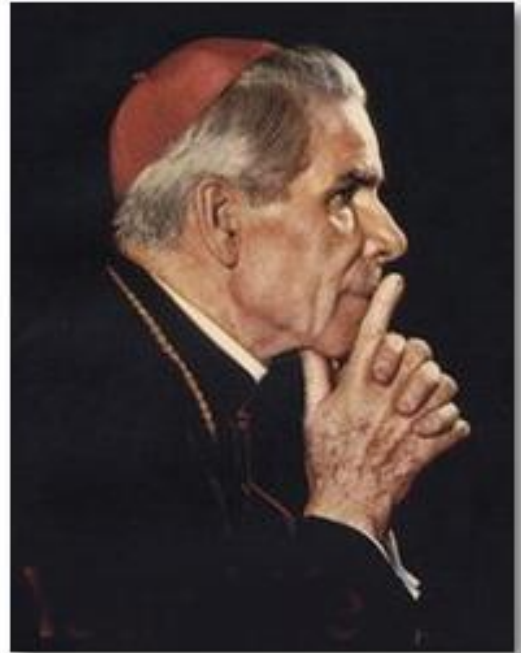
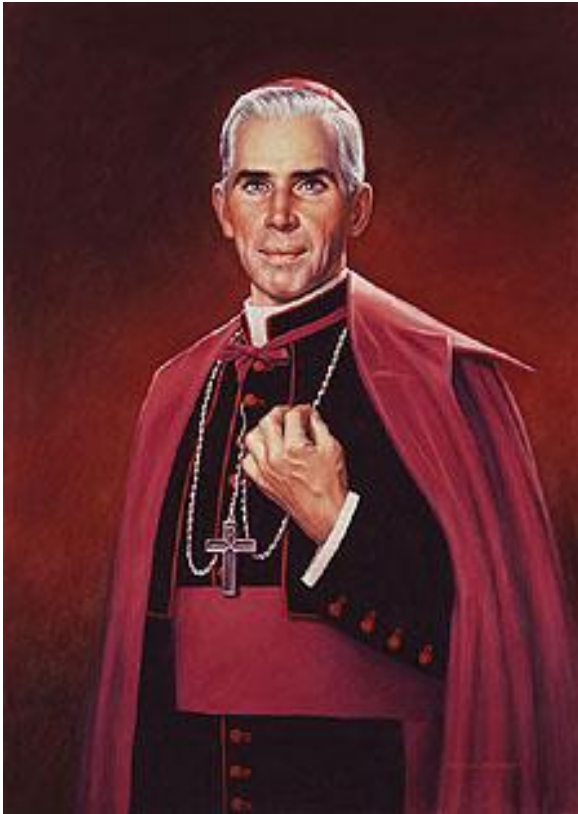


A Summary of Life is Worth Living by Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen



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Written exclusively for the Goldhead Group.
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General Overview

Life is Worth Living is a collection of transcribed telecasts, originally given by Bishop Fulton Sheen in the 1950's. Sheen saw in television a great opportunity to provide the American public with something lacking in current programming: "a reasoned presentation of a serious idea, to fill up the void of hearts and the yearning of minds for a pattern and a way of life." The resulting lectures addressed issues raised by recent scientific, psychological, and political developments, as well as problems common to men of every generation.

Sheen begins by trying to give his listeners a better understanding of their souls. By discussing the distinction between nature and person, the central faculties of intellect, will, and conscience, and the cause and cure of suffering, he creates a picture of the whole human person in all its strengths and weaknesses. He then discusses the need for an overall goal in life, and the way to find one and achieve it. With the resulting inward harmony, men can turn to their neighbors and treat them in accordance with this new-found understanding of human nature. Finally, Sheen addresses the greatest political threat of the day: Communism. As a philosophy directly contrary to the Christian belief in the worth of the individual, Communism has to be understood and conclusively refuted. It is the duty of the American people to uphold its own rights and those of the whole world, but it must first make itself worthy of this high calling.

The Human Soul

Like animals, men have passions and sensations, but they also have something animals do not: knowledge and love. Knowledge is the operation of the intellect, and its object is truth. Love is the operation of the will, and its object is goodness. These two human faculties operate differently, and they have different effects depending on what is to be known or loved. The intellect works by drawing its object to itself. To do this, however, is to bring the object to the level of the intellect. If the object is lower than man—such as the natural world—it is dignified and, in a way, "spiritualized," by being drawn into the nobility of the mind. But if the object is higher than man—such as the Trinity—it is necessarily degraded by being oversimplified to fit the human intellect. This is why we have to resort to imperfect analogies, when the truth is much more sublime and mysterious. The will, on the other hand, goes out to the object it loves. Instead of elevating or degrading its object, it itself is elevated or degraded, depending on the worth of the object it decides to love. If a man loves something below his level—sensual pleasures, for instance—he will descend to its level. If he loves something higher than himself, he will rise to its level, and he must meet that level's demands in order to do so. This is why it is so important to have good heroes and ideals, and it is the meaning of Christ's warning: "where your treasure is, there is your heart also."

