

No Guilty Bystander

*The Extraordinary Life of
Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton*

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PREFACE

Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton

I am an introvert. This might seem a strange statement since I have from time to time been on the local, national or international platform. But I am at my happiest when I am sitting in a comfortable chair and reading a good book. That is why having someone write my biography has been a bit uncomfortable. I would much rather be reading the stories of others.

There have been some real blessings in this process, however. I have been able to reconnect with friends from the past. We have shared memories long forgotten but cherished nonetheless. I have been reminded once again of what blessings these friendships are for me; what life-lessons they have taught me, and how I have been inspired by them to “Keep on keeping on.”

I thank God for all those in my life who have shown me by their example—Thomas Merton, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Franz Jägerstätter, Dorothy Day, Cardinal John Dearden, Archbishop Ray Hunthausen, and many others—what it means to live as followers of Jesus in the struggle for justice. They integrated their whole ways of being into the message of Jesus.

I would add to my “Grateful List” men and women from the parishes where I served who sought to live their Catholic faith in a family setting. I marvel at how parents with jobs, a mortgage, school tuition, managing a household and children, were able to create Catholic families of faith where a guiding principle was the Beatitudes.

I would also include those who did not even know they were an inspiration to me. I have encountered young people around the world and in the United States who received little encouragement from within their countries to build the reign of God. They didn’t give up. They kept struggling to spread the message of peace and nonviolence. I continue to be deeply inspired by these young men and women.

I feel deep gratitude for a trip I took to the Holy Land during the time I was living in Rome. I went with two other priests, and on the way we visited

Cairo. In that city, we were looking for the place where tradition has it that Mary and Joseph took Jesus. Of course, it was in one of the oldest parts of Cairo. As we walked along, we began to come into a large area that was teeming with homeless people. These were people who were living on the streets all the time, without access to water, food, or any clean clothing. It was a situation of absolute poverty. I grew up in Michigan during the Depression. It was a struggle for my parents to pay their bills, and keep us dressed and fed. But our poverty was nothing like that which I experienced that day.

For all those who have allowed me to share in your lives through my priestly ministry and through friendship, thank you. It has been my privilege to celebrate your families' marriages, births, and deaths—and everything in between: family reunions, graduations, and baptisms. You have allowed me the chance to share in the joys and sorrows of your lives, and I am a better person because of your friendship.

By going back over my ninety-plus years in preparation for this book, I have been reminded of how history repeats itself. As followers of Jesus, we know our clarion call: to be doers of God's word and to build God's reign in the here-and-now. This call is one that has guided my life. The challenge has not changed over the years.

How do we respond to this call? Start with one thing: the defense of democracy, opposition to human trafficking, reform of the prison system, support for LGBTQ rights. . . . And be aware. Keep reading to find out what is going on in the world and let yourself be touched by the events around you. For example, a recent issue is climate change. We are at the point of bringing harm to our planet that will make it unlivable within the next twenty years. This issue needs to be faced, as Pope Francis spelled out for us in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

Lest all of this seem overwhelming, the important thing is to recognize that each of us has a small part to play in the whole picture. No one does it alone. We must join with others in common efforts to bring about the kind of societal changes that are necessary.

Finally, since our task is to build up the reign of God, we must have as our basis a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus. I remember that I was once told that we should act as though everything depended on us and pray as though everything depended on God. But more recently I've come to know that we must pray as though everything depends on us, but that the results depend on God. With that kind of spirit, we can constantly move forward with calmness and determination in our effort to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible. As Jesus put it in his call to each of us, "The reign of God is at hand. Change your lives."

INTRODUCTION

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, the famous spiritual master and Trappist monk-poet Thomas Merton described himself as necessarily something of a “guilty bystander,” living a monastic life in retreat from the swirl of social forces and conflicts “out there” in the world. It could be argued, however, that through his prolific writings about the spiritual life and its inescapable ties to wider social currents and concerns, in fact, Merton was no guilty bystander.

The same could be said of the subject of this book, Thomas Gumbleton. When it comes to many things that truly matter, he has not been a guilty bystander. *No Guilty Bystander* captures the broad range of social concerns, historical forces, and systemic injustices, both in society and in the church, that have engaged him. This book endeavors to be a worthy examination of a remarkable life, but it also aims to provide insight on the social forces, movements, and reactions surrounding his life story. The operative premise upon which this book relies is: “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society [and a church as well, in this case] can be understood without understanding both.” (C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*)

From war and peace to poverty and marginalization, from the primacy of conscience to the call to collective advocacy and activism, from pastoring neighborhood parishes to accompanying the vulnerable across the globe, *No Guilty Bystander* relates the story of an extraordinary life. In telling this story we have drawn on a treasure trove of archival sources as well as interviews and conversations with both its central subject and many of the people with whom he has journeyed.

Part One starts not at a chronological beginning but rather at a profound turning point (not the first, and certainly not the last), when Fr. Tom Gumbleton first became aware of what his nation was doing in Southeast Asia. The story then shifts back to the 1930s to his family home and childhood,

his seminary years and the emergence of the highly “competitive Gump,” then to the young priest who becomes, in 1968, a young bishop called to action on behalf of justice and Gospel-inspired nonviolence, a Christmas Eve presence to U.S. hostages in Tehran, a key role in the committee of bishops charged with writing a pastoral letter on the morality of nuclear weapons, and a tenacious commitment to various forms of peace work during the decades thereafter.

Part Two begins with another period of personal transformation, relating what happened in Tom Gumbleton’s heart and ministry when his brother Dan came out as gay. It then traces Bishop Gumbleton’s steps as he responded to the assassination of San Salvador’s Archbishop Romero, and the brutal rape and murder of his friend Sr. Dorothy Kazel and three other missionaries in El Salvador. We chronicle some of his many journeys of accompaniment and solidarity in Central America and follow with the story of his response to the cries of the Iraqi people, the victims of 9/11, and the people of Afghanistan. In the course of his ministry Gumbleton traveled to some thirty countries, some on multiple occasions. No single volume can begin to document the complete itinerary of his global reach; in fact, in the interests of space, we have had to omit numerous campaigns and commitments and greatly abbreviate some of these episodes. But this book includes two poignant and transformative experiences, first in Haiti, his work with Kay Lasante, the non-profit health clinic he helped to found (the clinic will receive the royalties from sales of this book), and then in a small village in Austria, the home of war objector Franz Jägerstätter. Finally, no adequate account of Gumbleton’s ministry could overlook the many years of pastoring and the bonds he made, beginning in 1983, with St. Leo’s parish in Detroit, nor what happened in 2006 and 2007 when, on behalf of sex-abuse victims, he gave deeply personal testimony that upset some higher powers in the Catholic Church. This resulted in his removal from his beloved St. Leo’s.

Part III offers a portrait of Tom Gumbleton’s character, including what might seem to be some contradictions or paradoxes. The final chapter explores his significance, from the wellsprings that have fed his soul to the causes and energies that have propelled him to far corners of the planet.

This is a story filled with pathos and even anger over so many injustices, and yet it is no less a story filled with hope and inspiration, one capable of both probing and stimulating our consciences. *No Guilty Bystander* aims to bring to better light the inner and outer journeys of a man who became a transformational figure on the world stage and in his hometown of Detroit, and whose influence in the church and the wider world is yet to be fully measured or vindicated. May this story offer inspiration and courage in an unjust, conflicted, and anguished world.