

Gumbleton removed from parish; Requests, no demonstrations, no 'media circus'
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Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, retired auxiliary bishop of Detroit, announced at Sunday Mass Dec. 17 that he was being asked to leave St. Leo's Parish in Detroit, where he has been stationed since 1983.

Gumbleton told NCR that he expects a new pastor to be appointed within a month. He also said he expects to continue his weekly column, The Peace Pulpit, on the NCR website.

He said that the move has been in the works for six to eight months as part of the archdiocese's plan to restructure parishes in Detroit. St. Leo's will be "clustered" with a nearby parish and the pastor of the other parish, which has not been named yet, will become pastor of St. Leo's. Gumbleton left administrative positions with the archdiocese to take over as full time pastor of the inner city parish in 1994.

He told NCR in a telephone interview Dec. 19, "Once it became clear that our parish was going to be clustered then it was also quite clear that I would not be pastor of the cluster because I am already past retirement age." Gumbleton will be 77 next month.

Gumbleton said that he had hoped to continue to live at St. Leo's but the request had been denied. "I suppose it's so that the new pastor has a chance to take over and be seen as the pastor," he said.

"If I'm hanging around too much, it could make it more difficult for him, and I don't want that. My main concern is that the parish keeps going, so I don't want to do something that would be divisive," he said.

He said he was to take up residence "at a couple nearby places." He said, "I will not be pastor here, but I will still be functioning as a bishop. I will be doing confirmations and I will still be celebrating Mass publicly, but it will be at various places not one place."

Gumbleton is a native of Detroit and was ordained a priest of the archdiocese in 1956. He was ordained auxiliary bishop in 1968. He has long been critical of the archdiocese's parish restructuring plans. He has said closing schools and parishes amounts to abandoning the city.

"This whole process where you cluster parishes and so on, I think is hurtful to the development of the church within the city. But it is happening in the suburbs too," Gumbleton told NCR.

"I don't think the church becomes most alive when parishes become mega-churches. I think smaller communities are much more vibrant and much more expressive of a community of disciples than big churches. [Big churches] become big service stations."

He said if there are not enough priests to serve as pastors, "You train other people to take over as pastoral administrators, which is provided for in canon law. Lay people and religious.

"It's being done in other places. You have to get a sacramental minister, but the pastoral administrator is the leader of the community and it can work very effectively. I've seen it work," he said.

He declined to name the new pastor because the man is a religious order priest and must have permission from his superiors before accepting the appointment.

Gumbleton did say that the parish St. Leo's would be clustered with was compatible with the current parish community. "It is a parish that has a similar outlook and a similar way of acting that we do. It is one that could be compatible. I feel confident that these two parishes could work together and one pastor could make both go OK," he said.

He also said that it is not one of three parishes that St. Leo's pastoral council had recommended earlier this month as possible partners in a cluster.

Gumbleton also said he was anxious that his last days at St. Leo's not be turned into "a media circus."

"I would just as soon not have Sunday liturgy become something that is about me. I want to keep the parish going as a parish as we have for 20 some years," he said.

"I don't see any point in people coming to demonstrate or anything of the sort. It's not like it's my funeral Mass or something like that. I just want everything to continue to be as much for the parish as possible and not be flooded with outsiders.

"Christmas celebrations and Sunday liturgies should continue to be parish liturgies and not liturgies that are all about me. We have a very vibrant parish community and I want it to be that way."

In January 2005, when Gumbleton turned 75, he did not submit a mandatory letter of resignation to the Vatican. Instead, he began a yearlong correspondence with the Congregation of Bishops seeking permission to continue to serve as long as he was healthy. The congregation denied this request and Gumbleton submitted a letter of resignation in January 2006.

Last year when he told his parish that he had submitted the letter, he had said the resignation "affects the canonical office of bishop only."

He said his ministry at St. Leo would continue to be a priority, and he pledged to "continue to exercise my ordained ministry as a bishop as long as I am physically capable of doing so. This means that I will continue to teach, preach, celebrate sacraments and carry on my work for justice and peace wherever I am called to do so."
