



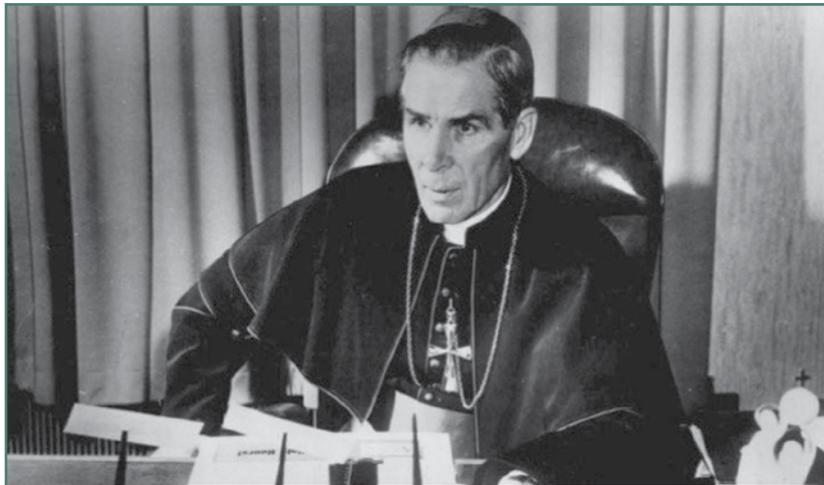
Venerable Fulton Sheen on Cancel Culture

We have been hearing much in our contemporary media recently about “cancel culture”. Cancel culture refers to the practice of withdrawing support from a person or group because of objectionable behavior and/or unfavorable opinions. Along with this withdrawal of support comes an effort to convince others, usually via social media but also in public demonstrations, that this person or group should not be heard, should not be allowed to have a viable public presence. Thus, the offenders are “cancelled”.

Cancel culture knows no political, ethnic, historical, or other boundaries. Recently, the teenage daughter of a deceased police officer had her eulogy of her father mocked and ridiculed by others for posting with the “BlueLivesMatter” hashtag, to such an extent that she removed it from her social media pages. Musician R. Kelly, comedienne Sarah Silverman, and actor Kevin Spacey have each been cancelled for a variety of indiscretions or words perceived as hurtful to others. Cancellation is happening even to people who have left this world. Statues that tell our national history in all its grandeur and gruesomeness are being toppled in cities from coast to coast in an effort to cancel what is perceived as history rife with racism. (The great irony is that cancellers are so blind that they do not realize that they are toppling statues of non-whites, abolitionists, and defenders of minorities.) More recently, we have heard of the cancellation of Flannery O’Connor by Loyola University in Maryland, quite simply because she lived in 1950s Georgia and wrote within that cultural milieu. Despite the fact that

O’Connor called herself an integrationist and let her faith guide her thoughts and actions, a liberal-leaning university didn’t view her as “woke” enough, and so support for her had to be cancelled.

But none of this is really new. Cancelling another person because of some perceived offense is as old as humanity itself. Cain cancelled Abel because the younger brother brought a sacrifice more pleasing to God. In Jesus’ day, a self-righteous mob was going to cancel the prostitute whom they had caught in adultery by stoning her to death; and Jesus himself was cancelled (at least they thought He was) by the religious establishment of His day. Thom-



as Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century, was cancelled by the goons of King Henry II for his stance against the king’s immorality. We are simply witnessing our generation’s version of these things.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Fulton Sheen, one of the great cultural commentators of the mid-twentieth century, commented on the topic. Although the evangelist’s short article did not use twenty-first-century parlance, he conveyed the themes of the topic perfectly. His article

was titled “Fanaticism”, which is an apt description of the pathology underlying modern cancel culture.

Sheen describes the reasons for the ascent of such fanaticism and its modern incarnation in cancel culture. He writes that fanaticism is born when three things coalesce: the loss of reason and a sense of values, the rallying around a leader who satisfies emotions, and the enthronement of mediocrity in the masses. When we look at the development of culture in the twenty-first century, we see these same trends. The use of rationality and a sense of stable, healthy values has fallen by the wayside, especially as the millennial generation has

begun bearing children of their own. Modern media has allowed the ascendancy of leaders, from social media influencers to actors to presidential candidates, who cultivate and prey upon the emotions of the masses in unhealthy ways. Finally, for several generations, our culture has been sliding toward mediocrity because of the dwindling numbers of people who read classic literature, listen to great music, choosing instead video games as a primary form of entertainment. We seem to have more people now who are concerned with earning a high score than with cultivating their minds to the highest degree.

