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School Sisters of Notre Dame

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Social Justice Resource

Gun Violence: Choose Life

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EXPERIENCE

The 10 victims of the Sante Fe High School shooting and the 17 victims at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School are at the forefront of our minds and so press upon our hearts. We pray for the victims, their families, and their communities and grieve for their loss. Sadly, they are but the latest high-profile victims in an epidemic of senseless gun violence. Twenty-six human beings (including an unborn child) lost their lives in November, 2017 when their church was attacked by a man with a gun; fifty-eight human beings were gunned down in Las Vegas in October, 2017; forty-nine human beings were murdered in Orlando in June, 2016; and the tragic list goes on.¹

Beyond these high-profile tragedies, though, gun violence runs rampant throughout the United States. Not only does the U.S. experience significantly more mass shootings than any other country,² but this year alone, as of June 12, 2018, gun violence already has been responsible for the deaths of 6,367 human beings and the murder or injury of 299 children

and 1,193 teenagers.³ The rate of gun violence in the U.S. far exceeds that of its counterparts. United States citizens, who make up about 4.4 percent of the world's population, own 42 percent of the world's guns.⁴ Studies show that more gun ownership is the only variable that explains the excessive gun violence in the United States.⁵ In fact, as LCWR recently noted, "A recent study of World Health Organization data published in the

American Journal of Medicine found that, among high-income nations, 91 percent of children younger than 15 who were killed by bullets lived in the United States. Guns are linked to roughly 33,000 deaths in the United States per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; about two-thirds of them are suicides."⁶ Gun violence in the U.S. also tends to be racist and sexist: black men are 13 times more likely than white men to be killed by guns, and on average, 50 women are victims of domestic homicide every month – access to guns increases the likelihood that domestic violence will turn lethal by more than 500 percent.⁷

"Those who face gun violence on a level that we have only just glimpsed from our gated communities have never had their voices heard in their entire lives the way that we have in these few weeks alone."
- Emma González, Parkland Survivor

In the aftermath of the Parkland and Santa Fe tragedies, there has been a new wave of impassioned debate about gun control laws. Students who survived the attack have organized themselves in a national campaign to end gun violence. These young men and women are calling for measures that will limit gun possession and use, including legislation to ban military-style firearms, which have been used in many recent high-profile mass shootings. In the words of Delaney Tarr, one of the Parkland survivors, “We know what we want. We want gun reform, we want common sense gun laws, we want stronger mental health checks and background checks to work in conjunction. We want a better age limit. We want privatized selling to be completely reformed so you can’t just walk into a building with \$130 and walk out with an AR-15.”⁸

The Parkland student activists seem to recognize the broader contours of this epidemic and are committed to addressing all types of gun violence. As one survivor, Emma González, tweeted, “Those who face gun violence on a level that we have only just glimpsed from our gated communities have never had their voices heard in their entire lives the way that we have in these few weeks alone.”⁹ The Parkland survivors have met with students from Chicago and across the country who are embedded in systems of violence to show solidarity and engage their efforts in seeking reform.

ANALYSIS

Congress has reacted to mass shootings in the past by passing legislative reforms to limit gun violence, such as the Gun Control Act of 1968 and the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994. This time, however, Congress seems to be immobilized. In fact, “Since the Stockton shooting [in 1989], no gun rampage, not even one as horrific as the murder of schoolchildren, teachers and

administrators at the Sandy Hook Elementary School ... has provoked enough public outrage to overcome N.R.A. [National Rifle Association] resistance and sustain a successful gun control campaign at the federal level.”¹⁰ The NRA’s 5 million dedicated members and its ability to gain access to politicians through its membership network, combined with its \$250 million budget – most of which is spent on ads, lobbying, and PACs, gives the NRA an enormous level of influence in local, state, and national elections (and, therefore, in policy-making).¹¹ While the majority of Americans favor increasing restrictions on gun rights, such as banning assault-style weapons (68%) and requiring background checks for private sales and at gun shows (84%),¹² the NRA advocates expanding gun rights, claiming, “to stop a bad guy with a gun, it takes a good guy with a gun.”¹³ To this end, the NRA advocates arming teachers and other school staff members as the most effective means to counter gun violence on school campuses. The group, however, is not opposed to restrictions on the availability of bump stocks (the attachment that enables a semi-automatic weapon to fire with nearly the same speed as an automatic one), or certain background checks and limitations. Although President Trump, who benefitted from \$30 million dollars spent by the NRA on his campaign,¹⁴ changes his position on gun control regularly, he currently is calling for just these measures.¹⁵

