

Discussion Question and Answers for Treasure in Clay,
the Autobiography of Archbishop Fulton Sheen

It is recommended that the size of a book club discussion group of Treasure in Clay not be less than 6 persons nor more than 12 persons to allow everyone to take part. If the group discusses three chapters for each weekly session, the 21 chapters of Treasure in Clay can be read in seven weeks.

The discussion questions for each chapter are in normal text. The suggested answers are marked in bold text. Individual groups may come up with different answers to the suggested discussion questions.

Chapter 1

Read 2 Corinthians 4:5-7 and comment on the meaning of the title of the autobiography. Reflect on an example of the differences between the way we are seen by others, the way we see ourselves, and the way God sees us. Give an example of a scripture passage that has told the tale of your life.

Sheen recognized that he was only the clay pot in which Christ the treasure was contained. The quote keeps Sheen grounded in humility, lest the pot think that it was the treasure. We are often not good judges of others or of ourselves. The world often says “things that are too bad to be true or too good to be true.” Neither is usually true. This is why it’s better to be concerned about how God sees us, which is the real truth. Personal scripture passages may vary.

Chapter 2

What virtues did Sheen learn from his parents? From Bishop Spalding? Reflect on the importance of Sheen’s broad passion for learning. Comment on Sheen’s interaction with Dr. Alexander who was known in the world not because of truth, but because of novelty. Sheen was not interested in novelty as much as the truth. What is the world today interested in?

From his parents, Sheen learned the value of hard work and religion, honesty, discipline, the virtue of religion, the recitation of the rosary. He learned of their love for him through their self-denial for their children. From Bishop Spalding, Sheen experienced kindness and patience when he expected to be reprimanded in anger. He learned of a Bishop’s love for his flock.

Sheen constant spent time reading and learning. In Louvain, he learned “metaphysics, experimental psychology, rational psychology, cosmology, Aristotle, modern space and time” and many other things. His learning allowed him to apply what he knew to his preaching about God.

Dr. Alexander wanted to be novel and taught implicitly that God was not perfect. Rather than wanting to be novel, Sheen wanted more to know the truth. Sheen was more concerned about the truth, whether or not he would impress anyone with his insights.

Ironically, his insights into the truth, which is from God, did impress the world more than Dr. Alexander ever did.

The world today focuses on the self, one's own reputation, and on possessing every novelty. Traditional truths and values are often ignored as antiquated and obsolete.

Chapter 3

Reflect on how Sheen heard the Lord's voice, like the biblical story of Samuel.

Sheen gave up a full scholarship to enter seminary. Reflect on what the Lord has asked you to give up for your vocation.

Describe the three stages in discovering a vocation using the biblical call of Isaiah.

Have you ever encouraged someone to become a priest? What happened?

Samuel heard the voice of God in its persistence, calmness, and peace of soul, even if he didn't recognize the voice at first. This was the voice that told Sheen to give up his university scholarship to go to seminary, because that was what God wanted him to do, not what Sheen wanted to do.

The call of Isaiah was first an experience of God's holiness, second of our unworthiness, and third of our response after God has blotted out our sins.

Answers about one's own sacrifice or one's own encouragement to the priesthood will vary.

Chapter 4

What made Sheen successful as a parochial vicar at St. Patrick Parish, Peoria?

Reflect on Sheen's desire build up Catholic University "to high standards" and not tearing it down "to meet a situation." How should we be approaching the problems in the Church today?

How did Sheen handle political controversies in academia at Catholic University of America. Describe what we learn about his character.

At St. Patrick, Parish, Sheen encouraged people in confession to come to daily Mass. He taught through dedicated preaching. Most importantly, he accepted his assignment wholeheartedly since he believed that the will of God was found in obedience. His dedication to the Eucharistic Holy Hour (not mentioned in this chapter) would also be part of his success.

Sheen always believed in holding up high standards, both at Catholic University, but also in his personal life. Lowering standards often seems right and prudent, but Sheen preferred to take the narrow path. We can accommodate the culture by lowering ourselves to meet the world and lowering the demands of the Gospel. Rather, we should hold up the Gospel and call the world to rise up to God.

