



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Bishop

August 6, 2019
The Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

A National Crisis

A Pastoral Reflection on the Deadly Epidemic of Gun Violence in the United States

By
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Bishop of Belleville

“Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers (and sisters), whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and hear and seen in me. Then, the God of peace will be with you.”

-Saint Paul, Letter to the Christians living in Philippi, 4, 5-9

(1) We are facing a national crisis in the United States. As a Catholic Bishop striving to live by and teach the good news of justice and peace proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth, I am compelled to name this truth. It is, in some way, a crisis of gun violence. (With the exception of a bomb or chemicals, it is difficult to think of another weapon with which so many lives can be extinguished in seconds.) I say this knowing well that guns do not kill people. Hunters, those who use guns for recreation, and those who have a gun in their home for security do not ordinarily kill people. The reasons for this crisis are many. The crisis is caused, in part, by a small number of gun owners who abuse the firearms that are readily available to them and by the lack of consensus on the part of the American people and their elected representatives concerning how to respond to what has become a daily occurrence. It is a crisis which could explode on any given day with bloodshed and death here in southern Illinois. It is a crisis for which there is no easy solution. But, as Christians, we are obliged to be a part of the conversation and the practical efforts to address this deadly crisis. We must listen, learn, think, pray and act.

(2) The horrifying events of this Saturday and Sunday, August 3-4, caused sorrow, shock, anger and frustration in the hearts of most Americans. On Saturday morning, August 3, 2019, a young man posted on line a statement expressing his irrational hatred for Hispanic people and his opposition to immigration and racial diversity saying “this attack is a response to the invasion of Texas.” He had driven six hundred miles to El Paso, Texas, a vibrant, bi-lingual, multicultural city on the border between the United States and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Armed with a military style AK47 assault rifle, he entered a crowded Walmart store filled with back-to-school shoppers from both sides of the Rio Grande River and methodically slaughtered 22 innocent children, women and men, many of them Hispanics, and seven of them Mexican nationals. He wounded another 27 innocent people. The man was apprehended and charged with capital murder, a hate crime, which is being called an act of “domestic terrorism” for which, if convicted, he could receive the death penalty. Shockwaves and unspeakable grief quickly spread though El Paso, one of the least violent cities in the nation, and throughout the country. “Not again!” “Not another mass murder!” The perpetrator reportedly has spoken to law enforcement in a matter of fact manner showing no emotions and expressing no remorse for his violent rampage.

(3) We have a growing number of Latino communities in our Diocese. Every year the number of Mexican immigrants in southern Illinois increases. Latinos worship in a growing number of our parishes. They are the majority of parishioners in one of our parishes. We want them to know that we are deeply saddened by the suffering in El Paso. We deplore the fact that our sisters and brothers are sometimes the objects of stereotypes, hateful words, scorn and violent acts. We know their vulnerability and fears due to the lack of comprehensive immigration reform. We welcome their presence in our midst with their long tradition of Catholic faith and, as a Local Church, we must continue to welcome, support and care for them.

(4) Thirteen hours after the attack in El Paso, at 1:00 AM the following morning, a man wearing full body armor and armed with a .223 caliber rifle with multiple magazines and as many as 250 rounds of ammunition entered the busy night-life scene of the historic Oregon District in Dayton, Ohio, and methodically slaughtered nine innocent people, including his own sister, and wounding dozens more. This cruel deed was accomplished in the 24 seconds before the police shot and killed the gunman. Were it not for their swift, courageous response, scores more might have perished. Though there is evidence of his “far left leanings,” so far no clear “motive” for this horrendous act of violence has been determined.

(5) There is mounting evidence that social media platforms like 4chan and 8chan are being used to create international communities of like-minded people who reinforce each other’s ethnic and racial hatred, encouraging and even applauding acts of violence against those who should be purged from the “nation” as they narrowly define. Children and young adults are particularly susceptible to this. Parents and parish communities should be alert to the possibility of our own youth being radicalized by extremists in online chat rooms. Extreme social media may be a far more likely impetus to violence born of hatred than violent video games or mental illness. While there is certainly a need to provide greater assistance to peoples suffering from mental illness, several university studies contend that diagnosed mental illness accounts for only a small percentage of mass murderers.

