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Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton kneels with other demonstrators in front of the W

Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton kneels with other demonstrators in front of the White House Feb. 12, 1998, to protest military strikes against Iraq. Gumbleton died April 4 at 94. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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One thing I know: The words I will write here are either both too late — or will be forever alive.

The public tributes in the media for Bishop Thomas Gumbleton on the occasion of his death made me stop and think. The articles were perfect: They described his move to the seminary as a young man; they talked about his commitment to the work of God in the positions he held in the Archdiocese of Detroit; they explained the number of years from his priestly ordination in 1956 to his episcopal ordination in 1968.

Most of all, they referred to his work for peace and his special understanding of America's negative effect on poor and oppressed people who were already suffering enough in their own country, let alone at the hands of ours. It was a remarkable synthesis of a life lived from ordination in 1956 until his death April 4 at the age of 94.

But more important, perhaps, than the list of the ecclesiastical offices he received — as well as the ones he was denied — was the heart of the man and what drove him.

In years to come, pictures will be passed around to affirm the fact that the death of a clergyman had really packed the cathedral — a clear sign of the impact this man had on the rest of us. No doubt about it. People came from all over to make a final public goodbye that testified to what he had really been to them, to so many of us. The solemnity of the liturgy itself was a sign of what it means to be "eternal."

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Storytelling could have gone on all night from those who knew him from Central America, from Vietnam, from Haiti, from peace and justice conferences around the world. And yet there was still so much more than even global impact to be seen in him.

For personal reasons, I myself could not get to Detroit for his funeral. I knew it would be surrounded in rituals, all of them meant to ease the pain of helplessness that comes as the living and the dead feel the warmth in either hand go cold. But I also knew that I would carry the meaning of it within me whether I had been able to say an official goodbye or not.

Instead of a sense of closure, no funeral would ever be able to strike an end of it for me. Instead, I felt rising within me an aching sense of loss and an even fiercer sense of commitment to carry on what he took with him: the truth of the Gospel; the cry of the prophets; the distinction between the spiritual and the religious, the institution and the faith. He was more than your everyday cleric, smiling, greeting, talking

church. On the contrary, everyone who met him left with an understanding that the world was his congregation and you were simply lucky to have found your way to the center of it.

Indeed, it was the center of him that spoke the loudest, the most convincingly, the surest of them all. Which, of course, is exactly why the church never gave this auxiliary bishop the right of succession as a diocesan bishop. Much of history, unfortunately, attests to the fact that the church commonly fails to recognize its holy ones. Which means that we are all the poorer as a result.

For me, it was three dimensions of his life that made me examine my own: First, his lack of success and his complete disdain in it; second, his voice in the church; finally, his death, and his refusal to quit his speaking, his preaching, his care for the abandoned to the very end.

In one moment of his life, I saw it all.

It was Holy Week in the late 1970s, Good Friday actually, when the community had begun walking in procession for 7 miles from the St. Peter Cathedral in downtown Erie, Pennsylvania, to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie monastery. The purpose was to draw people's attention to those who were being ridiculed, ignored, or left to wither in the world now as Jesus had been then and where too many were living under the newly designed nuclear cloud called "protection."

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton poses for a photo with a group of women during a Voice of the Fai

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton poses for a photo with a group of women during a Voice of the Faithful gathering in Washington Feb. 24, 2007. Gumbleton died April 4 at 94 (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Gumbleton had been a public critic of nuclear weapons for some time and agreed to be part of Holy Week with us in Erie, and so he took his place as leader of the long procession to these new Stations of the Cross.

It was a simple liturgy: The group walked in silence for hours, stopping at multiple places in town to draw attention to their tainting effect on society. The bishop and I took turns carrying a processional cross — I first, he next. Until, well, until I realized that there was a new factor in society that was quietly, consciously, cautioning me to be careful. After all, we had a visitor here.

Erie, Pennsylvania, like every other city in the United States, was struggling to determine whether or not nuclear weapons could possibly be described as national "protection" at all. Public arguments were common. Knowing how disturbing our own public witness might be, I suddenly realized that the dormers on the roofs above us were a straight line from them to us, just like the shot that took the life of John F. Kennedy. Anything, I feared, could happen … and I reached over and took the cross back.

"Wait a minute … What are you doing," he whispered. "It's my turn."

"Not here and not on my territory," I said, smiling.

"Territory or no territory," he said, as he smiled, too, and took the cross back again, "you're a prioress and have a job. I'm just a bishop and we don't do a thing."

That was the inside of him that would last forever: totally self-effacing, completely honest, unassuming, humble — funny, in fact — outspoken for the sake of the oppressed, and unafraid, unafraid, unafraid.

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I watched it all over and over again as the years went by. He never raised his voice. He never turned a statement into an argument or an argument into a war. He never derided people who thought differently than he did. He never, ever, asserted his ecclesiastical authority. He simply continued his call for peace, for justice, for the care of all the little ones everywhere.

Most of all, he went on standing up alone in group after group to face a world of rejection against him — sadly, in both church and state. Elders saw the danger he faced alone to speak for their LGBT children and feared for his own welfare. Colleagues admired him and grew their hearts to match his with the whole globe in mind. The young grew up in the life- illuminating light of a man who labeled no one an enemy, had no fear and spoke for the oppressed everywhere.

From where I stand, bishop or not, successor or not, this is sanctity. The kind that cannot be earned by power and cannot be lost by powerlessness. It can only be the kind of sanctity of which this church in a global world needs more. In itself. Now.