Sheen did not give into gossip, but remained honest and charitable, which is no small task. He demonstrated true integrity, even if it would potentially cost him.

Chapter 5

How did Sheen stay fresh in his teaching and not become stale?

What techniques did he use to make his lectures engaging? Can you apply any of these techniques personally?

Sheen never stopped learning and did not settle for repeating something he had worked on before. He destroyed his notes and forced himself to recreate his teaching anew every year. He spent many hours preparing and rehearsing for every hour he spent teaching. Sheen stood when he taught. He didn't teach with notes, but committed the points to memory, even at the risk of forgetting what he was to say. He made some points with a soft voice and not a loud voice, to draw the attention of the listener. He used humor to break up his talks.

Sheen challenged his students by not talking down to them but challenging them to excellence, such as his talk on chastity to college students after a campus riot the previous day.

Chapter 6

How did Sheen approach the "Catholic Hour" radio audience differently from the "Life is Worth Living" television audience?

In the future, what is the third approach to a digital audience that will be necessary in the future? Do you think Sheen was correct about this future prediction?

How did he prepare his sermons?

If you haven't visited Sheen's tomb at St. Mary's Cathedral, Peoria, Illinois, do so to see if the wish he expressed in this chapter was fulfilled.

The radio is like hearing the Word as in the Old Testament. Television is like seeing the Word incarnate as the Gospel is taught by the person of Jesus in the New Testament. He took a direct approach with a Christian audience on radio, speaking about God and his revelation. On radio, he was teaching in the name of the Bishop's Conference. He took an indirect approach with the wider and more mixed television audience, in which he spoke about a common experience and lead the audience to God.

The third approach in the digital age would be the anthropological approach, starting with man, his sufferings, and the disorder within himself in order to lead man to God. This will use the insights of our psychological age to discover our need for God.

He prepared his sermons in front of the Blessed Sacrament. He talked his sermon over with our Lord to discover its weaknesses and what he should say. He continued to feed his mind by reading which gave him material to draw from in his homilies.

The letters "JMJ" are written on the tomb of Sheen in St. Mary's Cathedral, Peoria, Illinois, as Sheen had asked.

Chapter 7

Sheen succinctly summarizes his opposition to Communism in the second paragraph of this chapter, after carefully studying Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Summarize his objections to Communism.

What prophecies did Sheen make about Communism in the years following World War II?

According to Sheen, what were the noble religious convictions of the Russians and how were they corrupted by Communism?

Sheen summarized Communism succinctly: Marx believed that man has been alienated from his true nature by religion and private property. Hence, Communism can only restore man to his “true nature” by abolishing private property and religion. Communism is not about distributing the wealth to care of the common man. It necessarily must demand atheism as well.

Sheen predicted that Eastern Europe would fall to Communism under the Russians. Poland would be caught between the Nazis and the Communists.

Sheen noted that the Russians were passionate about 1) the call to universal brotherhood, 2) the need for sacrifice and pain, and 3) the need to week God’s Will. Under Communism, 1) the brotherhood became the revolutionary proletariat, 2) sacrifice became violence, and 3) the Will of God became the will of a dictator.

Chapter 8

Sheen said that becoming a bishop was more honorable in his time than in the early Church. Is the life of a bishop held in high honor in our world today?

How did Sheen see the responsibilities of a bishop?

What dangers must a bishop avoid? How does a bishop avoid these dangers.

The opinion of bishops today may vary. However, the reputation of bishops has suffered to the extent that they have mishandled the issue of clergy abuse.

Bishops are to be fishers of men and shepherds of the sheep. Because of their higher rank, they are to be more the servants of their people.

Bishops must avoid empty glamor. Bishops must not reflect themselves, but Christ. Bishops must remember that they are the Father’s gift to the Son, that the Son calls them to continue his mission, and that the Lord is not always pleased with his bishops.

Bishops are strengthened by remaining connected to Peter who was called to strengthen his brothers, and by being united in charity to one another in mutual support like the washing of each other’s feet.

