

From
the Angel's
Blackboard

————— *The Best of* —————
FULTON J. SHEEN



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Contents

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

ix

MIND

SANCTIFYING THE MOMENT	3
CONSCIENCE, THE INTERIOR SINAI	15
GREAT MOMENTS OF DECISION	18
ENCOUNTER WITH GOD	21
RELIGION HAS MOVED TO THE SUBCONSCIOUS	23
HEALTH AND HOLINESS	26
GOD IS IMMANENT IN THE WORLD BY HIS WISDOM	29
HABITS	33
LIFE IS WORTH LIVING?	37
FATIGUE	41
THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY	46
LOVE'S OVERFLOW	54
AGNOSTICISM	59

FINGERS, HANDS, AND NAILS	64
ETHICS FOR THE UNETHICAL	67
TREASURES OF THE SUBCONSCIOUS	72
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WORK	82

H E A R T

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLEASURE	87
THE TENDERNESS AND POWER	92
UNDERSTANDING OTHERS	94
IT TAKES THREE TO MAKE LOVE	96
LOVES REACTION TO LOSS	100
THE THREE TENSIONS OF LOVE	103
LOVE IS A MESSENGER	106
ALTRUISM: THE EVOLUTION OF LOVE	110
ARE YOU HAPPY?	116
THE CONTINUATION OF THE INCARNATION	124
SELFISHNESS	126
COURTESY	130
THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHARITY	132
A THOUSAND TINY DELICACIES	138
THE PROBLEM OF GIVING	141
CARING FOR HUMANITY	144
MODERN SAINTS	154

SPIRIT

“AYE” OR “NAY” TO ETERNAL DESTINY	161
THE HYMN OF LIFE	164
THE DEATH OF LIFE	168
THE DEPTHS OF SIMPLICITY	173
GRACE AND FAITH IN CHRISTIAN LIFE	178
THE FIRST FAINT SUMMONS TO HEAVEN	185
THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN	189
WHAT ARE YOU LIKE?	195
TEEN-AGERS	201
MORE ABOUT TEEN-AGERS	204
CONTENT WITH SAWDUST BRAINS?	207
“NICE” PEOPLE	210
LOVE BEGINS WITH A DREAM	213
EMERGENCE OF CHARACTER	215
PRAYER AND MEDITATION	227
ANGELS	233
MAKING UP FOR WASTED TIME	236
PEACE	239
THE DIVINE SENSE OF HUMOR	241
<i>SOURCES</i>	243
<i>ABOUT FULTON J. SHEEN</i>	245

Editor's Foreword

A voice is silent in the midst of the Church and in our land, the like of which will not be heard again in our day . . .

Words that opened an unforgettable eulogy on December 13, 1979. Words that still echo through the years with a ring of truth.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen — charismatic prelate, powerful orator and thinker, popular television personality, and prolific writer of books as well as news columns for both the secular and religious press — was undoubtedly one of the best-loved religious figures of this century. And such was the tenacity of Sheen's mind, heart, and spirit that his greatest gift and legacy remain an indelible impact on the mind, heart, and spirit of all who call themselves God's people.

It is fitting, then, to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth with this special commemorative volume. In rereading many of Sheen's works, it becomes readily apparent that his voice can never be fully extinguished. There remains in his written and spoken words a keen insight into the universal human condition, and the universal quest for the Divine in the ordinary.

Although we've titled this collection *From the Angel's Blackboard* (reminiscent of Sheen's successful television program from decades past), the contents embrace much more than material from his subsequent series, *Life Is Worth Living*. Space limitations prohibit inclusion of all texts that are of continued interest to today's spiritual seekers; and final selections, admittedly, represent personal preference. But it

is our hope that these words will touch a new generation of readers as well as those for whom Fulton J. Sheen was a source of light, hope, faith, and understanding amid the inescapable doubts and struggles and frustrations of everyday life.

