayer for the missions does not mean a pious Hail Mary said in favor of others. It is to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1).”
- “The Council of Baltimore said that next to the aid of Providence, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith of France was the principal cause of the growth of the Church in the United States.”
- “Is a diocese in the United States justified, before the Spirit of Christ, in excessive spending on cathedrals, when a saving of just \$10,000 would build a chapel in the mission lands where the missionaries average over 100 converts per priest?”



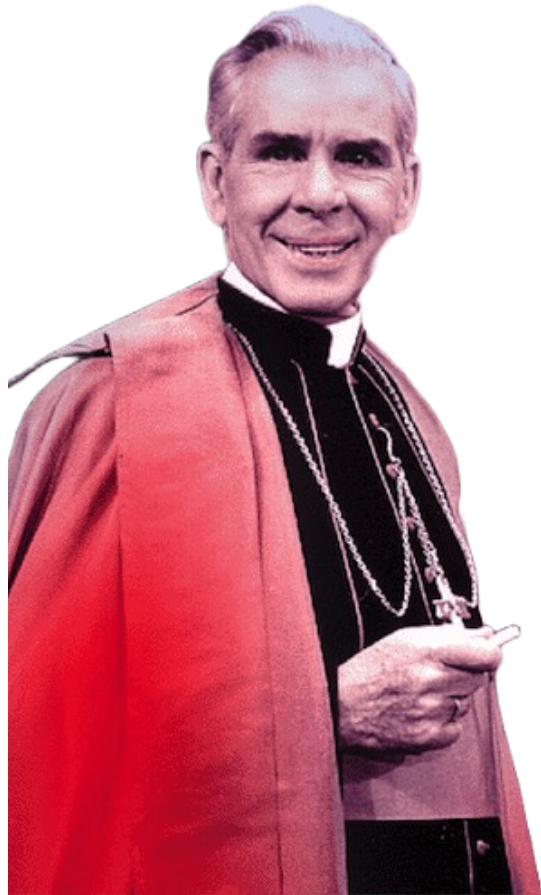
Blessed-to-be Fulton Sheen: Preaching Missions



- “To be a Catholic is to be missionary.”
- “Christ has sent us into the world to be witnesses, not successes.”
- “It is not only souls that have to be saved; it is society. It is not only souls that have to be sanctified; it is bodies as well, for as St. Thomas says, the soul is not a person. A person is a composite of body and soul. Society is a composite of the Redemption prolonged in the Mystical Body of Christ and the lump or mass of the world that, to some extent, feels the spiritual repercussions of that gift of Redemption.”



Archbishop Fulton Sheen on Preaching Missions



- National Director of the Society of the Propagation of the Faith in the USA from 1950-1966.
- He raised hundreds of millions of dollars and donated \$10 million of his own earnings.
- He designed in 1951 and promoted the World Mission Rosary, praying for the missions on five continents.
- He founded Mission Magazine in July 1951.
- Left all his books and 40 percent of his effects (the most of any recipient) to the Society of the Propagation of the Faith. It was his real passion in life and approaching death.

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Welcome!

I warmly welcome you to this website, put together at the insistence and with the assistance of friends.

During my diaconal ordination, Cardinal Edmund Szoka gave me the following instruction from the Ordination Rite as together we gripped the Book of the Gospels:

*"Receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald you now are.
Believe what you read.
Teach what you believe.
Practice what you teach."*

Those words have never lost their resonance.



Since that day -- October 8, 1998 -- I have tried to live up to that commission to be a "herald of the Gospel," by striving to teach what the Church believes, to practice what I preach to others, and to spread with joy and enthusiasm the truth Christ has entrusted to His church -- in and out of season, in and out of the pulpit.

This website is a chronicle of those attempts. You may also follow postings of articles, homilies and teachings on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

You can also subscribe to the podcast of daily homilies, lectures and talks through Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts and iHeart Podcasts.

It constitutes the "five loaves and two fish" (or even less!) that I have placed into the hands of the Lord as an attempt to feed a hungry crowd, confident that, if He wishes, He can multiply and supplement that meager offering to nourish many more (Jn 6:1-14).

In Christ,
Msgr. Roger J. Landry

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with Dr. Robert J. D'Antonio, Director of the Center for Catholic Studies, St. John's University, 2019