Chapter 9

Sheen did not want to hoard his wealth, but to spend himself. Reflect on how you have been asked to spend yourself for God according to your gifts and your state in life.

Sheen contrasts the West with the Third World. In what ways is the West rich, and in what ways is the West poor?

Reflect on Sheen’s anecdotes and how you can serve the needs of the Church in the missions and in the lives of the poor?

Personal answers will vary.

The West suffers from hunger of the spirit, while the rest of the world suffers from hunger for bread. The West must keep in mind both social justice and individual justice, saving

society and saving souls. It is not enough only to look after the poor and the love of neighbor. We must also remember the love of God and the call to holiness.

Chapter 10

What insights did Sheen gain from traveling in the footsteps of St. Paul?

How was Sheen's understanding of the Gospel enriched by traveling in the Holy Land?

What other lessons did Sheen learn from his travels?

Have you visited any of the sites that Sheen mentioned in this chapter? What lessons did you learn from your visit?

Sheen learned from St. Paul who was called to evangelize the world. He learned that he must mention the name of Christ and his crucifixion, and that preaching the Word will provoke antagonism.

Sheen learned various lessons from the Holy Land, bringing to life aspects of the stories contained in Scripture. Answers will vary. Answers regarding other lessons learned or places visited will also vary.

Chapter 11

It was later evident that Sheen suffered greatly because of opposition he had in Rochester, especially from the clergy. How does Sheen speak about the clergy and the laity in Rochester? What does this say about his character?

Sheen described the spirit of the 1960s: the shift from the individual to the social and the emphasis on the "me." While the world focused on social sins and lost the sense of personal sin, no one can completely ignore the personal struggle against evil in every human heart. Do you believe this an accurate description of the 1960s or even our world today?

Instead of emphasizing his accomplishments (churches or schools built, money raised), Sheen emphasized several of his initiatives that turned out to be failures. Which of these stood out to you and what does this say about Sheen?

Describe Sheen's attitude at age 75 when he retired. Do most people today take the same approach to retirement?

Sheen is universally positive regarding his interactions with the clergy and the laity in Rochester. He appreciated the bond with his priests who pray for him by name every day in the Eucharistic Prayer. He referred to his priests as a source of consolation.

Opinions about the 1960s and the world today will vary.

Examples of Sheen's failed efforts will vary. Of particular note was the gift of St. Brigid Church to provide housing for the poor. Sheen had a noble intention but encountered some of the harshest opposition from the faithful.

Sheen did not "retire"; he "retreaded." Retirement was not a time to cease activity, but a time to commit himself to different activity. He continued to focus on prayer, the interior life, and those apostolates that were available to him.

Chapter 12

Sheen gave several reasons for making a daily holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament. What reasons impressed you the most?

What fruits come from the daily holy hour as described by Sheen or from your own experience?

In what way is a priest's vocation especially preserved by the holy hour? What insight does Sheen give about Judas and how he lost his priestly vocation?

The Holy Hour was an act of reparation united to the act of Our Lord. The Holy Hour is an hour of companionship with Jesus, not an hour of activity for him. The Holy Hour transforms us into the likeness of Jesus.

The fruits of the Holy Hour are joy, a growth in divine love, like the fire of the burning bush that reinvigorates but does not consume, and personal knowledge of Christ.

Judas didn't lose his vocation over greed or avarice, but over the Eucharist. A priest must love the Eucharist if he wishes to preserve his vocation.

Chapter 13

Celibacy and marriage are different vocations but both focused on love. How did Sheen explain this truth? Does the world today understand this truth? Would Sheen support those today who call for the ordination of married priests?

Sheen described the fruits of celibacy not as a fruitless and arid emptiness but as a greater and joyful union with God. Explain this insight.

Why are priests who leave the priesthood to get married often unhappy?

In the last paragraph, what is the connection between the recognition of God and our own sense of unworthiness?

The celibate and the married person are both called to love. The celibate loves God immediately while the married person loves God mediated through the spouse. For those who are called, celibacy is a gift from God. The world does not understand this because we live in a sensate culture. Because Sheen sees the priesthood in connection with being a victim and loving God completely, he would not support married priests.