The selections that follow have in many cases been abridged and edited with a contemporary sensibility in mind. To the extent possible (and comfortable), attention has been given to inclusive language. In these instances, we trust in Fulton Sheen's blessing from above. But where text did not yield easily to change, we have chosen to leave Sheen's words intact (begging in these instances for the reader's understanding). We hope that readers will bring to these selections a ready and open spirit, a simple trust, and a heart that wills to be enlarged. If but a single soul can be transformed for the better; a single mind opened to new possibilities; a single heart stirred to greater good, this volume will have served its purpose well.

A special note of thanks to the good and wonderful people at the Society for the Propagation of the Faith — in particular Bishop William J. McCormack, National Director, and James R. Borut and Florence Lee, for their generous support of this undertaking. Their help and encouragement, and especially their faith in me, are deeply appreciated. Any shortcomings are mine alone.

God Love You!

PATRICIA A. KOSSMANN

Literary Representative

The Estate of Fulton J. Sheen

MIND

Sanctifying the Moment

MILLIONS OF MEN AND WOMEN TODAY lead what has been called “lives of quiet desperation.” They are panicky, worried, neurotic, fearful, and, above all, frustrated souls. And frustration results from failure — either a failure that has already occurred or a failure in prospect. Some people may become frustrated by comparing the immensity of the problems facing them with the feebleness of their resources for solving them; in such cases, they are too discouraged, too apprehensive of failure, even to try for a solution. Or they may become frustrated from a lack of someone to love, someone who will love them sufficiently in return.

The first type of frustration puts a soul in the harried position of a householder who becomes more and more depressed as the bills mount up, and money fails to materialize. He or she dreads a future reckoning. The second kind of frustration involves the feeling that life is passing quickly and that the chances for emotional fulfillment are growing less with every year. Both forms of misery are connected, then, with an unhappy individual’s consciousness of the passage of time. The frustrated soul is the one most apt to shiver when seeing the old sundial warning: “It is later than you think.”

All our anxieties relate to time. A human being is the only time-conscious creature. Humans alone can bring the past to mind, so that it weighs on the present moment with its accumulated heritage; and they can also bring the future into the present, so as to imagine its oc-

currences as happening now. No animal ever says: "I have suffered this pain for six years, and it will last until I die." But because a human being can unite the past to the present by memory, and the future to the present by imagination, it is often necessary to distract him in his sufferings — to break up the continuity of misery. All unhappiness (when there is no immediate cause for sorrow) comes from excessive concentration on the past or from extreme preoccupation with the future. The major problems of psychiatry revolve around an analysis of the despair, pessimism, melancholy, and complexes that are the inheritances of what has been or with the fears, anxieties, worries, that are the imaginings of what will be.

In addition to cases of true insanity and mental aberration — when scientific psychiatry is essential — there are many others for whom this unhappy preoccupation with the past and future has a moral basis. A conscience burdened with the guilt of past sins is fearful of divine judgment. But God in His mercy has given us two remedies for such an unhappiness. One is the Sacrament of Penance, which blots out the past by remission of our sins and lightens the future by our hope for divine mercy through continued repentance and amendment of our lives. Nothing in human experience is as efficacious in curing the memory and imagination as confession; it cleanses us of guilt, and if we follow the admonitions of Our Lord, we shall put completely out of mind our confessed sins: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9:62). Confession also heals the imagination, eliminating its anxiety for the future; for now, with Paul, the soul cries out: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

The second remedy for the ills that come to us from thinking about time is what might be called the sanctification of the moment — or the Now. Our Lord laid down the rule for us in these words: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Mt 6:34). This means that each day has its own trials; we are not to borrow troubles from tomorrow, because that day too will have its cross. We are to leave the past to

divine mercy and to trust the future, whatever its trials, to God's loving providence. Each minute of life has its peculiar duty — regardless of the appearance that minute may take. The Now-moment is the moment of salvation. Each complaint against it is a defeat; each act of resignation to it is a victory.

* * *

The present moment includes some things over which we have control, but it also carries with it difficulties we cannot avoid — such things as a business failure, a bad cold, rain on picnic days, an unwelcome visitor, a fallen cake, a buzzer that doesn't work, a fly in the milk, and a boil on the nose the night of the dance. We do not always know why such things as sickness and setbacks happen to us, for our minds are far too puny to grasp God's plan. A person is a little like a mouse in a piano, which cannot understand why it must be disturbed by someone playing Chopin and forcing it to move off the piano wires.

