Review of No Guilty Bystander: The Extraordinary Life of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

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In their book about Bishop Tom Gumbleton, Frank Fromherz and Susanne Sattler, IHM have made a great contribution to the understanding of the U.S. Catholic Church’s witness to Catholic Social Teaching in the last half of the 20th Century and the first decades of the 21st Century. There is hardly a social justice issue or moral crisis in the last sixty years that Bishop Gumbleton did not play a role in helping U.S. Catholics understand and respond to in light of the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching. He symbolizes authentic Christian discipleship in the public arena.

Tom Gumbleton was not a single issue Catholic. His compassion and strong commitment to justice touched all aspects of the social, political, religious, and economic lives of Catholic living in the United States. But Bishop Gumbleton was more than a product of his times; he helped shape the times he lived in. He was a doer of the Word, not merely a hearer of the Word.

As Fromherz and Sattler point out in their book, there was a repeating pattern or discipline in all of Bishop Gumbleton’s activism. It always started with taking the time to listen to the stories of those who suffer; those who are outcasts, oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised. This would lead to a conversion of heart and mind, which would lead him to nonviolent direct action to alleviate the suffering and address the root causes of the social injustice. Bishops Gumbleton did not merely “hear” the cry of the poor; he “listened” to the cry of the poor. His life has been a continuous process of being converted by the cry of the poor.

For me, the most interesting parts of the book were all the backstories and details about events and movements I thought I knew. This was especially true in the authors’ account of the writing of the 1983 bishops’ peace pastoral. While it was true that the writing of this pastoral received more media attention than any statement or pastoral in U.S. Catholic history; there was still so much more to the story than what was reported in the press. The contributions the authors made in filling the gaps of these historical events will benefit readers and future historians for years to come.

The most touching chapter was the story of Bishop Gumbleton coming to terms with his brother’s homosexuality and his solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community as they struggled for recognition of their human dignity in the Church. Tom’s story was deeply moving; not always heroic, but honest and authentic. Throughout this chapter the authors demonstrate how Bishop Gumbleton always put the dignity of the human person ahead of doctrine, dogma, and tradition.
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The authors had the daunting task of introducing readers to the many commitments and acts of solidarity that marked Bishop Gumbleton’s extraordinary life. To accomplish this task, they decided on an episodic style of storytelling. As a result, we are offered many different story lines. We see Tom the anti-war/anti-nuke peace activist; Tom the international solidarity activist; Tom the Church reformer; Tom the inner-city pastor; Tom the champion of victims of sexual abuse by Church leaders, etc. At times it felt like reading the script of a TV mini-series.

What’s missing is the connective narrative tissue that holds these various storylines together. The authors do a good job of highlighting Bishop Gumbleton’s personal character, his commitment to nonviolence, his authenticity and integrity that remain constant themes through all the events of his life and animated his involvement in so many issues of social justice and peace. But what is lacking are the ways these different storylines intersected and informed each other.

For instance, I wanted to know more about how his inner-city African American parish influenced his devotion to the people of Haiti. How did Bishop Gumbleton connect the violence in Haiti to the violence experienced by his parishioners from the police, the criminal justice system, and the ever-increasing economic inequality? How did his solidarity work in Central America inform his pastoral work at St. Leo’s? And how did his parishioners feel about his commitments to people of color around the world?

Despite these shortcomings, Sattler and Fromherz have made a great contribution to the understanding of some of the most amazing episodes in U.S. Catholic history and they have provided a great introduction to the exceptional life of Tom Gumbleton.

*Tom is a former staff person and chair of the Pax Christi National Council. He is a retired pastoral minister responsible for educating parishioners about Catholic Social Teaching and provided them with opportunities to act for justice. Tom was named a Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace in 2002.*