Fanatics, writes Sheen, think of persons who hold contrary ideas “as something to be overthrown and put out of the way”. Those who live and operate within the throes of cancel culture cannot bear the thought of being challenged. They cannot bear the presence of real virtue, rationally and historically verified. Thus, they will

cancel real culture.

Bishop Sheen provides more detail, making clairvoyant connections to the situation in the twenty-first century. “The masses are the people without consciences; they are people who become like individual nuts and bolts without reason or self-determination. All their actions are determined by equally irrational forces outside of them.” Does this not sound much like the “mostly peaceful demonstrations” around the country that have turned violent at the drop of a hat? When these groups of people have assembled with the goal of cancelling someone or some idea, they have lost all sense of reason and conscience as well as the ability to avoid violence. They are often simply reacting to the irrational forces around them, especially the ire of someone else telling them they should also be angry at something.

“The masses can never be identified”, Sheen says, “they have no faces; they just have the name ‘they’ or ‘everybody’.” This, of course, has been a factor which has allowed cancel culture and riots to thrive: everyone is being allowed to point to someone else, some amorphous “they”, as the authority and justification for their bad actions. This has been exacerbated as we have entered the COVID-19 pandemic, which calls for ubiquitous face coverings that allow a person to often go unnoticed and unidentified. Many marauders merely become part of “they” without having to take any responsibility.

This cultural moment has come about largely because of trends in our media. Sheen writes:

They all read the same books, see the same movies, listen to the same commentators, without ever asking themselves whether these standardized means of communication should completely determine one’s own set of values. They thrive on scraps and shreds of predigested ideas in capsule form, find it difficult to read anything without pictures, and would not dare be out of step even if everybody were walking to a precipice.

Wow! Whether this is about the 1950s or the 2020s, this is a damning indictment of our fast-food and sound-bite culture gen-

erally and our media specifically! People no longer ask, nor are they taught to ask, whether the information they consume is good or bad; and whether or not it will affect them positively or negatively. They simply react without rationality.

This is exactly why the particular scenarios play out the way they do. Cancel culture, and the media that have created it, no longer know how to have a robust, reasoned argument in conversation. Sheen tells us that fanaticism “wants to persecute instead of plead”. People are not argued into changing their opinions and actions; they are merely shouted down and told how



horrible they are for not agreeing with the angry mob. People and ideas are cancelled so that they cannot pose a rational counterpoint to the prevailing whims of pride, anger, and the lust for power or notoriety. Each of us probably knows someone who has dealt with harsh, unjustified reactions for expressing an opinion, or for trying to bring reason and right judgment into a situation.

So what would Fulton Sheen recommend in place of fanaticism and cancel culture? It is interesting, and certainly not coincidental, that he followed his article on “Fanati-

cism” with an article entitled “Does Mercy Stand Alone?” He proposes a culture of mercy to obviate against the prevailing fanaticism and cancel culture.

Sheen would have us know the virtues that truly benefit individuals and societies. Early in that article, he tells us, “The divorce of mercy from justice is sentimentality, as the divorce of justice from mercy is severity.” The word “sentimentality” sounds a lot like the reasons that people cancel others, and the word “severity” seems to describe well the way cancellation happens. More than that, the loudest cancellers in our culture call for heavy-handed justice upon those who think differently than they do, while they plead for mercy upon those who espouse their same ideals. Instead, Sheen would tell us that authentic mercy and justice both stand as a bulwark against sentimentality and severity.

As a most important factor, a pre-eminent gesture, Sheen would have us look directly at the Person of Jesus Christ, something our modern world is not habituated or apt to do. When we look at Jesus, especially Jesus crucified, we learn that “Our Lord proves He loved goodness by hating evil, which would ravage the souls of His creatures.” Those of us who despise cancel culture and other negative developments of modernity should exhibit the loving actions of Jesus toward the self-righteous cancellers. We should show them that Jesus Christ, and no one else, is the source and exemplar of righteousness. Jesus cancels our sins and our debt to God. That’s the message we need to hear more frequently in the midst of our current cultural climate.

Those of us who have watched the developments of recent months, asking what to do, must work more diligently to exercise justice and mercy, and teach others, particularly our next generation, to do the same. Only then will we succeed in building the culture that our Lord, Jesus Christ, intended, and for which Fulton Sheen advocated vigorously.

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