



Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development
Office of Domestic Social Development

A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence
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“[W]e know that this “piecemeal” violence, of different kinds and levels, causes great suffering: wars in different countries and continents; terrorism, organized crime and unforeseen acts of violence; the abuses suffered by migrants and victims of human trafficking; and the devastation of the environment. Where does this lead? Can violence achieve any goal of lasting value? . . . Violence is not the cure for our broken world. Countering violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of young people, families experiencing hardship, the elderly, the infirm and the great majority of people in our world. At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all.” Pope Francis, Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2017.

BACKGROUND:

The news is filled with reports of violence, of news of mass shootings at home and raging wars abroad. Many studies conclude that mass shootings—when defined as four or more people shot in a single incident—have reached one or more per day in the United States. Overseas, the war in Syria has claimed hundreds of thousands dead, and displaced millions of refugees. Other conflicts take innocent lives around the world. More than ever, the Church and all people of good will must work together to confront the pervasive culture of violence.

The Church has been a consistent voice for the promotion of peace at home and around the world, and a strong advocate for the reasonable regulation of firearms. Christ’s love and mercy must guide us. The Church recognizes that recourse to self-defense is legitimate for one’s own safety. In today’s world, however, weapons that are increasingly capable of inflicting great suffering in a short period of time are simply too accessible.

USCCB POSITION:

In 1994, recalling the words of Pope Paul VI, “if you want peace, work for justice,” the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral message, *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*. The bishops stated, “We have an obligation to respond. Violence -- in our homes, our schools and streets, our nation and world -- is destroying the lives, dignity and hopes of millions of our sisters and brothers.”

With this reality in mind, the USCCB supported the Assault Weapons Ban initially passed in 1994 but which expired in 2004. In 2000, the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, and called for all people to work toward a culture of life, to do more to end violence in our homes, and to help victims break out of patterns of abuse. Regarding gun violence prevention the bishops wrote, “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 regulation of handguns.”

The U.S. bishops have also addressed domestic violence. In their 2002 statement, *When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, the bishops emphatically declared that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified and that violence, whether physical, sexual,

psychological or verbal, is immoral. The bishops also acknowledged the toll domestic violence takes on men but especially children who are particularly sensitive to the impacts of such evil acts.

In addition to several statements and testimony offered to Congress on gun violence following several of the tragedies in recent years, the USCCB formed a Special Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities in response to the violence of the summer of 2016, which issued a Final Report and Recommendations in the fall of that year. The USCCB has consistently urged policy changes in the wake of violent tragedies which have become far too frequent in our cities and towns.

ACTION:

For many years, the USCCB has supported a number of reasonable measures to address the problem of gun violence. These include:

- A total ban on assault weapons, which the USCCB supported when the ban passed in 1994 and when Congress failed to renew it in 2004.
- Measures that control the sale and use of firearms, such as universal background checks for all gun purchases;
- Limitations on civilian access to high-capacity weapons and ammunition magazines;
- A federal law to criminalize gun trafficking;
- Improved access to and increased resources for mental health care and earlier interventions;
- Regulations and limitations on the purchasing of handguns;
- Measures that make guns safer, such as locks that prevent children and anyone other than the owner from using the gun without permission and supervision; and
- An honest assessment of the toll of violent images and experiences which inundate people, particularly our youth.

At the Bishops' General Assembly in fall of 2019, Bishop Frank J. Dewane, then Chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, gave a comprehensive overview of various policy responses to gun violence, and spoke favorably of Extreme Risk Protection Orders among other options. The USCCB also supports recent proposals to set a more appropriate minimum age for gun ownership, and to ban "bump stocks." Finally, the USCCB supports wholistic measures, such as the promotion of mercy and peacebuilding in our communities through restorative justice policies and practices, ongoing encounters and discussions at the parish level regarding violence in communities.

Catholics and all people of good will are urged to contact their Senators and Representative to support policy and legislative measures that uphold the safety and wellbeing of all persons in our communities.

RESOURCES:

Remarks of Bishop Frank J. Dewane of Venice, FL, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Delivered to the General Assembly of Bishops in Baltimore, MD, November 11, 2019. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/violence/remarks-bishop-dewane-responses-to-the-plague-of-gun-violence-2019-11-11.cfm>

Statement of Bishop Frank J. Dewane of Venice, Florida, Chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice, Urging True Debate on Gun Violence, November 7, 2017.

<http://www.usccb.org/news/2017/17-210.cfm>

USCCB Special Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities: Final Report and Recommendations, November 10, 2016.

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/racism-task-force-report-20161110-peace-in-our-communities.pdf>

Testimony of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops before Senate Committee on the Judiciary, February 12, 2013. "Proposals to Reduce Gun Violence: Protecting Our Communities While Respecting the Second Amendment." <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/upload/USCCB-Senate-Testimony-Proposals-to-Reduce-Gun-Violence-2013.pdf>

Letter from Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, California, Chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice, in Support of the Safe Communities, Safe Schools Act of 2013, April 8, 2013.

<http://www.usccb.org/about/domestic-social-development/upload/2013-April-8-Letter-to-Senate-on-Gun-Violence-from-Bishop-Blaire.pdf>

Call for Action in Response to Newton Tragedy: Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, and Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne- South Bend, December 21, 2012.

<http://www.usccb.org/news/2012/12-219.cfm>

USCCB Assault Weapons Backgrounder, February 2005.

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/assault-weapons-background.cfm>

Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice, 2002.

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm>

Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action, 1994.

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/violence/confronting-a-culture-of-violence-a-catholic-framework-for-action.cfm>

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