

MESSENGER FOR PEACE: Controversial leader preaches against war

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Bishop Thomas Gumbleton greets Kelly City, 32, of Detroit and her 2-week-old son Anthony Hodges during the exchange of the sign of peace in a mass Sunday at St. Leo's Catholic Church in Detroit. Gumbleton, who turned 75 last month, says he's not interested in retiring.

He's the longest-serving active Catholic bishop in the United States, elevated by Pope Paul VI in 1968 as the youngest American priest ever conferred the title.

He's a symbol of the Catholic peace movement worldwide and one of the few remaining liberal leaders in an American Catholic church shaped by Pope John Paul II's appointments of conservative prelates.

But most Sundays, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, an auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Detroit, still celebrates mass at St. Leo Catholic Church in a run-down neighborhood northwest of downtown Detroit. Three weeks ago, on Jan. 26, he marked his 75th birthday. According to Vatican practice, he was required to send the pope a letter offering to resign.

As a faithful servant, Gumbleton complied.

"But I suggested it may not be appropriate to resign," the bishop said last week.

A BISHOP'S ACTIONS

Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton has been a persistent advocate of progressive and pacifist causes. A sampling:

1979: He joined a small group of American clergy visiting hostages in Iran at Christmas.

1983: He coauthored bishops' statement that condemned the nuclear arms race.

1987: He was arrested while protesting at a nuclear-weapons test site in Nevada -- one of many encounters with police over the years during peaceful protests across the United States.

1986: He campaigned to raise \$100 million in humanitarian aid for Nicaragua, which he visited.

Quotes

ON ORDAINING WOMEN, 1994: "I've been supportive of women's ordination for a long time, and whenever I talk about social sins, I always talk about the sin of sexism. I think this is a justice issue."

ON GAY CATHOLICS, 1997: "The more the experiences of gay and lesbian people are shared within the whole church, there will be an evolution, I am confident, in the way we teach about human sexuality."

Gumbleton's weekly homilies are published on the National Catholic Reporter's Web site, www.nationalcatholicreporter.org/peace.

Sources: Free Press archives

Gumbleton said he cited the shortage of Catholic priests and how older priests and bishops "can be a witness to living a productive life" as reasons to postpone his retirement. The 84-year-old pontiff -- immobilized by arthritis and recently hospitalized by the flu and breathing difficulties exacerbated by Parkinson's disease -- is himself an example of long, faithful service for senior clerics.

Gumbleton declined to make a copy of his letter public, but, forecasting the Vatican's reaction, said, "I don't think it's going to fly."

To the supporters who view Gumbleton as one of the church's leading prophetic figures, an immediate acceptance of his resignation would be viewed as a slap. But even if the Vatican forces him to retire, it wouldn't change things much for Gumbleton.

That's because since 1994, at Gumbleton's request, Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida cut Gumbleton loose from structured responsibilities. Unlike other auxiliary bishops in the six-county archdiocese, Gumbleton isn't in charge of administrative duties, such as overseeing a group of parishes. Gumbleton pretty much steers his own course.

"It would not change anything at all. It's more of a symbol," said Gumbleton of a possible Vatican pronouncement that he is retired.

A formal retirement also wouldn't prevent Gumbleton from continuing as pastor of St. Leo, his home since 1983, or from keeping his multiple speaking engagements around the world.

"He would still be a pastor of the archdiocese," said Ned McGrath, a spokesman for the southeastern Michigan archdiocese. And Gumbleton still would be called on to officiate at ceremonies at parishes around metro Detroit.

In practice, the pope often allows bishops to serve well past their 75th year. But the pope's decades-long shift toward choosing bishops who would not think of challenging Vatican positions suggests that a Gumbleton resignation might be snapped up more quickly than others.

Maida will celebrate his milestone birthday next month and also is expected to send a letter of resignation to the Vatican. But nobody expects the pope to accept it. Detroit's former archbishop, Cardinal Edmund Szoka, continues to work as governor of the Vatican City State, though he turned 75 in 2002.

