

TRUTH, FREEDOM, TRADITION, FRONTIERS:
PRESENTATIONS ON AMERICAN CATHOLIC HISTORY
THE CHURCH IN WAR AND PEACE:
WORLD WAR II AND THE EARLY COLD WAR

II World War II and the early Cold War were times of growth for the Catholic Church in America, although the seeds of later difficulties were being sown.

- A. World War II brought Americans together and increased the harmony between religions and between races in this land. The result was an increase in the interaction between the Catholic Church and society at large in the United States.
- B. The late 1940s and 1950s is sometimes seen as the halcyon days of the Catholic Church in America, with increasing numbers of Catholics in society, and the Church engaging the nation fully at all levels, political, social, economic and educational. There was a dramatic increase in church and school building and in entrance into priesthood and religious life.
- C. However, there were problems on the horizon, with such things as family issues and an increased desire to be accepted by society, which led to the danger watering down of the faith for the sake of popularity.

II In the lead-up to World War II, most Catholic leaders (with the sad exceptions of Fr. Charles Coughlin and the magazine The Tablet) condemned Hitler and religious persecution generally.

- A. In 1937, Pope Pius XI published Mit Brennender Sorge, condemning the Nazi regime and no doubt regretting his efforts to try to deal with them. Although many world leaders continued to ignore the threat from Hitler, there were increasing protests, including many from American Catholics.
 1. For example, Cardinal Mundelein of Chicago issued a follow up criticism of the persecution of the Jews. And later in 1937, the United States bishops generally published a pastoral letter To the German Hierarchy protesting religious persecution.
 2. In 1938, the Knights of Columbus wrote to Franklin Roosevelt asking him to help the Jews. In 1940, Bishop Robert Lucy of Amarillo, Texas was also forceful in his denunciation of the Nazi regime in a diocese that had a large number of German descendants. And the increasingly prominent radio personality Monsignor Fulton Sheen likewise declared before a rally in New York, "Only those who condemn persecution irrespective of where they find it deserve to be heard."
 3. However, while most Americans, and most Catholic Americans, were sympathetic to the British, the French and the Poles, the majority also wanted to stay out of the war until the attack on Pearl Harbor. In 1941, the United States bishops did publish another pastoral letter "The Crisis in Christendom," which likewise condemned the persecution of Jews.

- B. Once the war started, the vast majority of American Catholics were supportive and joined the ranks in large numbers.
1. The bishops' conference declared that "our institutions and personnel are at the service" of the war effort.
 2. There was the anxiety about Christian institutions supporting a violent effort. But the Catholic just war theory seemed clearly applicable in this case. On the Protestant side, probably the most American theologian was Reinhold Niebuhr, who argued that the duties of individuals to forgive neighbors and even enemies, while still applicable to governments, must be adapted to the responsibility for social order. In his 1932 classic Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics, he drew a careful balance, pointing out the need for faith to reign in the excesses of politics and economics, but also warning against utopianism in these fields.
 3. The need for everyone to cooperate during the war once again encouraged a greater recognition of the value of the Catholic Church here. In addition courage and dedication of Catholic chaplains during the war increased the prestige of priesthood and religious life. In particular, the heroic example of Father Aloysius Schmitt who died helping personnel escape the U.S.S. Oklahoma during the Pearl Harbor attack was an inspiration to chaplains generally. There is also a famous photograph of Father Charles Suver celebrating Mass at the top of Iwo Jima after the victory there, which demonstrated well the unity of faith, courage and patriotism.

II. After the war ended, Catholics in America were eager to support the Church. And as a result, Catholic cultural, building and political projects increased.