When Job suffered, he posed questions to God: Why was he born, and why was he suffering? God appeared to him, but instead of answering Job's questions, He began to ask Job to answer some of the larger questions about the universe. When the Creator had finished pouring queries into the head of the creature, Job realized that the questions of God were wiser than the answers of men. Because God's ways are not our ways — because the salvation of a soul is more important than all material values — because divine wisdom can draw good out of evil — the human mind must develop acceptance of the Now, no matter how hard it may be for us to understand its freight of pain. We do not walk out of a theater because the hero is shot in the first act; we give the dramatist credit for having a plot in mind. So the soul does not walk out on the first act of God's drama of salvation — it is the last act that is to crown the play. The things that happen to us are not always susceptible to our minds' comprehension or wills' conquering; but they are always within the capacity of our faith to accept and of our wills' submission.

One question is never asked by Love, and that is "Why?" That word is used only by the three d's of doubt, deceit, and the devil. The happi-

ness of the garden of paradise, founded on trusting love, cracked under the satanic query: "Why has God commanded you?" To true love, each wish of the beloved is a dread command — the lover even wishes that the requests were multiplied, that there might be more frequent opportunities of service. Those who love God do not protest, whatever He may ask of them, nor doubt His kindness when He sends them difficult hours. A sick person takes medicine without asking the physician to justify its bitter taste, because the patient trusts the doctor's knowledge; so the soul that has sufficient faith accepts all the events of life as gifts from God, in the serene assurance that God knows best.

Every moment brings us more treasures than we can gather. The great value of the Now, spiritually viewed, is that it carries a message God has directed personally to us. Books, sermons, and broadcasts on a religious theme have the appearance of being circular letters, meant for everyone. Sometimes, when such general appeals do appear to have a personal application, the soul gets angry and writes vicious letters to allay its uneasy conscience. Excuses can always be found for ignoring the divine law. But though moral and spiritual appeals carry God's identical message to all who listen, this is not true of the Now-moment; no one else but I am in exactly these circumstances; no one else has to carry the same burden, whether it be sickness, the death of a loved one, or some other adversity. Nothing is more individually tailored to our spiritual needs than the Now-moment; for that reason it is an occasion of knowledge that can come to no one else. This moment is my school, my textbook, my lesson. Not even Our Lord disdained to learn from His specific Now; being God, He knew all, but there was still one kind of knowledge He could experience as a human. St. Paul describes it: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8).

The University of the Moment has been built uniquely for each of us, and in comparison with the revelation God gives each in it, all other methods of learning are shallow and slow. This wisdom is distilled from intimate experience, is never forgotten; it becomes part of our character, our merit, our eternity. Those who sanctify the moment,

and offer it up in union with God's will, never become frustrated — never grumble or complain. They overcome all obstacles by making them occasions of prayer and channels of merit. What were constrictions are thus made opportunities for growth. It is the modern pagan who is the victim of circumstance, and not its master. Such an individual, having no practical knowledge of God, no trust in His providence, no assurance of His love, lacks the shock absorber of faith and hope and love when difficult days come. Such a person's mind is caught within the pincers of a past he regrets or resents and a future he is afraid he cannot control. Being thus squeezed, his nature is in pain.

Those who accept God's will in all things escape such frustration by piercing the disguise of outward events to penetrate to their real character as messengers of the God they love. It is strange how differently we accept a misfortune — or even an insult — when we know who gave it to us. A teen might normally resent it very much if a well-dressed young woman accidentally stepped on her toes in a bus; but if that same teen recognized that the one who hurt her was her favorite movie star, she would probably boast of it to her friends. Demands that might seem outrageous from an acquaintance are met with happy compliance if it is a friend who asks our help. In like manner, we are able to adapt with a good grace to the demands of every Now when we recognize God's will and purpose behind the illness and the shocks and disappointments of life.