The emptiness of the celibate in not having a spouse must be filled with a love of Christ that is lifegiving.

The ex-priest who marries discovers that he must make many sacrifices as a married man, though he has betrayed the best of his first loves. For this reason, he will be unhappy.

We recognize in God his perfect beauty and perfect love, which make our lack of perfection and our unworthiness all the more evident.

Chapter 14

Compared to Sheen's other works (teaching, making converts, missions, writing, radio and television) what made giving retreats especially important to him?

How could Sheen tell when a priest on retreat was going to leave the priesthood?

Why did Sheen consider retreats for those in prison so successful?

He learned about himself and his own priesthood when giving retreats to other priests.

Priests may enjoy hearing about liturgy, social action, psychology, or other topics. However, the priest who is uncomfortable hearing about Jesus or the Eucharist is someone who was going to leave the priesthood.

Prisoners know that they are sinners and are very ready to hear about Jesus' mercy.

Chapter 15

Give some examples of the respect that Sheen had for the different Popes. How did this strengthen his faith in the Church?

What did the Popes say to Sheen about being a "prophet of the times," or about suffering?

Although Sheen concluded that he "had done little" in his service of the Church, what did the Popes say about him? What did St. John Paul II say to Sheen on October 2, 1979? (Read the funeral homily at the end of the epilogue for this answer.)

Between the extremes of liberal freedom (doing what you please) and totalitarianism (doing what you must), Sheen calls us to an enlightened conscience (doing what you ought). According to Sheen, how does John Paul II call us to live the Kingdom of God, especially in the United States?

Sheen had a mystical experience in seminary of total faith in God and total faith in his body, the Church. He saw this concretely expressed in the person of the Pope, the visible head of the Church. This was the basis for his indefatigable devotion to the Holy Father. Individual examples will vary.

Pius XII referred to Sheen as "a prophet of the times" who "will have a high place in Heaven." John XXIII told Sheen, "You have suffered much, which will bring you to a high place in Heaven."

Before seeing Paul VI, Sheen asked whether he had really done much to serve the Church or cast fire on the earth. Paul VI later praised him for his dedication to the Eucharist, to saving souls, and to the missions.

John Paul II told Sheen, "You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus. You are a loyal son of the Church."

Sheen said that John Paul II was sent to the Church in the new millennium to respond to the false mysticism of our times. In the United States, we have radical individualism with deep social divisions. John Paul II was a sign of contradiction as a man of faith that fascinated the world.

Chapter 16

Explain the three types of conversion or metanoia: those who seek God without being aware, those who acknowledge God but on the edge of their lives, and those who receive supernatural enlightenment.

Which of the conversion stories made the biggest impact on you and why? (One of the stories was from a parish census that Sheen performed at St. Patrick, Peoria.)

What did Sheen mean when he said most people do not have trouble with the Creed but with the commandments? Is this still true today?

Those who seek God without being aware experience conversion but without any clear sense of direction. Those who acknowledge God on the edge of their lives know that they need to reform, but it does not penetrate the heart. Those who receive supernatural enlightenment feel a deep need for repentance from the heart.

Stories about individual conversions may vary.

Being told what to believe doesn't touch the heart as much as being told how to act. The Creed tells us what we should accept in our intellect, but the commandments tell us that we have done wrong. The Creed doesn't tell us that we are bad, but the commandments tell us when we have sinned, and this wounds the heart.

Chapter 17

What did you learn from Sheen's description of Vatican II that you didn't know previously?

Explain the balance between individualism and socialism, between soul-winning and society-saving, between love of God and love of neighbor.

Sheen worried about a corruption of the fruits of Vatican II. Give an example of a misreading or misinterpretation of Vatican II.

Examples will vary.

Vatican II came at a time when the Church needed to remind the world both to love God and neighbor. The love of God tells us that we must individually be virtuous and win individual souls for Christ. The love of neighbor calls us to social progress to save society. Vatican II emphasized that both poles are necessary.