- A. The Church's teachings on family life, including prohibitions on artificial contraception, helped lead to an increase in the Catholic portion of the population. And the ranks of clergy and religious continued increasing to the point that some dioceses were turning away seminarians because they did not have enough space for them.
1. In particular, the Catholic population in America increased from 24 million to 45.6 million from 1945 to 1965, with the Catholic portion of the country increasing from 17% to 23.5% of the population.
 2. The number of clergy increased 52% to 59,000 and the number of religious sisters increased 30% to 180,000 during that time. According to one survey, 71% of Catholics attended Mass regularly by the early 1960s.
- B. The Church also built 3005 new elementary and high schools and 94 new colleges, along with 123 new hospitals from 1945 - 1965. Enrollment in Catholic elementary and high schools increased 120% to 5.1 million, which would have been about half of the Catholic children. And attendance at Catholic colleges and universities tripled to 385,000 during this time. There was some increased financial support from the

- government for private schooling, although the Supreme Court would later strike down direct payments to elementary and high schools. In particular, the government's subsidies for higher education, including the GI bill, helped many universities increase enrollment, although this would later cause concern about the government's increasing control over these institution through the threat of withholding funding.
- C. There was a flourishing of Catholic culture. For example, Monsignor (later Archbishop) Fulton Sheen gained a very large audience with his radio and television shows entitled Life is Worth Living and books such as The Life of Christ. Movies such as Going My Way, The Bells of St. Mary, and I Confess, books such as The Seven Story Mountain, The Cardinal, Brideshead Revisited and Canticle of Leibnitz, and the popularity of British Catholic writers such as G.K. Chesterton and J.R.R. Tolkien, also made Catholic culture central in America. From the South, Flannery O'Connor's short stories challenged people to a more fervent faith and a greater willingness to deal with the suffering of life. Likewise, while he was not a particularly devout Catholic, Alfred Hitchcock had a great deal of influence in culture, and promoted themes (such as asking what is the basis of order in nature, sin coming back to haunt the sinner and a critique of relativism) that were consistent with Christianity.
- D. Catholic groups such as the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Action and the Legion of Mary saw rapidly increasing membership. Missionary groups, such as Society for the Propagation of the Faith (led by Fulton Sheen from 1950 – 1966), also prospered in America.
- E. There was a strong Catholic reaction to the threats to family life in the United States and around the world. Thus, for example, the National Catholic Welfare Council had established in 1934 the Family Life Bureau to encourage successful marriages and families; and its activities increased after World War II. From 1946 to 1956, the Catholic Integrity Magazine promoted devotional and sacramental life within and among Catholic families. Likewise, in 1943, Patrick and Patricia Crowley began the Christian Family Movement in South Bend, Indiana; the CFM to this day is a parish based effort to bring Catholic families together for mutual prayer and support.
- F. There was also a mystical Catholicism developing in America at the time. Thus, for example, the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton and his works, most especially The Seven Story Mountain, became popular in devotional life. Likewise, such mystics as the laywoman Rhoda Wise and the Franciscan Blessed Solanus Casey were inspirations to those around them.
1. Born in 1915, Thomas Merton grew up a nonbeliever who lived a superficially pleasant but meaningless life until he met up with Trappist monks at a monastery at Gethsemini, Kentucky. The influence led him to enter the Catholic Church in 1938 and then to teach English at a Catholic University. He entered the Trappists in 1941, and soon began writing about his spiritual journey and prayers. His 1948 autobiography The Seven Story

Mountain quickly appealed to the public, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and led to an increase in devotion, including membership in the 12 American Trappist monasteries rising to 1000 monks by 1956. His involvement in interreligious dialogue, as well as non-monastic speaking tours, did cause some controversies before his accidental death in Thailand in 1968.