Gumbleton was 38 when he was made a bishop, an appointment that reflected the influence of the late Detroit Cardinal John Dearden, who wanted to encourage new, younger leadership after the Second Vatican Council of the mid-1960s put more emphasis on modernizing church practices.

A founder of the Catholic peace group Pax Christi, Gumbleton remains a persistent but soft-spoken advocate for progressive and pacifist causes. He championed for poor people and fought against social injustice in Latin and South America. He spearheaded humanitarian missions to Iraq before the war to protest the UN's economic blockade of goods and services.

Gumbleton also has been a visible advocate for more acceptance of gay people, questioning the church's teaching that gay sexual relationships are wrong. Gumbleton, saying a person's sexual orientation is defined at birth, has called such relationships a matter for each person's conscience. He said he spoke out after conversations with his mother and a brother, who was gay. Gumbleton reassured his mother that God would not punish his brother for living as a gay man in a long-term relationship.

In the 1990s, Gumbleton said he saw no reason that women should not be ordained priests, other than the church's traditional refusal to do so. The only other Catholic bishop in the United States to express such a view was Gumbleton's close friend, the late Saginaw Bishop Kenneth Untener.

Gumbleton, said Jay McNally, who was editor of the Detroit archdiocese's weekly newspaper, the Michigan Catholic, in 1990-95, is "a minority voice of dissent."

"He has challenged and opposed Catholic Church teaching on key issues ... for decades. On matters of faith, he's been a big problem," said McNally, who helped organize a conservative Catholic group, Call to Holiness. "His resignation will be a happy day for the Catholic Church."

Though often at odds with conservative thinkers, Gumbleton is among the most outspoken advocates of the pope's teachings on topics such as world peace, regularly repeating the pontiff's words in his speeches. While other U.S. bishops have been timid in stressing John Paul's outspoken opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Gumbleton eagerly reminds groups of the pope's teachings.

What has given many conservative U.S. bishops fits is the way that Gumbleton tries to push the 1-billion-member church to rethink other positions. He has been singled out a number of times for critical attacks by opponents at meetings of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. If the Vatican accepts his retirement, Gumbleton would no longer be a voting member of the group.

"He's a risk-taker," said Sister Maureen Sinnott, a Franciscan nun and psychologist, who was among the 200 people at St. Leo's 11 a.m. mass Sunday. "He says what's right, just like Jesus did. He says it so gently and so honestly, and it's always been about peace."

Later this month, Gumbleton plans to travel to Haiti to work on providing health care ministries in the slums of Port-au-Prince and to chronicle human rights violations. In April, he'll be part of a peace delegation to Cuba.

But he makes it a priority to be back for Sunday mass, a lively affair with a gospel choir and a racially diverse congregation. In most Catholic churches, mass-goers spend a minute exchanging the Peace of Christ handshake with people in adjacent pews. At St. Leo's, the ritual is a 10-minute celebration, as parishioners welcome friends and newcomers alike as Gumbleton roams among them.

In his sermon Sunday, to his congregation's applause, Gumbleton tied together the sacrifice that Lent requires of Catholics with criticism of American society's emphasis on wealth and the U.S. government's decisions in regard to the Iraq war.

"Blind obedience" to any Earthly power, Gumbleton said, "is a failure of responsibility.

"We have to listen deeply to God and follow where God takes us."

Though he jokes that he is "always in denial about birthdays," he is trim and fit. While during Lent Catholics are expected to fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday -- two light meals and one full meal with no meat -- Gumbleton will do that each of the season's 40 days. He sleeps on a futon on the floor of a room next to the church office. The rectory has been turned over to a program that helps new mothers beat addictions.

"Bishop is our inspiration and our motivator," Wilbert Dorsey, 55, a church usher, said Sunday. Gumbleton paid tuition for Dorsey to attend school to become a nurse's aide, Dorsey said, something Gumbleton acknowledges he has done for students of all ages.

No matter what the Vatican decides, Gumbleton will retain the title of bishop. Said the Rev. Thomas Reese, a Jesuit priest and editor of America magazine, "You can't scrape away the sacrament of ordination" for bishops.