

Woman recounts friendship with future Kansas saint

Former Dodge City resident also recalls her instructor in the Catholic faith, a young Fulton J. Sheen

By DAVID MYERS

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Imagine living your life having had personal interaction with not one, but two future saints.

In fact, imagine having counted one as a close friend. While neither Father Emil Kapaun or Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's sainthoods have been assured, that matters little to Marian Hurtig, who's not surprised at all that the two men she knew are well on the road to beatification.

Father Emil Kapaun

"He talked easily and had a very soft voice," Marian said of Father Kapaun from her home she shares with her daughter, Mary Lou, and Mary Lou's husband Walynn, in Cheyenne, Wyo.

Marian and her husband, Louis, who died in 2009, met the young Father Kapaun while he was a student at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Louis served at the university as a counselor, and the three struck up a friendship when it was discovered that they shared Kansas roots.

Father Kapaun was born in Pilsen, Kansas in 1916, the son of Czech immigrants. He graduated from Conception Seminary in Conception, Mo. in 1936, and was ordained a priest four years later at what is now Newman University in Wichita.

He entered the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps in August, 1944, and soon found himself chaplain to 19,000 service men and women in Camp Wheeler, Ga. He was released from active duty in 1946 and entered Catholic University under the G.I. Bill.

And that's when he met the Hurtigs.

"We discovered he was a young priest from Kansas," said Marian, who, with her husband, Louis, lived in Dodge City for many years, and later in Wichita. "He would come to our apartment and visit, and we would go on picnics together.

"We talked about where we had lived and the churches we had gone to, just ordinary things like that."

After attending Catholic University, Father Kapaun served briefly in southwest Kansas, in the towns of Spearville and Timken. It was while serving in Timken that Father Kapaun decided his place was back in the military, helping the service men and women in Korea.

Marian said that months later they "sent a letter to Father Kapaun, and it came back to us with a note telling us that he had died. We were good friends with Father Kapaun. And then we went to Korea. He did wonderful things while he was there."

Father Kapaun died of malnutrition and pneumonia on May 23, 1951 after being refused aid by his captors. For his many acts of heroism prior to and after being taken prisoner -- heroism given strength by an ever-deep faith, by the rosary, by his deep love for all God's children -- he was presented the Medal of Honor by President Barack Obama on April 11, 2013.

For his faith-filled service to his fellow human beings at a time when some of humankind acted anything but humane, the Catholic Church declared him a Servant of God, the first stage on the path to sainthood.

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen

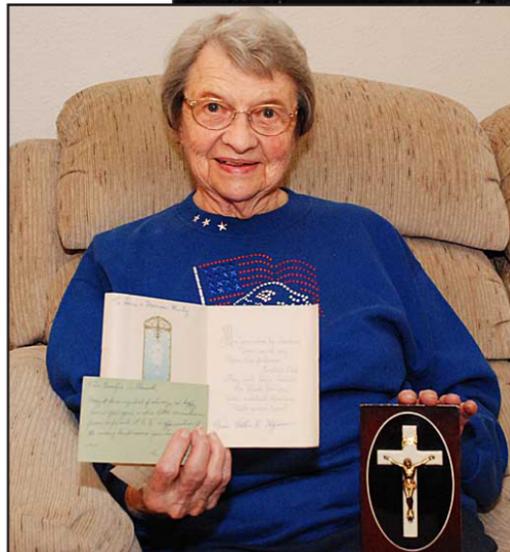
Marian is a convert to Catholicism. Not long after she and her husband moved to Washington, D.C. -- at the same time as they befriended a young Father Kapaun -- Marian began taking classes so she could fully enter the Catholic Church.

Her instructor? A monsignor by the name of Fulton J. Sheen, who was just a few years away from reaching world-wide fame for his powerful words and, not to mention, his fun-to-watch flamboyancy on TV.

Then-Father Sheen hosted a night-time radio show, "The Catholic Hour," from 1930-1950 before making the move to television and hosting "Life is Worth Living" from



Father Emil Kapaun, center, picnics with Marian Hurtig, and Father Paul Meier at a park in Washington, D.C., while Father Kapaun was studying at Catholic University of America. At left, Marian Hurtig holds a card and crucifix given to her by Father Emil Kapaun in thanks for the kindness she and her husband showed the priest while he was a student in Washington, D.C. (Photos courtesy of the *Catholic Advance*.)



1951-1957. From 1961-1968 he hosted "The Fulton Sheen Program," for which he was awarded two Emmys for "most outstanding television personality."

"He was a good lecturer," Marian recalled. "He liked to teach. I remember that first year I took the class. I went to him and said I didn't feel like I was ready to become Catholic. He said that was fine.

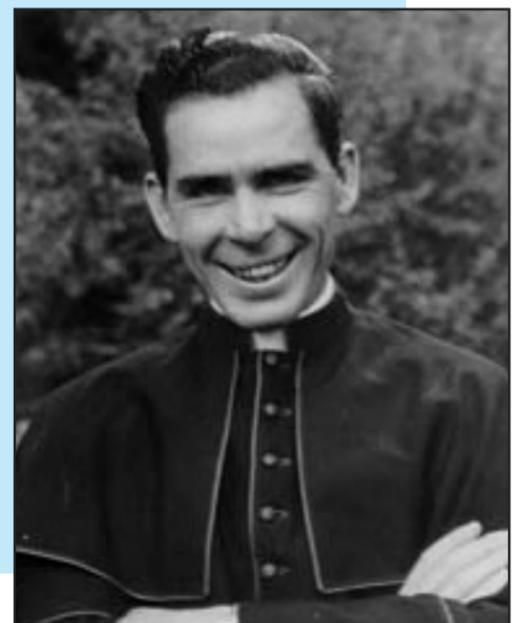
"I took it again the next year, and did it. He baptized me conditionally because I had been a member of the Episcopal church. It was exciting to know that we knew him. He did come to Dodge City one time and gave a lecture. I went back and renewed with him that I had known him in Washington."

Archbishop Sheen authored 73 books and numerous articles. Two months prior to his death in 1979, Pope John Paul II visited the archbishop in New York where he embraced him, saying, "You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a loyal son of the Church."

"Good experiences, the two of them," Marian said of Father Kapaun and Archbishop Sheen.



Father Emil Kapaun



Bishop Fulton J. Sheen