

A 94 YEAR OLD AMERICAN BISHOP - THOMAS GUMBLETON – REFLECTS ON HIS LIFE

This essay is drawn from Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton's preface to No Guilty Bystander, a biography of him published in 2023 by Frank Fromherz and Suzanne Sattler. He died in April 2024..

I am an introvert. This might seem a strange statement since I have from time to time been on local, national or international platforms. 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 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 Óscar 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 and school tuition manage a household and children and create Catholic families of faith where a guiding principle is 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 youth.

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 entered 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 90-plus years, I have been reminded 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 defence of democracy. Human trafficking. The prison system. L.G.B.T. 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 more recent issue is climate change. We are at the point of bringing harm to our planet that will make it unlivable within the next 20 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 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.*"