Sheen worried that the demonic would try to pervert the message from Vatican II. He worried about maintaining the tension between the Church giving witness in the world while not becoming of the world. He worried that the world would not listen to the teaching of the council, but rather to the media reports of the council. The "Spirit of Vatican II" is sometimes invoked to assert things that are not found in any document of Vatican II.

Chapter 18

Why do those who are spiritual have a greater sense of humor than the materialists or the worldly?

What examples of Sheen's humor did you most enjoy in this chapter?

How did humor make Sheen more effective as a preacher and teacher?

The spiritual person can have a greater sense of humor about the world, because the spiritual person has something greater than this world to hope for. The materialist is serious because this world is all he has.

Examples of humor will vary.

Humor had the effect of personalizing Sheen and bringing him down to the level of the hearer. Humor breaks up serious topics in order to allow the audience to continue to give him their attention.

Chapter 19

Sheen suffered often because of conflicts within the Church, whether with Cardinal Spellman or with his own clergy in the Diocese of Rochester. Read the foreword by Raymond Aroyo for examples. What does it say about Sheen that he deliberately remains silent about his sufferings?

What are several of the reasons Sheen gives in this chapter for remaining silent in the face of wrongs?

Sheen personified the victimhood of Christ who bore his sufferings. It is a testament to Sheen's holiness and integrity that he did not air his grievances.

Among the reasons for remaining silent: Complaints are unworthy of the one who forgave his crucifiers. The Lord bids us to absorb any wrongs and bear them patiently. We must avoid the danger of self-justification. If we want the Lord to throw away our sins, we must be ready to throw away our own self-righteousness. If we are punished when innocent, we should bear it because we committed another wrong for which we were not punished (like King David and Shimei).

Chapter 20

Give some examples of the role of Mary in Sheen's life.

Explain how Mary suffered with her Son, and how Sheen experienced suffering on Marian feast days.

On what day did Sheen die and was his prayer answered?

How does Mary safeguard celibacy for a priest?

Some examples of Sheen's devotion to Mary: Sheen was dedicated to Mary at his baptism.

His episcopal motto was "Grant that I may come to Thee through Mary." His use of JMJ was to honor Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. He honored Mary at every Saturday at Mass.

Mary suffered at the foot of the cross with Jesus. Sheen experienced several illnesses on Marian feast days and offered up his sufferings like Mary.

Sheen died on Sunday, December 9, 1979, one day after the Immaculate Conception which fell on Saturday that year.

For the priest, Mary is the ideal woman. A priest who loves Mary will not be tempted by other women. Mary was given to John at the cross, and she becomes real for the priest when she teaches him how to love like Christ.

Chapter 21

What was Sheen's baptism name? What do the names "Fulton" and "Sheen" mean?

Describe the "First Look" of Our Lord toward St. Peter.

What did this "First Look" mean for Sheen?

Describe the second stage, "Profession with the Fear of the Cross," in the life of St. Peter.

How did Sheen experience this "Fear of the Cross" and what did he learn?

Describe the "Second Look" of Our Lord toward St. Peter.

Why does Sheen say that Judas would have been saved by the "Second Look" if he had returned?

What did this "Second Look" teach Sheen about being a priest and victim?

Sheen was baptized “Peter” and confirmed “John.” In Gaelic, “Fulton” means “war” and “Sheen” means “peace.”

In the first look, Peter recognized his sinfulness but was chosen by Jesus nonetheless. Sheen was chosen to be a priest, in spite of his own unworthiness and received a new identity in Christ.

In the second stage, Peter professes Jesus is the Christ, but he denies the cross. Sheen was a priest and enjoyed the honors he received, but he hadn't yet embraced the identity of the priest-victim. A priest should have scars from serving the people like our Lord had.

In the second look, Jesus looked at Peter after his three-fold denial and saw the Lord's mercy and pity. Judas never saw Our Lord after his betrayal and went to the chief priests for redemption by returning the silver. Judas couldn't be redeemed by the chief priests and hung himself. When Sheen embraced the cross, he discovered the fruits of uniting his own trials and sufferings with those of Our Lord.