The USCCB, however, states that “the idea of arming teachers seems to raise more concerns than it addresses. Setting a more appropriate minimum age for gun ownership, requiring universal background checks (as the bishops have long advocated), and banning ‘bump stocks’ are concepts that appear to offer more promise.”¹⁶ In addition, the Bishops advocate a total ban on assault weapons; 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; 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.¹⁷ These suggestions correspond to the recommendations of experts in criminology, law and public health, who have determined that the most effective measures to limit gun violence (particularly mass shootings) would be to bar sales to all violent criminals; to ban semi-automatic guns, assault weapons, and high-capacity magazines; to perform universal background checks for gun and ammunition buyers; and to bar sales to the mentally ill.¹⁸

"This is not about protecting the second amendment. It is about protecting the most precious resource we have, the gift of life." - LCWR

The Second Amendment is, of course, at the center of this issue. The Supreme Court has found the right to bear arms to be subject to certain regulations, such as prohibitions on concealed carry permits, restricted access for felons and mentally ill individuals, gun-free zones, and prohibitions on "dangerous and unusual" weapons.¹⁹ When pressed, though, the Court found that restrictions such as banning handgun possession and laws prescribing mandatory storage procedures were unconstitutional because they impeded the use of these weapons for self-defense.²⁰ While "the Church recognizes that recourse to self-defense is legitimate for one's own

safety,"²¹ more emphasis can and should be placed on stemming the tide of violence so that the need for self-defense is decreased.

As LCWR has claimed, however, "This is not about protecting the second amendment. It is about protecting the most precious resource we have, the gift of life."²² Even the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees our right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," seems to qualify its successor by recognizing that the right to life is prior to any subsequent, "man-made," rights.²³ The Second Amendment was written at a time when civilian militias, rather than a professional army, served to defend the United States;²⁴ the founding fathers wrote the Amendment to ensure civilian participation in the protection of the nation, not to perpetuate the proliferation of guns for personal use. The founding fathers could not have foreseen that individuals would have access to weapons capable of inflicting mass violence – such as the semi-automatic rifles that seem to be the weapon of choice in most mass shootings recently. Indeed, "In three of the most recent mass shootings — the high school in Parkland, Fla., the church in Sutherland Springs, Tex., and Las Vegas — three men killed a total of 101 people and injured hundreds more, a level of carnage that would have been impossible with the weapons available during the 18th century."²⁵ Given the advancement in weaponry and the changes in political and social life that make civilian militias obsolete for the United States' protection in the 21st century, we must view the Second Amendment through a different lens – namely, through the lens of life, as guaranteed by the First Amendment and affirmed in Catholic social thought (CST).

REFLECTION

The principle of life and dignity is the linchpin of CST. It recognizes that every human being is endowed with inviolable dignity, regardless of his or her actions, assets, or attributes. We all are equally dignified because we are made in the image of God. This dignity, however, confers certain responsibilities upon us – namely, it demands that we work to facilitate the flourishing of all. Pope Francis, expounding on the thought of Saint Pope John Paul II, reminds us:

Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in ‘lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies’ (*Centesimus Annus*, 58). Authentic human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and ‘take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system’ (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 34). Accordingly, our human ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God’s original gift of all that is.²⁶

This “integral ecology” – the web of relationships that connects us to one another and our world – demands that we reject current models of consumption and power that perpetuate the culture of violence in which guns are viewed as necessary commodities and symbols of liberty. Since human beings are connected to one another through social and environmental organisms, we should move toward a model that seeks the common good, which recognizes individual rights as crucial to human dignity, but requires that those rights be put to use to facilitate the good of the community. Regulations should affirm

individual responsibility and liberty, while protecting the most vulnerable among us. Further, our personal responses to violence thus ought to uphold the dignity of all affected – victims, communities, and offenders.

