Larry Morris, general counsel at The Catholic University of America, was just 19 when he invited Archbishop Fulton Sheen to give a talk at the Midwest university where Morris was a junior. The day of the lecture in September 1976, Morris and his girlfriend picked up Archbishop Sheen, who invited them to join him for tea and toast.

At a small restaurant near campus, he was “perfectly content talking to us,” notes Morris. “There was no foot tapping, no sense that he had to be somewhere else.” In fact, like “a kind uncle,” he shared a piece of advice that has stuck with Morris: Always check out The New York Times book review section, so you know what everyone else is reading.

At 81, the archbishop had slowed down since the days when an estimated 30 million viewers tuned in to his national TV show Life Is Worth Living, but he still drew an audience of several hundred people to the talk later that day.

On Oct. 2, 1979, two months before Archbishop Sheen’s death, Pope John Paul II held an audience at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City, where he embraced the clergyman. The Pope said, “You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a loyal son of the Church.”

When Archbishop Sheen passed away on Dec. 9, 1979, he was eulogized as the world’s first televangelist who touched the lives of millions. In June 2012, Pope Benedict XVI named him venerable. But he is not the only alumnus who may be a saint. He is one of six alums whose causes are making their way through the canonization process.

As Pope Francis prepares to canonize Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II on April 27, Catholic University is honoring Archbishop Sheen, whose cause is advancing quickly, according to the executive director of the foundation that promotes his canonization. This semester, the student group Modern Catholic Authors will present the second in its series of talks on Archbishop Sheen.

Sister Maria Frassati Jakupcak, O.P., co-chair of a University committee that is planning several spring 2015 events to commemorate Archbishop Sheen, says she hopes that Catholic University students “will find in him both a role model and a friend.”

A religious in residence at Regan Hall and a teaching fellow pursuing her doctorate in English, she notes that Archbishop Sheen’s cause “is a reflection of Catholic University’s unique place in the history of American Catholicism. This is an institution that produces saints.”

Born May 8, 1895, to farmer Newt Sheen and his wife, Delia, the future archbishop was ordained a priest of the Peoria diocese on Sept. 20, 1919. As a seminarian, he started his lifelong practice of spending an hour in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. When he was hired by the University in 1926, he taught theology and philosophy, usually in McMahon Hall, Room 112. The May 25, 1932, edition of The Tower student newspaper notes that his sermon in Gibbons [Hall] Chapel on Ascension Day “will remain a chapter in the life of each senior.”

At the same time, his reputation as a national speaker was growing. In 1926, Archbishop Sheen spoke on the radio for the first time, giving a series of Sunday evening Lenten sermons on a New York station. Four years later, he made his first appearance on The Catholic Hour broadcast by NBC. In 1952, he made his TV debut on Life Is Worth Living, giving weekly lectures on topics that blended theology, philosophy, and politics.

Maria Mazanga, the University’s education archivist, Ph.D. 2000, says that his popularity...
as a speaker and radio personality was pivotal in bringing Catholics into "the national dialogue" on religious and political topics of the day. Little Rome and Catholic University were "the matrix for that transformation," she notes. "Catholics had pretty much been excluded at the national level," says Mautner. "Fusing Catholic and American ideals in a fatherly way, he instilled in them a sense of confidence that enabled their inclusion into American society.

In TV episodes available on YouTube and EWTN, the silver-haired archbishop with piercing blue eyes is dressed in full clerical garb, with a scarlet cap and zucchetto. He usually starts his talk with a joke and often ends with dramatic hand gestures. His only prop is a blackboard. Sister Maria Frassati notes that long before Pope Francis started tweeting, "he was a pioneer of the new evangelization," using the media of radio and TV to spread the word of God. Not always perfect, Archbishop Sheen struggled at times with pride. In his book on the archbishop, Thomas C. Reeves notes that in 1928 the prelate hailed a clipping service to document his activities. "He was proud of the impression the farm boy from Peoria was making in Catholic circles," the book notes.

In September 1950, Archbishop Sheen resigned from his teaching position at Catholic University to become national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. He led the society until 1966, raising hundreds of millions of dollars for missionary activities around the world and personally donating $10 million of his own earnings. That year a falling-out with Cardinal Francis Spellman led to Archbishop Sheen's reassignment as bishop of Rochester, Cardinal Francis Spellman led to Archbishop Sheen's reassignment as bishop of Rochester, his greatest strength was not in the perfection of his oratory, nor in the breadth of his knowledge, nor in the extent of his charities, but in the life of prayer that gave all these lesser things their meaning."
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As a pallbearer at a funeral, Lt. Bob Wood was one of four men who picked up the litter that held Father Kapaun. "Wasting away from dysentery, pneumonia, and a blood clot that had caused his leg to swell, the priest smiled and blessed his captors, saying, "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do."

Wood, then 23, says he was frightened as he carried the priest, who "stood out like a bright light in a dark room."

Just 35 when he died on May 23, 1951, Father Kapaun was buried in an unmarked grave near the Manchurian border, overlooking the Yalu River. His good works continued to bear fruit in his native Kansas.

A Chaplain Who Wielded the Mightiest Weapon

REV. EMIL KAPAUN, SERVANT OF GOD

Chinese guards at POW Camp No. 5 near Pysokong in North Korea were ordered by the U.S. Army chaplain, Rev. Emil Kapaun. Since his capture, he had defied them repeatedly by holding prayer services for the men in his care. Even worse, he was unafraid, even serene, when they taunted him about his Catholic faith. In late May 1951, the guards ordered that he be taken to the death house near the prison camp. Knowing that he would die there, Father Kapaun’s men pleaded with the guards to let him stay. They refused.

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