News

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit joins local Palestinians and internationa

Retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit joins local Palestinians and international visitors for a Palm Sunday procession from Lazarus' tomb in Bethany to the Bethany Gate at the Israeli separation wall March 16, 2008, in the West Bank. He was a co-founder of Pax Christi USA in 1972. (CNS/Debbie Hill)



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***Editor's note**: Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, a leading U.S. Catholic pastor for peace, died April 4 at age 94. We are republishing here Gumbleton's final interview with the National Catholic Reporter, originally published Aug. 2, 2022.*

Our April 4, 2024, news obituary, "Bishop Gumbleton, longtime soul of the US Catholic peace movement, dies," is here.

On July 23, 2023, we published a review of No Guilty Bystander: The Extraordinary Life of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton*. That story, "'No Guilty Bystander' celebrates Bishop Gumbleton's radical legacy," is here.*

To read "The Peace Pulpit," a column Bishop Gumbleton wrote for NCR, click here.

Retired Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton has been a member of Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement, since the group's founding in 1972.

As the organization prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary this August, Gumbleton spoke to NCR about Pax Christi's impact, and his hopes for its future.

Noting Pope Francis' progressive move away in recent years from the Catholic Church's long-held just war theory, Gumbleton said he thinks Pax Christi has "a major opportunity."

"If we can strengthen the movement and begin to spread and develop membership throughout our country, we have an opportunity to have a very positive, transforming influence on what is happening," said the bishop.

Following is NCR's interview with Gumbleton, edited for length and context.

***NCR**:* **How has the world changed since Pax Christi USA was founded?**

Gumbleton: It seems to me that since we started 50 years ago in the U.S., that violence has increased enormously, the number of shootings in malls and schools or almost anywhere — the recent one in Texas where all those children were murdered — so that sort of thing has happened more and more. The violence in our country just seems to be getting more and more out of control.

This just seems so, well, absurd that there are more guns than there are people in the United States. It's like you almost have to be ready for a gun battle when you go into a supermarket. I just find it overwhelming that this kind of violence has increased so much. And in spite of some efforts on the part of the president or other civic leaders, it's not going down; it's getting worse, and that's one of the major changes I think.

How have you witnessed Pax Christi USA impacting the church?

I think that within the bishops' conference, Pax Christi was a leader in promoting what we call the peace pastoral, the teaching document of 1983 that the Catholic bishops put out ("The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response").

I was a member of the committee that wrote that document, and as the president of Pax Christi at the time I had a lot of people ready to give us advice on how to write

such a pastoral letter, what should be included in it and how to promulgate it. So Pax Christi was very active in that regard back in the early 1980s. The whole peace movement was very active at that point, and Pax Christi was among the leaders in the Catholic Church of the anti-war/pro-peace activities.

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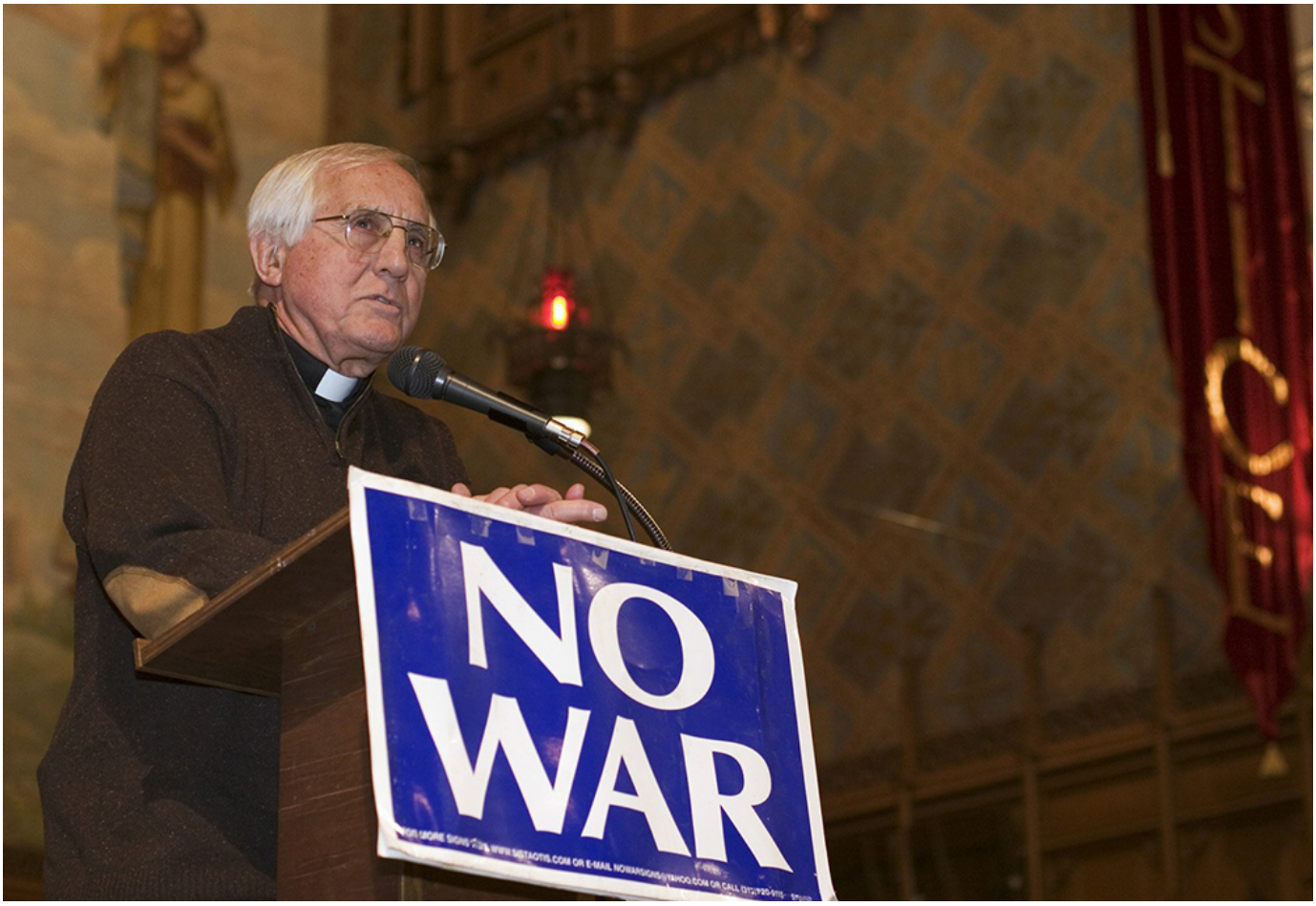
How has Pax Christi impacted your life these last 50 years?