(6) A representative of the Federal Bureau of Investigation said the rise in “hate crimes” in recent years may suggest that more such incomprehensible incidents are possible.

(7) In the past, when shootings such as these occurred in New Town, Connecticut (2012); Charleston, South Carolina (2015); San Bernardino, California (2015); Orlando, Florida (2016); Las Vegas, Nevada (2017); Southerland Springs, Texas (2017); Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (2018); Parkland, Florida (2018); Christchurch, New Zealand (2019); and many other places, I always wrote to our parishes and schools asking everyone to pray fervently for the innocent people whose lives were senselessly destroyed that they may share in the eternal life promised to those who love God and neighbor. I asked them to pray for the wounded, for their grieving families and friends, for civic leaders to have the courage and the wisdom to act decisively to prevent future massacres and, yes, for the perpetrator. In recent months, I have not written to you because these heartbreaking assaults on the value and dignity of every human life have been happening so frequently that it has not been possible to keep up. According to published statistics, there have been 255 mass shootings (four or more victims) in this country already this year. One hundred people a day and 36,500 people a year die from gun violence.

(8) This long litany of bloodshed, suffering, death and grief has distressed me greatly. I am very hopeful that each of our parish communities have been thinking and praying about these dreadful events, even without notification from me. But, beyond praying for the dead, suffering, and grieving, for what should we pray? That God will put an end to the violence? God does not ordinarily intervene in human history and quiet the intense emotions, rage, bias and hatred that can invade the human heart, or remove the finger of the gunman from the trigger. Nor does God step in and bring representatives of opposing political parties and ideologies together and guide them to reasonable, commonsense compromise. Here on earth, God's work must truly be our own.

(9) Like you, I am deeply distressed by the erosion of fundamental moral principles. "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." "Love your neighbor as yourself." "You shall not kill." "He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword." Do these moral imperatives no longer have meaning for some members of our society? Does our current gun violence crisis suggest that a growing number of American citizens no longer find these imperatives compelling? I hope this is not true.

(10) As human beings, as Christians, as members of the Catholic Church, we express our solidarity with those suffering from gun violence. We want them to know of our sincere "thoughts and prayers". At the same time, we understand that just as "thoughts and prayers" are not enough from mayors, governors, members of Congress and the President, they are not sufficient from religious communities. Those oppressed by violence want to know if the God to whom Christians pray is truly the God of the oppressed. Is God actually going to intervene with a divine "inbreak" into our world and do something about gun violence? Or, does God rely on us to be the agents of His Grace and renewal? Words of comfort are not sufficient. Soon after these latest shootings, President Donald J. Trump said, "In one voice our nation must condemn racism, bigotry and white supremacy. These sinister ideologies must be defeated." The President's critics complained that his own rhetoric reinforces these very attitudes and that his words were not preceded by sincere expressions of regret. Nor have the words been followed by swift and decisive actions to prevent gun violence.

(11) We all know that American citizens (including our fellow Catholics) are deeply divided over the many questions surrounding the gun crisis in our country. One of the easiest ways to provoke an intense argument is simply to ask such questions as: Do we need stricter gun laws? Ought we to ban the availability of military style rifles with fast loading ammunition from the market? Are Second Amendment rights absolute? Should there be expanded, stricter background checks for gun purchasers? Why does the National Rifle Association seem to have such a powerful influence on some elected officials? Which cable news channels cover the gun controversy accurately and fairly? Why is the Congress of the United States unable to develop reasonable, commonsense gun legislation? Do contemporary Americans believe that the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church provide valuable moral guidance for addressing this crisis?

(12) Many Catholics have told me that they truly want to do something. They feel helpless, even paralyzed. They simply do not know what to do. They can see that there are no easy answers or solutions. As your Bishop and pastoral leader of a community of people who proclaim publicly that we are the disciples of the Prince of Peace, I share this uncertainty and frustration. I am convinced that we must do something as difficult and seemingly ineffective as our modest efforts might be.

