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General Secretary, USCCB

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Christ’s Love and Mercy Must Guide Us

“We can [no longer] believe that mass shootings are an isolated exception. They are an epidemic against life that we must, in justice, face. God’s mercy and wisdom compel us to move toward preventative action. We encourage all Catholics to increased prayer and sacrifice for healing and the end of these shootings. We encourage Catholics to pray and raise their voices for needed changes to our national policy and national culture as well. We call on all relevant committees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to outline a reinvigorated policy agenda and pastoral campaign to address ways we can help fight this social disease that has infected our nation. The Conference has long advocated for responsible gun laws and increased resources for addressing the root causes of violence.”

Cardinal DiNardo, August 4, 2019

These reflections are a step on the path towards a fuller response to the challenges posed by the particular evil of gun violence in our society. More will be done to provide specific pastoral, policy, and advocacy tools to address this plague. We will journey together on this course, to do all we can to protect our brothers and sisters, especially the most vulnerable, from these recurring tragedies.

Engaging the Public Square

On August 3, 2019, horrible violence visited a Wal-Mart in Texas and 22 innocents died.

In response, Bishop Seitz said, “We see the effects of the sinful and insipid conviction that some of us are better than others of us because of race, religion, language or nationality.”

Bishops have called on our elected officials to exert leadership and asked all Americans to come together as a great, diverse, and welcoming people. This means that the Church must defend the life and dignity of each human person and must try to protect all individuals from the evils of gun violence.
Did You Know...

The news is filled with reports of violence, of news of mass shootings at home and raging wars abroad. Research made available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from the year 2017 noted that there were nearly 40,000 “firearm-related” deaths in the United States. 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. 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.

The Importance of Civil Law in Response

For many years, the Catholic Bishops of the United States have supported reasonable gun regulations, while honoring the provisions of the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution. There is a path forward that both protects the rights of individual gun owners while also making our nation safer for all her citizens. Catholics must continue to be informed on the issues addressed in responsible legislative proposals to regulate gun ownership, and to be ready to express their views to elected officials.
Our nation is awakening to the need for gun reform anew in the wake of weekly, sometimes even daily, headlines that describe more and more mass shootings. The threat of gun violence is no longer remote. As the collective American conscious grows more aware of the loss of peace in our communities, we must realize that this absence of peace has been a long term reality for many communities in our country. Gun violence in lower income communities and communities of color has been a destructive reality for decades. It is a toll measured not just in lives lost, but also in the thousands of gunshot survivors who live with disabling injuries for the rest of their lives.

While shootings, particularly in communities of color, may not regularly make headlines, they are no less a cause for the most urgent concern and action. As one body in Christ, a loss of peace for one community is truly a loss of peace for us all. As we struggle to find answers to gun violence, we must remember the dignity and rights granted by God to each person, in every neighborhood.

**Educating for Peace**

In his 1995 Encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope St. John Paul II condemned the “culture of death” that viewed the ending of human lives as a means to solving problems. As the culture has moved away from a common understanding of the “good” as that which comes from God and is rooted in virtue, the building blocks of society have undergone tremendous stress.

As Pope Francis proclaimed: “The education of children and young people is such an important task in forming them as free and responsible human beings. It affirms their dignity as an inalienable gift that flows from our original creation as children made in the image and likeness of God. And because education truly forms human beings, it is especially the duty and responsibility of the Church, who is called to serve mankind from the heart of God and in such a way that no other institution can.”
The Command of Love

Christianity bases its understanding of the human person on the first Creation story in Genesis. There we read that human beings are made in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Gn 1:26-27). The dignity of each person is rooted in this image and likeness, and “it shines forth in the communion of persons, in the likeness of the unity of the divine persons among themselves” (CCC, no. 1702). It is in this light that Christians understand that every person, regardless of race or ethnicity, is to be treated with dignity and respect.

That is why egregious acts of violence against people, and particularly mass shootings such as the ones we have witnessed in recent times, shake us to our core. They are a direct violation of God’s law inscribed in our hearts: “Thou Shall Not Kill.” But also, and more fundamentally, they disregard the Lord’s command to love one another: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being and with all your strength…. and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). “The command of love requires us to make room for others in our hearts. It means we are indeed our brother’s keeper (Gn 4:9)” (Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love, p. 14).

Preventing Gun Violence: Resisting Anger with Christian Charity

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us how anger can become sinful, leading to injustice and an offense against the God-given dignity of others. “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21-22). Mass shootings arise out of this sinful anger, which is destructive and opposed to the virtue of charity. The sin of anger begins in the heart and has horrific consequences when its resentment turns into hatred and manifests in acts of violence.

Let us uproot this sin of anger by keeping Christ crucified in our minds and hearts.
Preventing Gun Violence: Building Strong Communities

The eruption of mass shootings confronts us with a profound evil that has entered the hearts of fellow citizens. These events and others raise the question, “Why?” Each day we are surrounded by seemingly endless forms of violence as witnessed by the flood of homicides, the rise of suicides, and incidences of abortion, domestic violence, drug abuse, destruction of the environment, among others. These evils have no place in the human heart.