The will, then, can elevate or degrade the soul, but the intellect cannot. This is why knowledge of God does not necessarily bring sanctity. All theologians know how to be saints, but only those who *will* it actually achieve sainthood. The two faculties are related, however. Although knowledge does not guarantee love, one cannot love a person without knowing him first. But once this elementary knowledge has made love possible, that love creates a deeper knowledge. Thus, both powers of the soul cooperate to produce the kind of deep understanding that the long-married couple has of each other, and that the saint has of God.

Intellect and will belong to—and, in fact, constitute—human *nature*, because they are what separates humans from animals. The exercise of the powers, however, belongs to the *person*; it is the person who knows and loves. The nature is "the principle of activity," while the person is the agent, and therefore the source of responsibility. Sheen deals mainly with the properties of human nature, because they are relevant to all men.

There are three basic tensions in man: anxiety, contradiction, and temptation. *Anxiety* results from the disproportion between the infinite happiness man desires and the finite happiness he is actually able to attain. This stems from the tension between the spiritual and the material in man, the divide between the eternal and the temporal which will never be resolved in this world. *Contradiction* is the pull between good and evil in

every man, the war between pleasures of the spirit and pleasures of the flesh. A *temptation* is a suppressed evil. It knocks at the door of the will, asking to be admitted to the soul and allowed to provoke it to sin. Temptations are not sins, because they are inherent in human nature. It is not wrong to have temptations; it is only wrong to give in to them.

In addition to these three tensions, humanity is subject to a whole range of fears. Fear is the emotion that we feel in the face of a real or imaginary evil; as love is the attraction to good, so fear is the flight from evil. There are two kinds of fear: normal and abnormal. Normal fear is a fear of some external object, but abnormal fear comes internally – from the mind. In some cases, it is caused by suppressed guilt, which makes a man live in fear of punishment, but keeps him from acknowledging his sins and finding peace. Others live in subjective terror because they themselves have been the instruments of terror. This is why murderers cannot trust their partners in crime, and why they often have such cowardly deaths when they are finally brought to justice. A third kind of subjective fear is dread – the fear of nothingness. All men yearn for the infinite, but many do not know how to find it, and doubt that it is even there. They are left to find their own way in the world, terrified of being thrown back into the nothingness they came from, but despairing of any eternal goal to be reached. Dread also has a positive side, however: it can become longing. All fear can turn into fear of God, which brings peace instead of anxiety. Instead of being motivated by fear of punishment – servile fear – we can avoid or repent for sin through fear of offending a loving God – filial fear. By throwing ourselves on God’s mercy, we can free ourselves from all anxiety; as the Bible assures, “Perfect love casteth out fear.”

Fear, then, can be overcome by the love of God; but men can never completely rid themselves of it, because the tensions that cause it are universal. The only way to explain this basic failing of humanity is to posit some historical problem that changed human nature itself. Man is not intrinsically evil, but he is not perfect; his weakened will and darkened intellect show that he is still good, but damaged. An analogy of an orchestra helps explain the nature of this Fall. Man is like a musician playing a symphony written by God. He has free will, so he can play a discordant note that is not part of the score. The orchestra can continue to play, and play perfectly; but the discordant note has been released into the world, and time cannot be turned back. The note will always affect everyone in the universe; but if someone were to reach out from eternity and make it into the first note of a new melody, it would no longer be discordant. This is what happened in the Incarnation. In order to correct the injury done in time, God had to enter time; in order to begin a new melody, He had to become a “musician” Himself; and in order to escape the fallen elements of human nature, He had to be a man without sin. But “Almighty God, having given freedom to man, will not take it away again;” so He asked humanity for permission to begin a new melody, and through Mary it began.

We can deduce the fact that the Fall happened from our perception of evil; but we can discern the good – and combat the corruption in our nature – through another of the soul’s faculties, namely conscience. Conscience is a “judgment of our reason telling us that we ought to do good and avoid evil.” An object is good when it fulfills its highest purpose, so each thing’s good is different. Man’s good is eternal Life, Truth, and Love. He cannot be satisfied with any earthly thing (i.e. life that ends, truth that is incomplete, love that fades away) because he was made for the infinite. But unlike other creatures, which fulfill their purposes by blind instinct, man is given a choice. Conscience identifies the good, urges him to choose it, and convicts him if he does not.