I invite all pastors, administrators, deacons, religious brothers and sisters, principals, parents, and community leaders to consider the modest proposals below as starting points, as provokers of thought and actions. You, as individuals and groups, may well have different and better ideas:

- 1. Create opportunities for the Christian Faithful to gather to pray (e.g., adoration of the Blessed Sacrament) specifically for the conversion of hearts and the decrease in gun violence through appropriate, constitutionally permissible legislation.**
- 2. Gather your Parish Pastoral Council, your Social Outreach Committee, your catechists, your faculty, your school board, or a group of your adult friends together to listen, learn, think, pray and act regarding the present crisis:**
 - A. Study the teachings of the Catholic Church in relevant passages of Sacred Scripture, relevant documents of the Second Vatican Council, relevant sections of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the dignity and value of every human life, and the vocation of every Christian to be an instrument of God's peace. Study also the relevant passages on the dignity of life and violence in the writings of St. John Paul II and Pope Francis.**
 - B. Form small groups interested in educating themselves about this difficult topic by studying gun legislation at the state and federal levels. Read and discuss reliable documents about the history and meaning of the Second Amendment, comprehensive background checks for gun purchasers, the potential value of Extreme Risk Protection Orders (sometimes called Red Flag Laws), by which the courts allow law enforcement to restrict potentially dangerous people rather than dangerous weapons, thereby temporarily confiscating guns from individuals deemed a danger to themselves or to others.**

- C. Learn about the statements of Congressmen and women and Senators who represent your parish. Consider writing them with suggestions or questions. Consider inviting them to address a representative group from your parish or Parish Partnership.**
- D. Consider some additional questions that might lead to fruitful conversation and actions, such as:**
- **What can you do in your own parish, your own community to help people to become more informed about, sensitive to, and concerned about this crisis?**
 - **Do you think a mass shooting could happen in your community? Are you prepared?**
 - **Are traditional and cable news stations reliable sources of information on this topic or do they all represent conservative/liberal biases? If not, where CAN you find objective information?**
 - **How does the National Rifle Association influence the conversation about gun safety and gun violence? Should the National Rifle Association continue its not-for-profit status? Why or why not?**
 - **Is it appropriate for military style weapons to be available in civilian society?**
 - **Do you think that voting in political elections can be a part of the solution to the crisis?**
 - **Does being a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent more or less determine a person's views concerning the gun crisis?**
 - **Can religion, faith, prayer and Church life help our communities to address this crisis?**

(13) These gatherings will bear little fruit if only like-minded people are in the groups. The group leader would need to be a good moderator to help all participants to be open to actually listening with open minds to others without assuming that if they disagree with you they must be wrong. A prayerful, cooperative and respectful spirit will be essential. The goal is a Christ-centered conversation, NOT a quarrel!

(14) You might also search out common reading material that is accurate, fair and balanced. At the same time, select other resources that represent opposing arguments concerning the topics for conversation. It might be possible to benefit from a single session. However, I think four to six sessions would be far more beneficial. I am rather certain that only a small number of your parishioners, school faculty members or neighbors would be interested in this. A small group would be a start. A husband and wife or a family group could also do this. Any group of the Christian Faithful could pursue this. It need not be led by the Pastor or Principal. These conversations could take place in the rectory, the convent, the school, or in someone's home.

(15) As your Bishop, I hasten to conclude by stating the obvious. I am not an expert in social science, psychology, political theory or all aspects of the debate concerning gun violence. I am also very aware that many people believe that there is NO crisis of gun violence in this country. You may have far better ideas of things you can do than these modest suggestions.

These notes are my prayerful response to the question I have heard in recent days. “What can we do?” You could do this.

(16) As you listen to one another, learn from your reading and from each other, think about what you have experienced, prayerfully reflect alone and with a group and decide what modest things you can or even should do to address, in some small way, our national crisis of violence. It is good to remind ourselves of the words of St. Teresa of Calcutta: “When we encounter pain and suffering in the world, our hearts are moved with compassion. We are frustrated when we cannot heal all of the wounds. We may be tempted to give up and do nothing. But everybody can do something! WE MUST DO WHAT WE CAN!”