2. Solanus Casey (1870 – 1957) was raised in a large Irish Catholic family in Wisconsin. Starting at the age of 17, he was very active in numerous occupations, seeking his way in life. But, after witnessing a murder, he underwent an even deeper conversion and entered seminary to become a diocesan priest. However, because he could not master the languages and the academics, he then entered the Franciscans, who in 1904 ordained him as a “priest simplex” that is a priest who did not receive enough education to preach or hear confessions. Despite his limited formal education, and humble assignments, he became known as a very wise spiritual director and a channel of miracles. He also organized many charitable efforts during the Great Depression, including the still famous and thriving Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit, which serves 56,000 people a year to this day. By his death in 1957, he was widely revered in that city and beyond. And in 2017 Cardinal Angelo Amato presided at his beatification Mass in Detroit.
3. Regarding general devotions, the rosary became more popular than ever in the United States. The Irish born Holy Cross Father Patrick Peyton (often known as “the rosary priest”) promoted the “family rosary crusade” and rosary rallies, beginning in the United States, but continuing throughout the world.

III. The Catholic Church began engaging American culture much more during this era. The effect was mostly positive, but there could be dangers of being too eager to be consistent with popular culture.

- A. There was a vibrant debate about how much Catholics should be involved in the ecumenical movement and how much Catholics should embrace the American experiment in religious liberty and separation of Church and state.
 - Fr. John Courtney Murray became prominent in promoting ecumenical dialogue and religious liberty. For a time, the Vatican Holy Office told him to stop publishing new articles on religious liberty until they had time to research his views, but he was never told to retract his views. In 1960, he published a series of older essays he had written in the widely acclaimed book We Hold These Truths, which argued that the Catholic Church was in the best position to defend the American vision of politics and society.
 - Overall, American theologians debated heavily about whether the ecumenical movement would be helpful in bringing out the faith in American society or would more promote religious indifferentism. Theologians at Woodstock College in Maryland, including Father Murray, tended to favor ecumenism. On the other hand, theologians at Catholic University of America tended to go in the other direction.

- B. When John Kennedy ran for the Presidency in 1960, some people, such as the Protestant preacher Norman Vincent Peale, again questioned whether he could be a faithful Catholic and a loyal American President. In a 1959 interview with Look magazine, and then in a 1960 speech to the Houston Ministerial Association, Kennedy said that he was a Democrat who happened to be Catholic, and that he would not let religious views dictate policy. The speeches satisfied most secular skeptics, but left many Catholics wondering how loyal he was to the Church. Most Catholics in politics tended to be Democrats, but there were some notable exceptions, including William Buckley, the editor of the new conservative journal National Review.
- C. With reference to racial integration, the bishops and Catholic institutions were generally progressive, although it sometimes took time. For example, after 1945 Cardinal Samuel Stritch of Chicago began integrating schools in that archdiocese one at a time. In 1947 and 1948 the archdioceses of St. Louis and Washington desegregated their schools. In 1955, Archbishop Joseph Rummel of New Orleans ordered the schools of that archdiocese to integrate; there was resistance to the point that in 1962 he threatened to excommunicate those who refused. In 1957, the United States bishops issued a pastoral letter condemning racial discrimination, which was followed up by a letter from Pope Pius XII to Americans in 1958 along the same lines. The support for integration was strong, although a bit later than people would have wished.
- D. In the midst of the successes, there was concern that worldly prosperity and a concern for getting along with society were weakening the faith.
1. The question arose of how much Catholic politicians should allow their faith to guide their policies.
 2. It appears now that clergy were often did not know the distinction between what can be changed in such things as liturgy and theology and the principles that are unchangeable. When, after the Vatican II Council, many matters such as theological methods, governing structures and liturgical practices were changed, some clergy left the priesthood and others made changes that were not authorized.
 3. It does appear that there were often issues small and large that were being neglected. Thus, there were reports of alcoholism among the clergy and religious, and even abusive behavior, that were swept under the rug.
 4. Some commentators, from Msgr. Fulton Sheen to the liberal author Fr. Andrew Greeley, were concerned that Catholics were taking their faith for granted and engaging in external practices because it was popular, not as a matter of conversion.

- E. Overall, as the Vatican II Council opened, the situation for the Church in America was largely positive, and there was a great deal of optimism, albeit in the context of the Cold War, with its threat of nuclear destruction. However, challenges were waiting in the background.

