Missionary Witnesses:

Venerable Servant of God Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen
National Director, The Society for the Propagation of the Faith (1950 to 1966)

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen: asleep on a concrete floor.

It was on a visit to Uganda, East Africa, when Archbishop Sheen stayed in a small center where priests would come after being out in the missions for a long period of time. That particular night, there were so many missionaries coming and going that he found himself a spot on the floor near the front door. And slept. He tells the story in his autobiography, Treasure in Clay: “About four o’clock I was awakened by one of the priests leaving. He carried a large sack on his back. ‘Father, where are you going?’ I inquired. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘When will you be back?’ ‘In about six months.’ He was on his way to establish a new missionary station.” Archbishop Sheen saw him off from his “bed” on the center’s floor.

It was in 1950 that the Holy Father asked this priest to fill the office of national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. One of his early endeavors on behalf of the Missions was MISSION magazine. MISSION gave the then-Monsignor Sheen an excellent way to reach millions of people, helping them to learn about the world situation of the day and about the Church’s missionary work among the world’s poorest. He strove to help those millions love that work as he did. “Our Blessed Lord died not for one nation, nor for one people... The primary motive of all missionary work is to bring the Redemption of Our Lord to all human hearts.”

Through MISSION, Archbishop Sheen worked to forge a strong link between Catholics in the United States (called to be missionary as all Christians are called) and the Missions. “MISSION never asks you to give,” Archbishop Sheen wrote in 1962. “It asks you to sacrifice... The world will be won to Christ and the Missions will prosper only to the extent that each and every one of us takes up the Cross daily and follows Him.” In asking for monetary help, he often prompted the sacrificing of luxuries in order to help the basic needs of the Church’s missionary work. In a 1961 issue of MISSION, a letter was printed...
from a high school student who sent $20: she had given up buying her class ring. Another donor wrote with appealing humor: “I was going to use this $2 to buy a billfold but decided to send you two folded bills instead.”

Often Archbishop Sheen’s “thank you” to a donor was expressed not only in a letter, but in an issue of MISSION as a ‘God Love You’:

GOD LOVE YOU to J.V.S. for $80
“In remembrance of my wife, whom God has taken to Him. May He now give me the grace and help to raise the seven children left in my care.”
(MISSION, May-June 1962)

“The richest offering to the Missions,” he said in a 1960 issue of MISSION, “is suffering. We cannot become like Our Lord in His Wisdom, His Innocence or His Power; but we can become like Him in His agonies. Pains, patiently borne in union with Our Savior, are worth more than any other gift.”

During his time as national director of the Propagation of the Faith, Archbishop Sheen narrated films on the Missions to help people see “in action” the missionary work that so needed their participation. He shared with readers of MISSION very moving letters that came to the Propagation of the Faith from missionaries. He visited mission lands all over the world, but even at home their needs were never far from his mind. Each afternoon, kneeling, he led his office staff in praying the rosary for the Missions.

In 1966, at the end of his term as national director he wrote to readers of his “God Love You” column in diocesan newspapers: “During 16 years I have spent myself and was spent for the sake of the Missions. All that I received through television and personal gifts was given to the Society, and at the end of my life if I have anything it will be given to the Propagation of the Faith. I beg a prayer from you and I promise to pray for you. Bye now! God Love You!”

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