Saint Augustine is instructive on this issue. As he puts it, human beings are “linked together by a common fellowship based in a common nature,”²⁷ so, he tells us, “at one and the same time you disapprove of [offenders’] guilt while approving of their nature. Indeed, you have

more right to hate their guilt precisely because it mars their nature, which you love. Therefore if you take action against the crime in order to liberate the human being, you

bind yourself to him in a fellowship of humanity rather than injustice.”²⁸ Rather than writing off the perpetrators of gun violence as “monsters,”²⁹ and discounting or celebrating their deaths, we should mourn the fact that our fellow human beings are so broken. Rather than blaming the deaths of black youth in our cities so unambiguously on gang culture (and, so, largely ignoring them), we should strive to implement laws that facilitate the revitalization of those communities, and to engage interpersonally in actions that do so, as well. Saint Augustine, reflecting on an outbreak of violence against his Church, levies this criticism:

How easily those events might have been prevented or nipped in the bud, if the citizens, and especially their leaders, had intervened to stop them at the start or before the end. ... It might not be possible then, for you to distinguish the innocent from the guilty out of the whole city. ... Everyone was implicated in the outrages that were committed with their consent, even if they neither took part in them nor instigated them (*Ep.* 91.8-9).

As we consider gun law reform, then, the focus should be on upholding the dignity of all human beings – protecting the innocent, mitigating poverty, nurturing our children to encourage their authentic development, and rejecting violence in all its forms. The USCCB calls “the Church and all people of good will [to] work together to confront the pervasive culture of violence”³⁰ through policy reform, but also through more “wholistic measures [sic], 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.”³¹ As we work to establish a balance of liberty and security in the service of healthy communities and authentic human development, we ought to remember always that justice is a work of love – both our positions and our advocacy efforts should facilitate the dignity of all, even those who disagree with us, so that “unadulterated love may help to heal such serious damage” (*Ep.* 185.45).

“Our thoughts and prayers must be joined with action, we can and must do more to prevent such attacks.” – Cardinal Sean O’Malley, Boston

ACTION

If we are serious about confronting gun violence, then, our efforts must go deeper than purely political ones. Increasing and improving gun regulations will be important, of course, but we also must confront violence on an interpersonal level. Please [pray for an end to gun violence](#), and read below for some general principles that should ground our activities, both publically and personally, to root out the causes of violence:

1. Reject the culture of violence and facilitate a culture of peace and unity. Limit your exposure to violent media; curb your temper; focus on the gifts God has given to you and that God wants you to share with the world, rather than the irritations you experience; pray for peace and justice.
2. We must do better by our children. We cannot raise them to think they are completely autonomous, independent beings who are beholden to no one; we must raise them to recognize themselves as part of one human family, each with special dignity that is fully expressed through unity with others. By countering the mindset of consumerism, individualism, and power-seeking, we will facilitate authentic development that enables children to flourish and grow into just adults.
3. Rather than arming teachers with weapons, we should arm teachers with enhanced resources and increased funding to cultivate a culture of peace in the classroom and throughout the school community. Schools must be adequately resourced to assist vulnerable and bullied children and to teach non-violent conflict resolution practices.
4. Our response to a perpetrator cannot be one of hatred or isolation; rather, we should work toward restoration for the victims and community, as well as for the perpetrator. Our

human family can flourish only when each of us participates in community with dignity – and this necessarily involves the atonement, reform, and participation of the perpetrator. As difficult as it might be to desire the good of an offender, to counter violence with hatred is contradictory to the practice of Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute (Mt. 5: 44).

5. Visit [Sandy Hook Promise](#) for resources and action steps.

Contact your elected officials to take up legislation immediately that:

- Requires universal background checks and mandatory waiting periods for all gun purchases
- Bans civilian ownership of high-capacity weapons and magazines
- Makes gun trafficking a federal crime

Click [here](#) to contact your Senators. Click [here](#) to contact your Representative.

¹ Note that most reports on total fatalities do not include the perpetrators if they are killed during the event, which indicates a rejection of the humanity of the offender. We will return to the significance of this below.

² Kara Fox, "How US gun culture compares with the world in five charts," CNN, last modified March 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/03/americas/us-gun-statistics/index.html>.

³ Gun Violence Archive, accessed June 12, 2018, <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>.