IV. Four Catholics who exemplified the Catholic Church during this era were Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen, Father John Courtney Murray, Flannery O'Connor, and Servant of God Rhoda Wise.

A. Fulton Sheen (1895 – 1979) demonstrated the American attributes of creativity and courage, of adhering to firm principles while adapting to new circumstances and being able to reach out to the world.

1. Fulton Sheen was born in 1895 in Peoria, the oldest of four sons of Newton and Delia Sheen. His father and uncle ran a hardware store, but they had to move to a family owned farm when it burned down in a fire that also burned much of the city. The family was very devout, praying the rosary daily and often having priests over to the house.

- Fulton Sheen served as an altar boy at the Cathedral on a regular basis. He often related one event in which he dropped a cruet after Mass, but Bishop Spalding was kindly to him, and encouraged him. He contrasted that event with a different experience of another altar boy in Russia, whom a priest kicked off the altar after he served Mass poorly; his name was Josef Stalin.

2. Fulton Sheen graduated first in his class in high school and then attended seminary at St. Viator College in Illinois and St. Paul Seminary in Minnesota. Starting in seminary, he resolved to make a holy hour before Eucharist every day, and he held consistently to that resolve. He would say later in life that that holy hour was crucial for everything else he did.

3. After ordination, he studied at Catholic University in Washington and then the University of Leuven, Belgium, earning a doctoral degree in philosophy in 1923, and winning the Cardinal Mercier award for the best philosophical dissertation. Fulton Sheen then earned a doctoral degree in theology (S.T.D.) at the Angelicum University in Rome. At the time, one needed two doctoral degrees to be a full professor.

4. After ordination, Bishop Edmund Dunne sent him to be the assistant pastor at St. Patrick Church in London and then to teach theology at St. Edmund College, a boarding school, which is the oldest continuous Catholic school in England. Fr. Sheen was then assigned as the pastor of St. Patrick parish in Peoria. People were surprised at the appointment, given Fr. Sheen's academic credentials. However, he accepted it as a part of his ministry. Bishop Dunne later explained that he wanted to see how Fr. Sheen would obey a surprising order.

5. In 1927, Fr. Sheen then became a philosophy and religion teacher at Catholic University, a post he continued to work at for 25 years. Teaching such subjects as "Philosophy and Religion," "Religion and Society," and "God and Modern

Philosophy,” he was tried to find ways of connecting philosophy to the modern world. In his role as a teacher, he strongly promoted engagement with the world and Catholics taking on roles as teachers across the boards. Even in the late 1920s he was opposing racial segregation and anti-Semitism.

6. In 1926, a New York radio station asked him to give a series of Lenten reflections. Then in 1930, he was asked to help out for two weeks for a radio show called The Catholic Hour. His talks were so popular that the station hired him full time. In those broadcasts, he denounced Hitler as the anti-Christ and promoted opposition to him. By 1936, he was receiving about 75 letters a week, a lot of them recommending topics. He also often went on speaking tours and celebrated the first televised Mass in 1940.

7. In 1946, Time magazine said he was the Catholic Church’s greatest evangelizer. By that time, that the radio station was receiving 3 to 6 thousand letters a week about his broadcast; and in 1950 it had four million listeners. In the midst of this speaking, he still taught full time at Catholic University until 1950, as well as publishing 34 books. In June, 1951, he was consecrated as an auxiliary bishop for New York.

8. In 1951, now Bishop Fulton Sheen began his very famous Life is Worth Living television series, which brought the faith to the world.

a. The show began simply as his talks to a live audience without notes. Despite having a less than prime slot, the show soon took off, and the number of stations increased to 15 within two months. About 8500 letters a week came in for the show, and tickets for the live audience were difficult to come by. The show climbed in popularity to 30 million and was at times the most watched television show in America. Bishop Sheen won an Emmy award for The Most Outstanding Television Personality in 1952. In his acceptance speech, Bishop Sheen said that he wanted to thank his writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Time magazine called him in 1952 the first televangelist.

b. Bishop Sheen would be dressed in the full regalia of a bishop, but would also try to present aspects of the faith to the general public. He vehemently oppose communism and secularist views on psychology. But he also made a study of such atheistic systems to respond to their objections to the modern world.