Conscience works by three processes, analogous to American government: legislative, executive, and judicial. The legislative give us the moral law. The executive witnesses our intentions and the consequences of our actions. The judicial confers on us either praise and joy or blame and guilt, depending on the evidence presented by the executive. The source of the moral law by which conscience judges is not man himself, because the dictates of conscience often clash with his desires; nor is it society, for the law often contradicts society’s customs. Since it is universal and absolute, the law must have as its source some omniscient intelligence, which must belong to a person; and since that Person is supreme and absolutely just, he must be God.

Conscience is given to everyone; it is the light which enlightens every man who comes into the world. We all unconsciously appeal to this standard when we say that someone “ought” to act a certain way, or that the way he has acted is wrong. “There is no sense in saying anything is wrong, unless we know what is right.” Thus we are all given the steadying influence of conscience to combat the corruption of the Fall. But because we have free will, we must actively choose to obey conscience and react correctly to the tensions, fears, and temptations that are part of our fallen nature. The first step is humility; the second step is understanding suffering, and meeting it properly; and the third step is character-building.

Humility is the natural state for a fallen human, for “being humble implies that our eye recognizes the need of light, our reason admits the need of faith, and our whole being the guidance of the Eternal Law of God.” Humility is not servility or underestimation; it is an acknowledgement of our true standing before God. In order to appreciate the beauty and bigness of the world, we must realize our own “littleness.” If we inflate our egos in defiance of the infinite, we will never be able to see that there are great truths outside of ourselves; and if we think we know everything, we can never be taught the things we need to learn.

By not recognizing our true status, we fall into either outright pride or false humility. We become very critical of others, in order to make ourselves feel great by comparison. We refuse to acknowledge responsibility for our sins and our need for a savior, when the Savior Himself gave us the ultimate example of humility. In the Incarnation, Jesus became man and confined Himself to human boundaries. He made Himself a creature whose very nature demands humility. God could be human, but the proud man demands something higher; God could lower Himself, but the proud man cannot even be content at his own level.

Suffering seems as much a part of human nature as the need for humility, but it is harder to understand. Humility is the proper state for humanity, but suffering often seems undeserved. Once we understand the reason for it, however, we can learn how to transcend it. The mystery of suffering can never be fully explained in this world, but the Passion shows that it is somehow necessary: “Without Good Friday there would be no Easter Sunday.” We know that this is the way the world works, but we do not know *why*. Job asks the same question in the Old Testament, and God answers him, “tell me, since thou art so wise, was it thou or I designed earth’s plan, measuring it out with the line?” God’s reasons are incomprehensible to man; we know only that suffering is necessary, and that we must therefore learn how to meet it.

Suffering makes a man concentrate on himself, and this can lead to selfishness; but it can also be an opportunity for good. To begin with, physical suffering reduces a man’s opportunity to sin, and gives him a chance for a deep examination of conscience. On a more profound level, any kind of suffering may be turned into sacrifice. It can be offered in reparation for our sins, and even for the good of others. All suffering borne patiently earns merit, and through the communion of saints that merit can be transferred to those who need it most. Suffering is only tragic when it is wasted by people who do not understand how to transcend it.

With our nature thus beset by sin, temptation, and suffering, we must actively work to build character. There is a “law of degeneration” in nature which drags down to death everything that does not constantly struggle, not only to survive, but to better itself. Unexercised muscles atrophy; unweeded gardens grow wild; and undisciplined men succumb to concupiscence. To perfect ourselves, we must exercise self-restraint in order to rein in the destructive pull of the flesh.

Not all of our desires are evil, however. Certain pleasures are harmless in moderation –alcohol, for instance – but they must not be abused. Others can be either good or evil, and must be limited to the good. Reading, for example, can be good; but it can also be an occasion of sin if one reads the wrong things. A third set of desires, however, is intrinsically evil; and these must be neither indulged nor moderated, but strictly abstained from. “If your right hand offends you, cut it off.” But there is no sense in all this self-discipline if there is no goal to be attained; men must know that there is a purpose to life.

Many people suffer from mental fatigue or boredom because they cannot settle on one goal to work for, or because they have no goal at all. We need a “permanent, over-all purpose in life.” The first step towards realizing this goal is to have a “master idea,” because ideas lead to actions. The master idea is that we are made for happiness, which - as discussed above - consists in satisfying our natural hunger for perfect Life, Truth, and Love. We must not only *want* this happiness, but actively *will* it. In the end, however, there is only so much we can do on our own; we must ask God for help. This principle is seen in nature, where the elevation of a lower thing requires a “descent from above.” In order for a plant to be incorporated into a higher life-form, for example, it must be eaten by an animal. But it must also “surrender its lower existence” to the thing above it; and so must we. But unlike plants and animals, we have free will; so in order for God to descend and take us up into His life, we must freely choose to die to ourselves. But to sacrifice for this goal, we must first realize that there *is* a goal. Many men never strive for eternal happiness, because they do not believe it exists; but man “would not be craving for such happiness, if it did not exist. He would not have eyes if there were no light or things to see.” Once we realize there is “something higher,” we can devote our lives to it and once we are right with ourselves, we can turn to others.

