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Bishop Thomas Gumbleton holds a letter from Pope Francis on Jan. 26, his final birthday. Francis thanked Gumbleton, who died April 4 at age 94, for his "testimony as a pastor, a good shepherd." (Courtesy of Sue Sattler)



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When Bishop Thomas Gumbleton died on April 4, he was the most senior member of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy. Among those who had recently sent him birthday greetings: Pope Francis.

In a letter to Gumbleton on the occasion of the bishop's 94th birthday on Jan. 26, Francis thanked Gumbleton for his "testimony as a pastor, a good shepherd."

The pope also joked in the letter — which NCR has viewed — that "they say that bad weeds never die."

Bishop Gumbleton funeral

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's funeral Mass will be at 11 a.m. Saturday, April 13, at Detroit's Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament, 9844 Woodward Ave. The Mass will be livestreamed here. For details, click here.

While the pope's words were in jest, over the course of Gumbleton's ecclesial career there were some church leaders who clearly concurred with that assessment.

After a meteoric rise in the church — being named auxiliary bishop of Detroit at age 38, the youngest bishop in the country at the time — Gumbleton never advanced in the hierarchy.

A founding member of Pax Christi USA who traveled the globe as a peace activist and speaking about social justice issues, Gumbleton was known for his deep commitments to church reform and the implementation of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council.

His unapologetic political activism and willingness to question church doctrine on matters of war and peace, women's leadership and LGBTQ Catholic inclusion raised eyebrows among church leaders both in Rome and in the United States. He finished

his church career where he began, in Detroit.

During an April 9 phone call, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sue Sattler — who was a close friend and longtime neighbor of Gumbleton — described to NCR how several Michigan Catholics sought to get the pope to write to him.

Sattler said that Francis' papacy had been a tremendous source of encouragement to Gumbleton and cited a tribute penned by Vatican analyst Robert Mickens in La Croix International following the bishop's death.

"Gumbleton was living among, and advocating for, some of the most marginalized people in society and the Church long before Pope Francis made 'going to the peripheries' Catholicism's preeminent leitmotiv," wrote Mickens.

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While Francis did not personally know Gumbleton, Sattler told NCR that it was Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey — one of the pope's closest U.S. allies and a Detroit native — who eventually arranged for the pope to write to the legendary bishop.

"Initially, he thought it was a prank," Sattler recalled of Gumbleton's reaction upon reading the letter that was presented to him on the evening of what would become his final birthday.

"He read it three times," she said. "It took him an hour and half for him to believe it was real."

Sattler said that Gumbleton later thanked Tobin for his involvement in the papal surprise, saying "there were many involved, but you took it over the finish line."

And on April 13, the cardinal will celebrate the funeral Mass for Gumbleton in their shared hometown — accompanying him across the finish line on his final journey.