

Discussion Question 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.

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.

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?

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?

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.

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?

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.

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?

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.

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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.

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?

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?

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?

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?