9. In 1958, Bishop Sheen became the national director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, which is to this day dedicated to support for missionary activity. In this role, he increased the society’s fundraising dramatically and popularized its missionary goals.

10. Fulton Sheen also continued publishing books, including his 1958 classic Life of Christ. He would eventually publish 73 books. He also had two syndicated

columns, *God Love You* and *Fulton Sheen Writes*. He received royalties from his broadcasts and books, and gave almost all of it to charities, including \$10 million to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

11. Fulton Sheen attended all of the Sessions of the Vatican II Council. Pope Benedict XVI said in a 2012 interview that Fulton Sheen “would fascinate us in the evenings with his talks.”

12. In 1966, he became the Bishop of Rochester, where he served until 1969. It was a very difficult time, and he had a lot of opposition from within the Church.

- He opposed the Vietnam War, starting in July, 1967, before it became very unpopular. He was also very involved in ecumenical activities, including the Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation.

- After three difficult years, he retired from this office in 1969. He was then appointed the titular archbishop of Newport, Wales.

13. Archbishop Sheen later began taping retreats. In 1974, Cardinal Boyle of Washington asked Fulton Sheen to be the speaker for a priests retreat entitled *Renewal and Reconciliation*. The talks were taped and sold to the public, a novelty at the time. Soon he and others began taping series of talks and selling them. The company Mistr-O-Media was central in this business, with its profits helping to fund the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.

14. Despite these efforts, Bishop Sheen’s popularity waned in the United States during the 1970s. However, on October 2, 1979, Pope John Paul II, in a visit to St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York, specifically asked for Fulton Sheen. When he came over, the Pope embraced Sheen and said, “You have written well and spoken well of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a loyal son of the church.” Later on, his talks and books would rise again in popularity, and are widely admired around the world today.

15. In his last days, Fulton Sheen finished his autobiography *Treasures in Clay*. Ad on December 9, 1979, he died of heart disease. The cause for canonization is progressing and is ready for the beatification, but has been delayed for further research about his time as Bishop of Rochester.

B. Fr. John Courtney Murray (1904 – 67) was a Jesuit theologian who set forth a vision of America and of religious liberty that would be central to the Vatican II declaration on religious liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*.

1. John Courtney Murray was born in 1904 to a devout Catholic family and entered the Jesuit order in 1920. He received a degree in Classics and Philosophy from Boston College in 1926 and a masters a year later. He then taught Latin and literature in Manila for four years.

2. He returned to the United States in 1930 for theological studies and was ordained a priest in 1933. Fr. Murray then attended the Gregorian University in Rome and earned a doctorate in 1937. He then taught systematic theology, and in particular grace and the Trinity, at the Jesuit theology seminary in Woodstock, Maryland. He held that post until his death in 1967. Likewise, in 1941, he became the editor in chief of the new Jesuit scholarly journal Theological Studies and held that position until his death.

3. In the 1940s he started writing more about ecumenism and religious liberty. He maintained that Jesus Christ established the Catholic Church as the primary means to salvation. However, he argued for religious liberty and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. He said that having an state official church worked in a bygone era, but was no longer helpful. But he still favored tax credits for religious schools so that parents would be able to choose among a variety of types of education. These writings attracted the attention of the Holy Office in Rome, led by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviano, who told him in 1954 to stop publishing new articles on the subject, which he did. The Holy Office did not say that his views were wrong, but rather that they needed time to see whether they were consistent with Catholic thought.