Man’s Relationship with Man

All association with men must be built on one principle: a belief in the intrinsic worth of the human soul. All people are made in the image of God, and all are potential children of God; the universe was made for them, and God died for them. No one can take away this value, and it alone renders them worthy of love. Many speak of “tolerating” people we do not like, but we can never tolerate men, because tolerance is reserved for evil. The good is never to be tolerated, but only loved; and thus we are commanded to love our neighbors for the sake of the intrinsic goodness of their souls. In regard to people’s mistakes and opinions, however, we should exercise tolerance; there must be free speech, for instance. On the other hand, tolerance has its limits; we cannot tolerate anything that harms another person. We cannot tolerate intolerance.

This belief in the worth of the individual should help us understand the unique situation of teenagers. The reason they are so awkward and rebellious is that they are discovering their own personalities and struggling to develop character. This also explains their restlessness in exploring all new possibilities, while their shyness and desire for privacy in love is a manifestation of their respect for persons of the opposite sex. Mothers, too, demonstrate this Christian respect for the human soul. It is because they realize the incredible worth and potential of children that they not only sacrifice for them and nurture them - body and soul - but educate them to help them realize that potential.

Belief in individual worth is also the basis of American democracy. But this principle can only exist where there is belief in God, because our worth is drawn directly from our contingency on Him. The founding fathers understood this, and consequently made it clear in the Declaration of Independence that the rights they were defending were God-given. But Communism does not have this foundation. According to Karl Marx, the belief in individual worth is “an illusion of Christianity... [because] persons of and by themselves have no value.” This fundamental difference between America and the Communists affects every aspect of their respective governments and demonstrates why all good Christians and Americans should oppose Communism.

Communism and America

Communism must be treated carefully and rationally; it must be hated or loved for its philosophy, and not out of emotion or because of its current foreign policy. One of the most important principles of this philosophy is that, in Marx’s words, “an individual has no value whatever unless he is a member of the revolutionary class.” In a democracy, the state exists for the citizen; in a Communist nation, the citizen exists for the state. This principle’s consequences are clearly seen in a comparison of the American and Soviet constitutions. According to the Declaration of Independence, which is the foundation for the American Constitution, our rights are God-given, and thus inalienable. According to the Soviet Constitution, our rights come from the state, and therefore

the state can take them away. Consequently, Soviet rights are very limited. Soviet citizens have the right to worship, but their priests and churches may be taken away at any time; they have the right to spread anti-religious propaganda, but not to evangelize; and they have freedom of speech, but only if they use it to support the government. All of these injustices are the logical results of a radical Communist philosophy.

Russia's susceptibility to Communist ideology is partly due to its unique history. Beginning in the thirteenth century, when some of the greatest minds of the West were active, Russia shut itself off from Europe. When it finally began to accept Western ideas again, they were tainted by atheism and rationalism. The philosophy of Communism originated with Marx, a German, who in turn borrowed ideas from France and England. Soviet Russia is, in fact, a product of all that is corrupt in Western civilization; therefore it is America's duty to transform the monster it has created by fighting for the remnant of goodness in the West. We must not settle for the Communist idea of peace, which is a peace without justice; we should fight for our beliefs, and peace will come on its own as a "by-product" of justice.

Finally, America needs to make national reparation for the sins which have contributed to the rise of Communism. "The great shame of our world is that we have the truth, but we have no zeal. Communists have zeal, but they have no truth." If only we would act on our love of God and country as fervently as the Soviets do on their convictions, we could give the Russian people something worthwhile to fight for. Communism has failed them. Instead of giving them more promises of materialistic happiness, we should give them what their leaders do not: a chance for spiritual happiness. America was a powerful agent of God in rescuing the world from Nazism, and is currently providing aid to many poor and starving nations. Now it must challenge Communism, and prove to the world once again that it is an "arsenal for democracy."

Conclusion

Life is Worth Living strives to unify the American people with "that *Pietas*, which embraces love of God, love of neighbor, and love of country." A good Catholic lives his Faith at home, at work, in science, art, politics – everything he does. The "master idea" of Catholicism gives him unflinching purpose and hope, and makes life "full of romance and thrill." Once he realizes the truth about God, about creation, and about himself, life is transcended. Fear, war, political struggles, and suffering in general become opportunities to turn his life to God and unite his will with the Divine. By following God's commands, a man may become a Christian of "inner peace and outer service." His service to God and country will in turn lead others to God, where they will find the fulfillment and the purpose they have been looking for.