A strong, loving family, a caring community, and deep personal commitments, formed by charity and empathy are protection against all sorts of evil, including the temptation to inflict harm. We encourage a commitment to supporting and strengthening families and communities as the first line of defense against evils such as mass shootings. We must journey beyond our immediate environment, and reach out as missionary disciples to evangelize, with empathy, those who abide in the margins and peripheries, who are often cast away in our disposable culture.

Anti-Violence Efforts and Programs

A Christian can never look the other way or remain apathetic in the face of rising gun violence and senseless attacks on innocent people. This is so fundamental to our faith and our understanding of human life and dignity that we must do everything we can to defend life and to prevent tragedies like these from happening again. We can start with simple steps, such as

- facilitating a community dialogue on gun violence, its causes and ways to prevent it;
- helping to tone down hateful rhetoric and public discourse that demonize certain groups and stoke fear in people’s hearts;
- working to promote true dialogue, understanding and appreciation among diverse groups of people;
- and acknowledging cultural influences, practices and legal loopholes that lead individuals and entire communities to devalue human life.
The law and social norms help educate citizens. It is time for Christians to act to prevent gun violence and other forms of violence, so that the Gospel of Life can again influence the wider culture in which we live.

There are many practical examples of specific programs and activities that respond to the threat of gun violence. Participating dioceses have trained hundreds of people already. Some of these programs include:

- Mentor Training on boundaries, communication, addiction and mental health
- Exodus Project Community Awareness Training for deacons, parishes, volunteers and community groups
- Impact of Violence Boot Camp
- Restorative Justice trainings offered in Spanish
- Belong Circles Facilitator Training
- Valley Watch Network Training
- Presentation on the Prison Industrial Complex about the intersection of race, justice and mass incarceration
- Concrete Conversations—panel presentations and discussions that bring together community members and young men at-risk of gang involvement
- Introduction to Restorative Practices and Using Circles Effectively (eligible for Continuing Education Units)
- Facilitating Restorative Conferences (eligible for Continuing Education Units)

Belong anti-racism movement training through PICO to equip and train congregation leaders to bring together neighbors and fellow congregants

- Civic Engagement and Power Building
- Elevating Stories and Earned Media
- Finding the Way Facilitator Training (active listening, small group leadership, program curriculum and best practices)
- Bereavement Ministry Training in the Aftermath of Violence
- Trauma Care & Re-Entry Workshop—PTSD, Applied Behavioral Analysis, Medication Assisted Treatment and Recovery Services
- Disarming Defiance: Trauma-Informed Classroom presented by the Purvis Institute of Child Development at TCU Trust-Based Relational Intervention Institute for Child Development Crime Victim’s Symposium
- Jail Facility Security Orientation
- Ministry Specialized Methodology: Substance Abuse, Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma, Gang
- Restorative Circle Training
- Diversity and Implicit Bias Training

For more information on these and other programs, see: http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/chd-funded-groups.cfm.
Mental Health

Millions of Americans struggle with untreated mental illness, and it would be good for our society's health to give them greater access to help. However, the data show that most people with mental illness are not violent, and are not significantly contributing to elevated rates of gun homicides. Two-thirds of the 40,000 gun deaths each year are suicides, and about half of those are committed by someone with a known mental illness. The truth is that an overwhelming majority of people who attempt suicide with a gun die, whereas, the overwhelming majority of people who attempt suicide by some other means survive and go on to get the help they need.

Extreme risk protection orders or so-called “red flag” laws can allow family members, law enforcement officers, and others to go to a court and present evidence that a person is a threat to themselves or others, and get a temporary order to remove firearms from that person’s possession. In one study of existing laws in Connecticut and Indiana, for every 10-20 of such orders that were issued, one life was saved.
Prayer Against Gun Violence

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we come to you burdened and grieved
by the evil and destruction of gun violence,
entrusting to your mercy
each victim of this horrific crime.

Father of mercies and God of all consolation,
who console us in our every affliction,
comfort the families and friends of each victim,
give solace to grieving communities,
and bring peace to anxious hearts.

O God, who show a father’s care for all,
pour out your gracious blessing
on police, medical personnel, leaders,
and all who are your ministers of mercy,
bringing them healing and peace in the face of this tragedy.

O God of peace, who are peace itself
and whom a spirit of discord cannot grasp,
nor a violent mind receive,
grant to those who are tempted to commit these acts
repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth,
so that they may return to their senses
and escape the snare of the devil,
entrapped by him, for his will.

O God, author and lover of peace,
defend against every attack those who cry to you,
so that all who trust in your protection
may not fear the weapons of any foe.

O God, merciful and strong,
be pleased to banish violence swiftly from our midst
and to wipe away all tears,
so that we may all truly deserve to be called your children.