

Catholic Social Thought and Gun Violence

By Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

“We must come to the firm determination that there is a fundamental problem in our society. A Culture of Life cannot tolerate, and must prevent, senseless gun violence in all its forms.”

Twenty-four years ago, the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote: “Our families are torn by violence. Our communities are destroyed by violence. Our faith is tested by violence.”¹

Not only was violence then destroying lives, dignity, and hopes, the bishops wrote, but fear of violence was “paralyzing and polarizing our communities.”

The violence then described by the bishops is now compounded in our consciousness by terrorism abroad, wars across the Middle East, mass shootings in places like San Bernardino, Charleston, Sandy Hook, Orlando, and now Parkland, school shootings and shootings by police and others of Black men, women, and children, shootings of police officers, and violent political discourse. Despite our impressions and fears, as the bishops then noted, “It doesn’t have to be this way.”



Change has to begin in this nation because, as the bishops continued, “No nation on earth, except those in the midst of war, has as much violent behavior as we do—in our homes, on our televisions, and in our streets...” At the heart of much of this violence are guns—from handguns to assault weapons. There are almost as many guns in the United States as there are people.²

Change begins with the simple sign seen on some church properties: *Thou shalt not kill*. The fifth commandment’s mandate is rooted in the essential dignity and sanctity of every human life—life that is tragically assaulted by every bullet that tears through human flesh. One practical and compelling step in reducing gun violence is gun control, as the bishops have written:

We support measures that control the sale and use of firearms and make them safer (especially efforts that prevent their unsupervised use by children or anyone other than the owner), and we reiterate our call for sensible regulations of handguns.³

REFLECTION

In a recent statement, the bishops's conference enumerated its support for “implementing reasonable regulations on firearms” such as: universal background checks for all gun purchasers; limiting civilian access to high-capacity weapons and ammunition magazines; making gun trafficking a federal crime; improving access to mental health and addiction treatment for those who may be prone to violence; and supporting reentry programs to help people avoid re-offending.⁴

The Vatican has urged the international community “to assume its responsibility in establishing an obligatory legal framework aimed at regulating the trade of conventional weapons of any type, as well as of know-how and technology for their production.”⁵ As one of the world's leading producers and exporters of conventional arms, the United States has a heightened responsibility to add support for control of conventional weapons to our existing commitment to control of weapons of mass destruction.



Gun violence is nurtured by a pervasive culture of violence.

Popes and bishops repeatedly have urged us to confront that larger culture in many different ways. As Saint Pope John Paul II put it, To choose life involves rejecting every form of violence: the violence of poverty and hunger, which afflicts so many human beings; the violence of armed conflict; the violence of criminal trafficking in drugs and arms; the violence of mindless damage to the natural environment.⁶

The U.S. bishops also have emphasized confronting domestic violence, the glamorization of violence in the media and music, abortion, and “the slowmotion violence of discrimination and poverty, hunger and hopelessness, addiction and selfdestructive behavior.”⁷

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ENDNOTES

¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*, November 1994.

² “According to the Congressional Research Service, there are roughly twice as many guns per capita in the U.S. as there were in 1968: more than 300 million guns in all,” <http://n.pr/2oyRH0t>.

³ U.S. Catholic Conference, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, November 2000, no. 4.

⁴ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Domestic Social Development, *A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence*, January 2016.

⁵ Statement by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on behalf of the Holy See concerning the International Trade in Conventional Weapons, October 10, 2006, no. 3.

⁶ Saint Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, no. 57.

⁷ *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, op. cit.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. After the Parkland shooting, Bishop Gumbleton declared: “these children are telling us what needs to be done and committing themselves to do it. Why aren’t we adults becoming more convinced that we have to change our lives just as Jesus says to change your lives, follow the Gospel, live according to the way of Jesus? ... In the garden before he was put to death when someone tried to protect him with a weapon, ‘Put away your sword. Those who live by the sword die by the sword.’ Jesus has shown us a different way. Give up violence, give up the idea that violence can overcome violence, that one gun can be better than another and bring peace. It won’t.” Why is it so difficult for so many adults who believe they are people of faith to follow Jesus’s teaching and example on nonviolence? What does Bishop Gumbleton mean when he says that, following Pope John Paul’s lead, violence cannot overcome violence? Why?
2. Arguments for guns are often promoted on a rights basis: it is a matter of “the right” to have a gun because of the Second Amendment. But Americans also have a “right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Catholic social teaching posits that there is a hierarchy of rights: while owners of companies have a right to profit, that must be secondary to workers’s rights to decent pay and safe working conditions. Discuss whose rights are being given more importance in the current debate, gun owners or students? Why this might be the case, and what are ways to reframe the discussion on rights?
3. Pope Francis has spoken out about those who make money from producing arms and trading arms, calling them “merchants of death” concerned more about “getting rich” than about human lives. How and why has the legal sale of weapons become big business in the U.S.? How does this effect efforts to control guns? How is the common good impacted when profits are always put first?
4. An important value in Catholic social teaching is the Option for the Poor. A young man from an inner city area of Philadelphia, Clay Cane, recently wrote that guns purchased legally are flooding into neighborhoods like his, where so many youth see no hope for a better life: “Guns are acts of violence against America’s most marginalized communities;” the guns “that plague cities from Chicago to Philadelphia flood in from states with loose gun laws. . . these firearms are bought at legal gun show, transported over state lines and sold via straw purchases to criminals...[and] cause havoc in communities of color...does the NRA believe gang members in inner cities are manufacturing guns in the basement?” He notes people are profiting from this awful trade, as gun victims continue to die. How does his first-hand assessment relate to Pope Francis’s and the U.S. Bishops’s concerns? What are some of the connections between poverty and guns and profit?

FAITH IN ACTION

- See marchforourlives.com to support students marching against gun violence.
- See The Brady Campaign (www.bradycampaign.org) and The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (www.csgv.org) websites for advocacy suggestions.

PRAYER

Christ, Prince of Peace, we mourn for all the students who have been murdered in school gun violence in the U.S., and for all those slaughtered by guns in this country. We pray that their souls may rest in your peace, and that, in their memory, we may advocate for comprehensive gun reform. We ask your forgiveness for the senseless violence that has been allowed to continue because of the accessibility of weapons. We commit to respond to your call for peace and to become peacemakers in your name. Bless our efforts, bless our children, and bless this country. Amen.