5. However, in 1960, Fr. Murray agreed that some of his previous articles could be published in a book entitled We Hold these Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition. With John F. Kennedy running for the Presidency, the book received a great deal of attention. After the election, Time magazine had a cover article on his thoughts, with the image of St. Robert Bellarmine in the background, and Fr. Murray in the foreground.

6. Fr. Murray was instrumental in writing Dignitatis Humanae, the Vatican II Declaration on Religious Liberty.

a. When the Vatican II Council began, Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York brought John Courtney Murray with him to the council as his peritus (expert), starting with the second session in 1963.

b. During the first session of the Council in 1962, St. Pope John XXIII created the Conciliar Commission on Christian Unity, and placed Cardinal Augustine Bea in charge of it. At the second session in 1963, the decree on ecumenism included a chapter on religious liberty. However, the debate indicated that bishops wanted a separate document on religious liberty. And so St. Pope Paul VI entrusted that task to the Commission on Christian Unity. The Commission relied heavily on Fr. Murray for the research and drafting of the document

c. The Commission on Christian Unity presented the document to the third session of the Council in 1964. The document not only affirmed that people should not be forced to convert to any faith (a principle that was widely agreed upon), but also that the very dignity of the human person

demanded that people should be fully free to profess and promote their faith, with the understanding that there is a duty to seek the truth and adhere to it. After a passionate debate, the Commission revised the document to respond to objections that it watered down the centrality of the Catholic faith and the duty to adhere to the truth.

d. The Commission brought a revised document to the Council again in 1965. Once again there was strong debate for four days, but with the debate largely going in its favor. Fr. Murray was very ill recovering from a collapsed lung while the debate was continuing, but he continued commenting on the revisions. The final vote was 1997-224, a ninety percent majority, although with the most dissents of any final document of the Council. The result was considered a triumph for Fr. Murray and the American bishops generally; and the declaration is sometimes informally called “the American document of the Vatican II Council,” for it reflected American views on religious liberty.

6. After the Council, Fr. John Courtney Murray continued to be active in public affairs. For example, President Johnson appointed him to a committee that reviewed Selective Service exemptions. In that role, he argued unsuccessfully that conscientious objector status should be given, not only to those who objected to all warfare, but also to those who objected specifically to the Vietnam War.
 7. Fr. Murray died suddenly of a heart attack in 1967. In the 1970s his influence waned. But more recently, as the issue of Catholicism in society and politics has become more heated, his view that the faith and the American experiment are compatible, and his emphasis on natural law and society, has gained greater attention.
- C. Amidst great suffering from illnesses, Flannery O’Connor (1925 – 64) brought her Catholic faith and values into the realm of American literature, challenging what she perceived to be a tendency towards a comfortable faith.
1. Flannery O’Connor was the only child of a middle class family in Savannah, Georgia in 1925. She tended to be reserved and live a largely isolated childhood. Her father died in 1941, leaving the family bereft and of in modest means. However, Flannery was a bright student and became the arts editor for the student news magazine in high school. Along with her parents, she was a devout Catholic from the start, praying daily and reading theology regularly.
 2. In 1945, at the age of 20, she graduated from Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College and State University) with a degree in social sciences. In college, she drew cartoons as social commentary for the student newspaper. After College, she earned a masters in journalism from the University of Iowa. There she met writers who would later be helpful in publishing her short stories. In 1946, as she was earning her master’s degree,

she published her first short story The Geranium, which involves an old Southern man moving to New York City and having trouble adjusting to a life that is physically better, but in which he has no special standing.