⁴ Max Fisher and Josh Keller, "What Explains U.S. Mass Shootings? International Comparisons Suggest an Answer," New York Times, last modified November 7, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/americas/mass-shootings-us-international.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Leadership Conference of Women Religious, "Mourning is Not Enough: LCWR Calls for Action to Prevent Gun Violence," LCWR, last modified February 23, 2018, <https://lcwr.org/media/news/mourning-not-enough-lcwr-calls-action-prevent-gun-violence>.

⁷ Everytown, accessed March 18, 2018, <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/>.

⁸ Julia Conley, "#NeverAgain: Parkland Students Lead Thousands in Rally to Demand Gun Control Legislation," Common Dreams, last modified February 21, 2018, <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2018/02/21/neveragain-parkland-students-lead-thousands-rally-demand-gun-control-legislation>.

⁹ P.R. Lockhart, "Students from Parkland and Chicago unite to expand the gun control conversation," Vox, last modified March 6, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/3/6/17086426/parkland-chicago-students-gun-violence-race-activism>.

¹⁰ Kevin Clarke and James Martin, S.J., "A History of Gun Control in the pages of America," America: The Jesuit Review, last modified July 7, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/history-violence>.

¹¹ Sam Musa, Abstract, "The Impact of NRA on the American Policy," *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs* 4, no. 222 (September 18, 2016), <https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/the-impact-of-nra-on-the-american-policy-2332-0761-1000222.php?aid=83220&view=mobile>.

¹² Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "In 2017, Americans narrowly opposed allowing teachers and school officials to carry guns," Pew Research Center, last modified February 23, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/02/23/in-2017-americans-narrowly-opposed-allowing-teachers-and-school-officials-to-carry-guns/>.

¹³ Mark Berman and David Weigel, "NRA goes on the offensive after Parkland shooting, assailing media and calling for more armed school security," Washington Post, last modified February 22, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/02/22/after-silence-on-parkland-nra-pushes-back-against-law-enforcement-the-media-and-gun-control-advocates/?utm_term=.89d5310a479f.

¹⁴ Michael D. Shear, "Trump Moves to Regulate 'Bump Stock' Devices," New York Times, last modified February 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/20/us/politics/trump-bump-stocks.html?rref=collection/sectioncollection/politics&action=click&contentCollection=politics®ion=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=sectionfront>.

¹⁵ Cf. Linda Qiu and Kitty Bennett, "Trump's Evolving Positions on Gun Issues," New York Times, last modified March 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/us/politics/trump-evolving-positions-gun-issues.html>.

¹⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Domestic Justice and Education Chairmen Urge Concrete Actions to Address Scourge of Gun Violence," news release, March 5, 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/news/2018/18-046.cfm>.

¹⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Backgrounder on a Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence,” accessed March 18, 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/backgrounder-on-gun-violence.cfm>.

¹⁸ Margot Sanger-Katz and Quoc Trung Bui, “How to Reduce Mass Shooting Deaths? Experts Rank Gun Laws,” *New York Times*, last modified October 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/05/upshot/how-to-reduce-mass-shooting-deaths-experts-say-these-gun-laws-could-help.html>.

¹⁹ Luis Acosta, “United States: Gun Ownership and the Supreme Court,” Library of Congress, last modified July 2008, <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/second-amendment.php>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ USCCB, “Backgrounder,” 1.

²² LCWR, “Mourning is Not Enough.”

²³ As an article in the *New York Times* recently noted, most countries view the right to own guns as one citizens must earn, while “the United States is one of only three countries, along with Mexico and Guatemala, that begin with the opposite assumption: that people have an inherent right to own guns” (Fisher and Keller, “What Explains U.S. Mass Shootings?”).

²⁴ Noah Shusterman, “What the Second Amendment really meant to the Founders,” *Washington Post*, last modified February 22, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/02/22/what-the-second-amendment-really-meant-to-the-founders/?utm_term=.f8f41d5c07cb.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter LAUDATO SI’: On Care for Our Common Home* (2015), 5, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

²⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (1467; repr., Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican Classics, 1972), XVIII.2.

²⁸ Augustine, *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Ep.* 153.3. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent references to this work will be cited in text.

²⁹ For example, Dana Loesch (NRA spokeswoman) said recently, “I don’t believe that this insane monster should have ever been able to obtain a firearm.”

³⁰ USCCB, “Backgrounder.”

³¹ *Ibid.*