The swaddling clothes of an infant hid the Son of God in Bethlehem, and the appearance of bread and wine hides the Reality of Christ dying again on Calvary, in the Mass. This concealment of Himself that God effects with us is operative in His use of the Now to hide His will beneath the aspect of very simple, everyday things. We live our lives in dependence on such casual, common benefits as air and water; so Our Lord is pleased to receive from us in return the thousands of unimportant actions and the trifling details that make up our lives — provided that we see, even in our sorrows, "the shade of His hand outstretched caressingly." Here is the whole secret of sanctity; the method is available to everyone and deserves particular notice from those who ask:

“What can I do?” For many good souls are hungry to do great things for God. They complain that they have no opportunities for heroic virtue, no chance at the apostolate. They would be martyrs; but when a meal is late, or a bus is crowded, when the theater is filled, or the dance postponed, or the bacon overdone, they are upset for a whole day. They miss their opportunities for loving God in the little things He asks of them. Our Lord said: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Lk 16:10).

The Divine Beloved speaks to the soul in a whisper, but because the soul is waiting for a trumpet, it loses His command. All of us would like to make our own crosses — tailor-made trials. But not many of us welcome the crosses God sends. Yet it is in doing perfectly the little chores He gives that saints find holiness. The big, world-shattering things many of us imagine we would like to do for God might, in the end, feed only our egotism. On the other hand, to accept the crosses of our state of life because they come from an all-loving God is to have taken the most important step in the reformation of the world, namely, the reformation of the *self*. Sanctity can be built out of patient endurance of the incessant grumbling of a spouse, the boss’s habit of smoking a pipe at the office, the noise the children make with their soup, the unexpected illness, the failure to find a marital partner, the inability to get rich. All these can become occasions of merit and be made into prayers if they are borne patiently for love of One Who bears so patiently with us, despite our shortcomings, our failures, and our sins.

It is not hard to put up with others’ foibles when one realizes how much God has to put up with from us. There is a legend that one day Abraham was visited in the desert by an Arab, who set up loud complaints of the food, the lodging, the bed, and the wine that his generous host had offered him. Finally, Abraham became exasperated and was about to put him out. God appeared to Abraham at that moment and said: “Abraham, I have stood this man for forty years; can’t you put up with him for one day?”

To accept the duty of this moment for God is to touch Eternity, to escape from time. This habit of embracing the Now and glorifying

God through its demands is an act of the loving will. We do not need an intellectual knowledge of God's plan in order to accept it. When St. Paul was converted he asked merely: "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" We can be warmed by a fire without knowing the chemistry of combustion, and we can be cured by a medicine without knowing its prescription. The divine will, pouring into the soul of a simple paralytic resigned to suffering, will give him a far greater understanding of theology than a professor will get from a lifetime of theoretical curiosity about religion that he does not practice. The good thief and the bad thief on the cross had the same crisis of fear and suffering — one of them complained and lost his chance for heaven that day; the other spiritualized the brief moment of suffering. Some souls win peace and sanctity from the same trials that make others rebels and nervous wrecks.

God cannot seize our wills or force us to use our trials advantageously, but neither can the devil. We are absolute dictators in deciding whether we wish to offer our will to God. And if we turn it over to God without reservation, He will do great things in us. As a chisel in the hands of Michelangelo can produce a better statue than a chisel in the hands of a child, so the human will becomes more effective when it has become a liege of God than if we try to rule alone. Our wills operating under our own power may be busy about many things, but in the end they come to nothing. Under divine power, the nothingness of our wills becomes effective, beyond our fondest dreams.

The phrase that sanctifies any moment is "Thy will be done." It was that *fiat* of our Savior in Gethsemane that initiated our redemption; it was the *fiat* of Our Lady that opened the way to the Incarnation. The word cuts all the guy ropes that attach us to the familiar, narrow things we know; it unfurls all our sails to the possibilities of the moment, and it carries one along to whatever port God wills. To say and mean "Thy will be done" is to put an end to all complaining; for whatever the moment brings to us now bears the imprint of the divine will.

There are great subjective advantages to such an act of resignation to God's will. The first is this: We escape from the power that the