Within the movement we put a major influence on the act of love or nonviolence, and then, in my own life, I went through a very profound conversion to that. Because I grew up, as Catholics did generally, with a conviction that war could be justified. It was through Pax Christi that I came to understand that, within the teachings of Jesus, war cannot be justified.

So Pax Christi, in my life, helped to bring about a profound conversion away from any acts of violence for any reason whatsoever and toward only making peace through active love or nonviolence, and that was a major change in my life.

I grew up very much Catholic prior to World War II and during World War II — the war was thought of as totally justified, and we were doing the right thing. Well, I would not have that conviction any longer. War is never justified.

We have to find nonviolent ways to resist violence, and that's possible, but it takes a commitment, it takes training, and it takes a strong conviction that the way of love is the only way to bring peace.



Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, auxiliary bishop of Detroit, addresses several hundred anti-war activists at Central United Methodist Church March 18, 2005, in Detroit. The gathering was held to mark the second anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The United States launched war in Iraq March 20, 2003, with a pre-dawn strike on Baghdad. (CNS/Jim West)

Why is it important to celebrate this 50th anniversary?

It's important because, as I've mentioned, violence seems to be out of control in this country.

Pax Christi can help bring a much more profound awareness that violence is not justified and that we have to try to find ways to bring about peace without violence.

Pope Francis is leading in this. In fact, he's come closer to almost making the Catholic Church a peace church than we've ever seen. Pax Christi right now has a major opportunity. If we can strengthen the movement and begin to spread and develop membership throughout our country, we have an opportunity to have a very

positive, transforming influence on what is happening, and we could work against the violence that's going on within the country and certainly work against the violence of war.

What are your hopes for Pax Christi's racial justice work?

Racism is a form of violence, and so I hope we strengthen our efforts in that specific area of violence because racism is still a form of violence that is very present in our country.

The whole Black Lives Matter movement, I think, is a positive way of working against racism, and we need to act on that very strongly. I'm hoping that Pax Christi will continue its work on anti-racism with a lot of fervor and energy.

What are your hopes for the next 50 years of Pax Christi?

My hope is that we could spread the teaching of Jesus that, as Fr. Richard McSorley, a Jesuit who was very strong in the peace movement, said: "If Jesus did not reject violence for any reason whatsoever, we know nothing about Jesus."

In other words, he's saying that Jesus rejected violence and there's no softening of that teaching or letting it be weakened in any way. He rejected it! And as Christians, we must do the same thing. My hope is that Pax Christi will be ever more effective in bringing about that kind of conviction within the heart and mind of every Catholic in this country, every Christian, and eventually, that our influence would shape our national policies that would reject violence and only develop nonviolent resistance to violence on every level.

Related: Pax Christi celebrates 50 years of Catholic witness against the 'war machine'