3. After moving to New York to advance her writing career, Flannery O'Connor began publishing short stories about the sufferings of humanity. Her first book Wise Blood (1952) presented very tragic scenes of both fraud and misunderstandings in religion, but with the positive message that truth and redemption are available to those who seek it, and that faith in something is inevitable. Her second book The Violent Bear It All Away (1960) also presents the confused religious state of one who is presented with the false choice between a superstitious Christianity and an enlightened and boring atheism. The books, along with her short stories, do not so much present the Catholic faith in itself, as they present faith in something as inevitable, and describe the errors and tragedies people can fall into.
4. Over her career, Flannery O'Connor wrote 32 short stories, some of which were combined into a books in 1955 and then again posthumously in 1965. The stories would always involve a tragedy (usually death) and a call to redemption; the tragedy would lead to openness to grace, which a person chooses whether to accept. Ironically, her most pessimistic story A Good Man Is Hard to Find, about an escaped criminal who bizarrely demonstrates good manners while murdering an entire family but bizarrely, is also her most famous work. Other stories such as Revelation, which involves a woman overcoming prejudices against foreigners, have a positive sense of redemption and greater vision.
5. In 1952, when her career was quickly advancing, Flannery O'Connor was diagnosed with lupus, a disease her father likewise suffered from. The illness increased her religious faith, which now included daily Mass and keeping a prayer journal. Despite her illnesses, she continued giving talks on literature and current events. From this time until her death, she lived at a family dairy farm in Milledgeville, Georgia.
6. Flannery O'Connor died in 1964; but after her death her writings continued increasing in prestige. They responded to the increasing depression and existential angst of the modern world, but with a call to true faith, rather than despair or contentment. Even many atheists recognize in her works a call away from ease and comfort to recognizing the flaws of humanity. However, unlike those without faith, Flannery O'Connor also understood the availability of redemption. She once said, "For me the meaning of life is centered on our redemption in Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that."

D. Servant of God Rhoda Wise (1888 – 1948) was a mystic and stigmatic who inspired many people, including the future Mother Angelica

1. Rhoda Greet was born to a working class family in Ohio. Her devoutly Protestant family soon moved to West Virginia. In 1915, she married Ernest Wissmar, but he died of cancer a short time thereafter. She then married George Wise, and they adopted two children. George, however, had a drinking problem, which caused financial problems that were exacerbated by the Great Depression. By the early 1930s they were living in a shack near Canton, Ohio.
2. The problems became worse when Rhoda Wise had to receive an operation for ovarian cancer. In 1933, George Wise even committed her to a mental hospital twice because of post-surgery depression. In 1936, she suffered from a broken foot that did not heal properly.
3. In 1938, she was again in a hospital for her foot injuries, this one run by the Sisters of Charity. The nuns were very kind and prayerful; and one of them taught her about Catholic devotions, such as the rosary and devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. They also provided her with the accounts of saints, including Saint Therese of Lisieux, who also had great infirmities towards the end. Under their influence, Rhoda Wise decided to enter the Catholic Church later that year.
4. In March of 1939, just after joining the Catholic Church, Rhoda Wise was diagnosed with what seemed like incurable cancer, and went home for what was expected to be her death. However, in May of that year, she received visions of Jesus and Saint Therese, and was suddenly cured of the cancer and the foot injuries. She reported 19 more visions over the course of the next decade and would strongly promote devotion to the Sacred Heart and to St. Therese.
5. On Good Friday, 1942, she received the stigmata in her forehead; and during the following year, she received the stigmata on her hands and feet.
6. Over the course of time, many people learned of her visions and the stigmata, and gathered around her home in Canton. Several people reported miraculous cures after visiting her and/or receiving holy water from her. One of the visitors Rita Rizzo, whose mother sent her to Rhoda Wise in 1943, seeking a cure for a severe stomach ailment. Rita was cured of the ailment and would later become known as Mother Angelica.
7. Rhoda Wise had a stroke in 1948 and died in July of that year. Her daughter opened a shrine at her former home in Canton, which is now run by the Missionaries of the Eternal Word. In 2012, the Archdiocese of Atlanta opened the cause for her canonization. In 2018, the diocesan stage ended with

a conclusion that she had lived a life of heroic virtue and presented her cause to the Congregation of Saints.