



Catholic Social Thought and Gun Violence

Twenty-two 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, and Orlando, 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

In a recent statement, the bishops’ 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 slow-motion violence of discrimination and poverty, hunger and hopelessness, addiction and self-destructive behavior.”⁷

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.” www.npr.org/2016/01/05/462017461/guns-in-america-by-the-numbers
- 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.