



ARCHDIOCESE OF INDIANAPOLIS

The Church in Central and Southern Indiana

Leadership Briefing

By Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

Ending Senseless Violence

In recent weeks, we have once again witnessed multiple, senseless mass shootings—including one right in our own backyard at the Indianapolis FedEx Ground Center. Innocent men, women and children, including eight Hoosiers, were murdered, and their families, friends and co-workers were heartlessly thrown into profound grief and confusion. When will this endless gun violence stop? When will people of good will in our society from every walk of life set aside their political difference and come together in defense of the human lives that are being destroyed so unnecessarily by these irrational killing sprees?

In my public statement on the FedEx shootings in Indianapolis (see below), I mentioned that the U.S. Catholic Bishops have long-supported changes in local, state and federal laws to control the sale and use of firearms. We have also strongly advocated for changes in the way our society treats mental illness and the way we safeguard, and educate, children and families who are exposed to guns.



Printed below is a statement issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in January 2020 entitled, “A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence.” This statement outlines in some detail the positions advocated by the American bishops in response to the growing crisis of gun violence in our country.

“We bishops are fully conscious of the strong opinions held by advocates for strict adherence to the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, on the one hand, and those who seek better laws and regulations concerning the ability to purchase and use different types of firearms. As the USCCB statement below affirms, we recognize that ownership of guns for the purpose of self-defense is a constitutional right. However, ready access to weapons that are increasingly capable of inflicting great suffering in a short period of time creates serious problems for individuals and for society. That’s why our Church strongly advocates for the reasonable regulation of firearms.”

In my 2018 pastoral letter, *We are One in Christ: A Pastoral Letter on Fundamentals of Christian Anthropology*, I offered some reflections on the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology that form the basis for our positions on social problems like gun violence. In my letter, I observed:

“Christians are not naïve about the power of evil or the corrupting influence of human sinfulness. In every social situation, there exists the presence of evil both in the form of individual sinful actions and in the corrupt social structures that have been allowed to develop and become institutionalized in society. “

“What is needed to overcome evil in all its forms is the love of Christ—pure, unselfish, compassionate, merciful and transformational. Love overcomes sin and death. It has the power to transform the hearts and actions of individuals and societies, to break down barriers and build bridges, and to set aside laws and customs that reflect the hatred, prejudice and fear of generations of sinful people. Love ultimately conquers all evil, but, as reflected in the passion and death of Jesus Christ, true love requires surrender to God’s will and the corresponding sacrifice of all human desires and interests that do not correspond to the divine law.”

People of good will can disagree about the best ways to regulate the purchase and use of firearms, but based on the increasing instances of gun violence in communities throughout our country, there should be no question that we need to do whatever we can to stop the senseless violence.

As Pope Francis never fails to remind us, violence is always counter-productive. Whether in politics, race relations, economic crises or disputes among families or local communities, we are challenged to be peacemakers, to find common ground and to engage in respectful dialogue.

With this in mind, I renew the urgent request that I made in my statement concerning the shootings at the Indianapolis FedEx Ground Center two weeks ago: May we all recognize that we are made in the image and likeness of God and continue to do what we can to end this senseless violence and to live together in peace.

Statement of Archbishop Thompson on the FedEx Shootings in Indianapolis

Once again, our nation is mourning the loss of lives in a mass shooting and this time it is eight of our own neighbors who were killed at the Indianapolis FedEx Ground Center. We pray for the victims and loved ones of those who were murdered as well as those who were injured. We pray that these senseless acts of violence will stop. The U.S. Catholic Bishops have long supported changes in the law to control the sale and use of firearms. May we all recognize that we are made in the image and likeness of God and continue to do what we can to end this senseless violence and to live together in peace.

+Charles C. Thompson

Selections from A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence, by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, Office of Domestic Social Development, January 2020

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.

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope

We 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.)



My Prayer for You

Jesus, Risen Lord, help us to see and touch you—in prayer, in meditation on your Word, in our frequent reception of the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance, and in our generous service to all our sisters and brothers in your holy name. Strengthen us with your grace, Lord, and fill us with the lasting hope and joy of your resurrection.

+ Charles C. Thompson