

4 Ordinary A 2008 **St. Raphael, Springdale, AR**

I think I have read every book that was ever written by Archbishop Fulton Sheen. But my favorite book will always be his last, his autobiography called *Treasure in Clay*. For those of you who do not know Fulton Sheen, he was an extremely popular and very charismatic bishop in the last century here in the United States. Of course, he was not **nearly** as popular as Dc. Chuck, but then again, who is? But the reason I like *Treasure in Clay* is that there he really tried to grow in humility, a virtue that he lacked. I mean here was a guy who had it all: he was very intelligent, an engaging speaker, he had a delightful sense of humor, he was extremely handsome, and an archbishop to boot! Hard to be humble with gifts like that. I'm reminded of that country music song that goes: "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror, 'cause I get better looking each day. To know me is to love me, I must be a heck of a man. Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble, but I'm doing the best that I can." Well, in this book, Fulton Sheen candidly admits that he's not "perfect in every way." And he finds the secret to true humility: not paying attention to what others say about you. He wrote: "I have learned not to believe newspaper clippings and not to be carried away by what the world thinks of me. The more we accept popular estimates, the less time we spend on our knees examining our conscience." In other words, humility comes when we stop listening to others and start listening to our conscience.

In the gospel today Jesus teaches His disciples the Beatitudes, and gives them a perfect "recipe for humility." Jesus urges His disciples to be "poor in spirit," to be "meek," to be "merciful," and to be "peacemakers." But notice how he summarizes everything by telling His disciples to disregard what others think about them. He says: "Blessed are you when others insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me." In other words, don't worry about what others think – whether they praise you or condemn you – instead, worry about what God thinks of you, what your conscience thinks of you, then you will truly be meek and humble.

Now, I will confess to you that I, too, struggle with humility, especially when I hear some of the things that little children in our parish say about me. Recently another priest was celebrating the Sunday Mass, and one little girl turned to her mother and asked: "Mommy, where's the real Jesus?" A couple of nights ago, I was visiting a family for supper. The little girl repeatedly called me Jesus (now mind you, this was a different little girl!). She said: "Jesus, do you want to see my room?" "Jesus, watch me jumping!" "Jesus, I drew this picture for you." What can I say?! But you know, over the years I've learned to balance the praises I've received, and not get conceited. I keep a file of all the complaints I've gotten from parishioners. You know, I've been ordained almost 12 years now, and that's gotten to be a rather large file! Every now and then I take out that file and re-read some of those letters. They remind me that I have made poor

decisions; I've said and done things that have hurt and offended people. Some people have even left the Church because of me. Those letters provide a more sober assessment of my priesthood, and it's not all good. Over the years I have tried to act like Jesus; but I'm also aware that at times I have acted more like Judas.

My friends, in 3 days we will celebrate Ash Wednesday and begin the season of Lent. Lent is a time to disregard our newspaper clippings and what the world says of us, and listen carefully to our conscience. It's time to acknowledge humbly that while we try to do what Jesus would do, we often do what Judas would do: and so, we are lazy and lustful, we are greedy and gluttonous, we talk too much and pray too little, we are proud, prejudiced and impatient. In fact, Lent begins with the greatest of all signs of humility: ashes on our forehead. Do you remember what the priest says as he puts the ashes on you? He says: "Remember man, you are dust, and to dust you shall return." For 40 days the Church invites her children to shut out the sights and sounds of the world, and to listen attentively to the whispering of our conscience.

Like Fulton Sheen, we, too, have been given a precious treasure – the gift of grace – but we carry it in fragile clay. My friends, this Lent let's be honest with ourselves: you are not a saint, and I am not Jesus. But at least we can both be a little more humble.

Praised be Jesus Christ!