

Pronechen-SHEEN
by Joseph Pronechen
Register Staff Writer

West Covina, Cal. -- Not many individuals stand ready to give away millions of dollars of solid Catholic teaching on audio format. Terry Barber is.

In February, as founder and director of St. Joseph Communications, Barber launched a free, no strings attached giveaway offer of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen's *Life Is Worth Living* course for converts.

Barber's offer is no small potatoes. Based on the retail price of this MP3 CD course on the St. Joseph website, the giveaway tops over \$12 million. The only proviso: it is limited to current RCIA candidates and to those received into the Church last year.

The numbers are high. According to Sister Mary Ann Walsh, spokesperson for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the latest figures from 2007 list 49,415 adult baptisms (considered anyone over 7 years old) and 87,363 received into full communion. That's 136,778 new converts. Expect the same this year.

Figures "don't seem to differ that much from year to year," Sister Mary Ann said. "The numbers remain relatively consistent."

That's fine for Barber. He believes, "Having Archbishop Sheen supplement the RCIA program will continue to help all of them learn, love, and live out their Catholic faith."

"This is his Converts Course; this is Bishop Sheen at his best," he explained. These talks aren't from Bishop Sheen's similarly titled *Life Is Worth Living* TV series that ran from 1951-57 and drew over 30 million weekly viewers. In 1965 after the Second Vatican Council where Sheen attended all the conferences, he recorded these 24-plus hours of instruction for all converts and sent the records to countless people requesting his help.

"He was preparing something that would give his converts a solid grounding in the faith," said Franciscan Friar of the Renewal Father Andrew Apostoli, Vice Postulator for the cause for canonization of Archbishop Sheen. Because Sheen who was named Servant of God in 2002 had at times as many as 500 people under instruction in the New York City and Washington area at once, he well understood the importance of teaching those entering the Church.

"Because Bishop Sheen was a man dedicated to the truth, dedicated to the Church and her teachings, we're going to get solid teaching all the way through," said Father Apostoli, citing clarity and orthodoxy. "And our new converts need a solid grounding in authentic Catholic teaching."

Father Apostoli continued, "He could bring even deep theological thoughts or concepts into language people could readily understand. That's a great advantage in his series -- plus you can go over it again and again with these CDs."

Both Phil Vaneanian of Tehachapi, Cal., and Bill Berry of Midland, Tex., testify to that.

Vaneanian who converted 10 years ago is currently listening to this series again as a refresher and simultaneously reading Sheen's books. He first got the series on tape from St. Joseph's Communications, the place he credits for a big part of his conversion.

“Archbishop Sheen is a real intellect able to go to the depths of our Scriptures and Catholic faith and simplify them for lay people like me,” finds Vaneanian. “He gave me a deep understanding of our faith – and why we do things in the Catholic Church -- which wasn’t above my head.”

Now in RCIA at St. Stephens’s in Midland and preparing to be received into the Church at Easter Vigil, Berry got the MP3 series gift at February’s Footsteps in Faith Bible Conference in Lubbock, Tex.

“Bishop Sheen does such a thorough job in explaining the faith and the reasons behind the beliefs, the different Catholic theology, and why the beliefs are important,” said an appreciative Berry, a lawyer and from a Baptist background. He noted his family also has Sheen’s talks from Lighthouse Catholic Media, another apostolate Barber directs. Bishop Sheen makes everything “easy to understand,” said Berry.

Barber is no newcomer to this work. In 1978 already wanting to see as many as possible learn the faith from this particular series, he got permission from the Society for the Propagation of the Faith to put it on tapes. Since then he has produced thousands of sets and has received many stories of people coming back to the Church through Sheen’s teachings. As an aside, Barber said he ran his first ad for them in 1979 in the Register.

By the mid-1980s he put this *Life is Worth Living* into the Los Angeles radio markets; later on EWTN radio and then EWTN television.

Right away Barber had another source of encouragement: “John Paul II inspired me to get this material into people’s hands,” he said, because in 1979 he saw that John Paul met Bishop Sheen at St. Patrick’s Cathedral and told him: ‘You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus. You are a loyal son of the Church.’

Added Barber, “If John Paul thinks Bishop Sheen is a loyal son, I want to distribute his material to as many souls as possible.”

Barber’s hopes are high. He reflects that if an average of 140,000 converts enter the Catholic Church annually, in five years he can reach 700,000 with Sheen’s teachings. “The Church needs converts to get the cradle Catholics fired up about their faith,” he believes. So did Sheen.

James Schellman, executive director of the North American Forum on the Catechumenate in Washington, D.C., confirms that in the last few years an average 140,000 come through RCIA. While he is unfamiliar with this offer other than what’s on Barber’s website, Schellman, who focuses more on resources for RCIA ministers, pointed out that St. Anthony Messenger Press provides *Catholic Update*. “It’s very fine and comes out monthly, so over a period of time you have a set of wonderful resources you can see over and over again,” he said. It’s by subscription.

Barber’s giveaway appears unmatched. Kate Chiodo, head of the RCIA program at Church of the Holy Spirit in Lubbock, Tex., received news of this supplemental series with enthusiasm and will recommend it to the candidates. She’s been familiar with Sheen since her childhood and catches him on EWTN now.

Enthused Chiodo, “His messages are timeless and take us to what it means to be a Catholic.”

“People tell me that all the time (they) listen to his tapes and read his books and they think they were given yesterday,” affirms Father Apostoli. He details two reasons why Sheen is so contemporary.

One, because in the 1950s and 60s he was very farsighted hitting the problems we’re seeing now. He was an ardent opponent of Communism; the residue of Communism especially today in America is a secularism seen in government that take God out of politics and seen in the lack of real commitment to the sanctity of life and sanctity of the family.

Two, “He wrote his books and prepared his thoughts in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus is the same yesterday today and forever. So Bishop Sheen’s teachings have a constant contemporary sound to them.” They’re timeless.

Currently, funding for this giveaway is coming from St. Joseph Communications, but Barber hopes to have Catholic Resource Center (CRC), which he also directs, eventually involved if benefactors step forward to help this massive effort (contacting CRC, P.O. Box 720, West Covina, Cal, 91793). With more funding he wants to expand the giveaway to whoever does any instructing in the faith.

In fact, as vice postulator of the cause for his canonization, Father Apostoli believes, “if Bishop Sheen were ever to get canonized, not only would the people in RCIA be listening but everybody would be wanting to hear his great teachings on Catholic doctrine.”

BOX: Visit St. Joseph Communications at SaintJoe.com
Call 800 526-2151 ext 419

Staff writer Joseph Pronechen is based in Trumbull, Connecticut.