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Gumbleton: Nothing but the truth

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

There are moments in life when the details of an event become largely irrelevant. What particular incident started World War II is hardly as important anymore as the millions of people who were killed in it. Whether or not cigarette smoking is a "benign" addiction -- one of the kind easily handled by "just saying no" -- is a meaningless conversation. The fact is that more than 400,000 people die every year from the effects of cigarettes.

And now, in the archdiocese of Detroit, we have another moment where the effects of an action may be far more important than the legal niceties that explain it. Whatever the reasons for the loss of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton as auxiliary bishop of Detroit and pastor of St. Leo Parish there, the fact is that the fallout from such a move is major in this church at this time in history. The resignation/removal/whatever of Bishop Gumbleton brings to the foreground some issues of church that no amount of canon law can ever dispel.

The details behind the removal -- and there is, no doubt, a great deal behind it -- are not all that clear. The general contours of the situation are, however:

First, bishops are required to tender their resignation to the Roman pontiff at the age of 75. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is surely meant to protect the church from incompetent administration, from theological stagnation, from chronic inactivity, from physical debilitation.

What is equally important to remember, however, is that 75 is not a magic number. The pope is not required to accept a bishop's resignation. In fact, some are even being appointed at that age. Jozef Glemp, 77, for example, was just appointed apostolic administrator of Warsaw on Jan. 6, 2007. Bishop Robert Sarrabere, at the age of 80, was made apostolic administrator of Montauban, France, on Jan. 7, 2007. (See: www.catholic-hierarchy.org.) And that's good, too. When you have a charismatic bishop, when you have effective pastoring, when you have a model of Christian community that is dynamic, visionary and healthy, why would you interrupt its growth? Or as the kids say so clearly, so eloquently, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Clearly, 75 is not a magic number. A good many episcopal resignations have not been accepted at that age. The cardinal archbishop of Dublin, Desmond Connell, for instance, stayed solidly in place until he was 78 and might very well have been there still if not for his involvement in the sex scandals of this period.

Secondly, we are deep into a period of priestless parishes. Churches are being clustered -- two or three parishes are being served by a single circuit-rider priest -- around the world and across the United States, as well. In other places, once-retired priests are being redeployed to act as caretaker residents of otherwise defunct parishes. In this particular case, in Detroit, St. Leo Parish, which Bishop Gumbleton requested to go on serving, will now be administered instead by a non-resident priest who will function at the same time as formation director at the local major seminary.

Finally, The Urban Parish Coalition, a group under the umbrella of the Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance, placed ads in the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* that read "Bishop Thomas Gumbleton...Life-long Detroit, Priest, Pastor, Bishop, Elder, Global Peacemaker, Visionary, Prophet, Spiritual Leader and Friend.....We honor, respect and love you. ...We are opposed to the decision to remove you as Pastor of St. Leo the Great Parish, Detroit."

How many of those kinds of ads, ads praising a bishop, have we seen lately? It's a far cry from the ads run in the *Boston Globe*, for instance, calling for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law. You'd think a church would be giddy with glee to see such a thing happen.

So, the question is not whether or not what has been done has been done legally. Of course it has. Rome has the power, we are reminded often, to do whatever it wants to do to the clerical personnel of the church. The question is only, "Should they?"

And that's where the scriptures provide an eerie challenge to the news story of the day. "Let your light shine," it reads. But how shall we recognize what is the light? The criteria is plain: (Matthew 5:1-10) The light is in those who are poor in spirit and gentle, who mourn over the suffering of the world and thirst for justice; who are merciful and pure of heart; who are peacemakers and persecuted for the cause of right.

Advertisement

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, international peacemaker, advocate for the poor and oppressed, proponent of justice and truth-teller of the church -- even about the church -- people everywhere are saying, meets that criteria with startling clarity. That only makes the situation harder to understand, more difficult to grasp. It's not so much either the resignation or the loss of the parish, however difficult that may be for everyone involved, that makes us wonder. After all, there's nothing wrong with change.

But in this case, at this time in church history, at this moment when the church has lost such public credibility, when the church needs priests, when this is one of the most effective proclaimers of the Gospel in the public arena, when this is obviously one of the most loved church leaders we have, why lose this one to the public face of the church?

If you read the comments of parishioners and colleagues which this story has evoked, it is the rest of the scripture that troubles them, it seems. "No one," the scripture goes on, "lights a lamp to put it under a barrel; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house."

"No pastoral office whatsoever," the letter from the Congregation for Bishops accepting his resignation says. No position in the diocese at all? No office of peace and justice? No position as special envoy to anyone for anything? Strange, isn't it? But if this is the case, what happens to the light?

When Cardinal Bernard Law resigned for not telling the truth about pedophile priests, Rome gave him a promotion, a position on five of the curial congregations of the church, St. Mary Major, one of the four principal churches in Rome, and a luxurious Roman apartment. On the other hand, this bishop, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, told the truth, even about his having been abused by a priest himself when he was a young seminarian. Most of all, he took the position that it is the obligation of bishops to bring transparency, accountability and justice to the plight of sex abuse victims, whatever the financial ramifications for the church itself.

From where I stand, it looks to me as if we won't know for sure what really happened here till we see what they give Tom Gumbleton. But in the meantime, the question looms large for all of us: What is going on in a church that stamps out the light?

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