

## **Prayer Service – Love in Action**

The tragic loss of lives in Gilroy, California, El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio confront us with a terrible truth, states Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The terrible truth is that we can never again believe that mass shootings are an isolated exception. They have become an epidemic – an epidemic against life that we must, in justice, face.

The numbers are startling. There have been 251 mass shootings in the United States of America in 2019, and today is the 221<sup>st</sup> day of the year. Thus, there have been more mass shootings than days so far this year.

Yet, there are even more horrifying statistics. For the number of the mass shootings represent more than 500 persons who have been killed and more than 2,000 persons injured.

Our first and most important reaction as people of faith is our offer of prayer and consolation to the victims and their family members and the communities from which they come. For, the numbers I have just shared are not just statistics. They are people. Real lives that are precious and sacred. Our hearts go out to them all.

Yet, as people of faith, we also know that words of support are not enough. As our Savior Jesus Christ Himself told us, it is not enough simply to cry out, “Lord, Lord.” Words have consequences, and they must be transformed into actions. So, we are compelled by our faith to take preventive action. And, this action must be something substantial.

One recommendation which often is proposed in response to previous mass shootings is tighter laws of gun control. Specifically, legislation which prohibits civilian access to high capacity weapons and ammunition, universal background checks and heightened security screenings on the purchase of guns, and the utilization of “red flag” laws which allow for the petition of state courts to order the temporary removal of firearms from persons who may present a danger to others or themselves.

Proponents of more lenient gun regulations often point to the Second Amendment of the Constitution as a defense of the right to keep and bear arms. Yet, such a defense can be countered by the moral conviction that every right carries with it a responsibility. And, the rapid rise of gun violence certainly seems to point to the need to legislate precautions which prevent the abuse of this right. For, this clearly seems to be a case where even greater rights are being put at risk. The very words of the Declaration of Independence declare that there are rights of greater import, unalienable rights bestowed upon us by our Creator and for which the very purpose of government is meant to protect, these rights being the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The violence of our present age are at the point of stripping us of these sacred rights.

Since the 1990’s, the Bishops of the United States have advocated vigorously for a comprehensive approach to reducing gun violence. And, in fact, the assault weapons ban, which was in place for a decade before expiring in the year 2004, was a centerpiece of the proposals for which the Bishops successfully lobbied. We must raise our voices and intensify our advocacy to ensure the return of this ban.

Yet, as vital as such gun control legislation is, we must look even deeper for solutions to this crisis. Archbishop Charles Chaput of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia was formerly the Archbishop of Denver during the time of the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton Colorado recently pointed to his testimony on this tragedy of 20 years ago:

“The real problem of Columbine is in our culture...we’ve created a culture of violence – a culture that markets violence in dozens of different ways, seven days a week. It’s part of our social fabric. When we build our advertising campaigns on consumer selfishness and greed, and when money becomes the universal measure of value, how can we be surprised when our sense of community erodes?...When we answer murder with more violence in the death penalty, we put the state’s seal of approval on revenge. When the most dangerous place in the country is in a mother’s womb...the body language of that message is that life isn’t sacred and may not be worth much at all...We live in the most violent century in history. Nothing makes us immune from that violence except a relentless commitment to respect the sanctity of each human life, from womb to natural death. The civility and community we’ve built in this country are fragile. We’re losing them. In examining how and why our culture markets violence, I ask you not to stop with the symptoms. Look deeper.”

And, one of the places which we also must look deeper is into the depths of the racism which still afflicts our country. In the recent mass shootings and many of the former instances, there has been a consistent influence of the White Supremacist movement. The recent Texas gunman, for example, posted before beginning his rampage an online manifesto ranting against immigrants and making other racist remarks. The Bishop of El Paso, Mark Seitz, pointed out most vociferously how dangerous the current vitriolic language being used by some to describe the people at the border truly is:

“A government and society which view fleeing children and families as threats; a government which treats children in U.S. custody worse than animals; a government and society who turn their backs on pregnant mothers, babies and families...This government and society are not well. We suffer from a life-threatening hardening of the heart...In a day when we prefer to think that prejudice and intolerance are problems of the past, we have found a new acceptable group to treat as human, to look down upon and to fear. And should they speak another language or are brown or black...well, it is that much more easy to stigmatize them.”

Bishop Seitz warns that such racial stigmatization has added fuel to the fire of the Supremacist movement and makes targets of those who already are vulnerable and face so many challenges. He urges all people – but especially politicians – to examine themselves and their language and cease from using rhetoric which demeans and even demonizes whole groups of people.

And, while it is helpful to identify some of the deeper elements which have influenced the calamitous rise of mass shootings, there still remains the task of trying to identify some practical and concrete actions to address this situation. How can we embrace and seek to fulfill the purpose of our prayer this afternoon to transform love into action?

One way to confront the rise of mass shootings is to join the Bishops in their advocacy for gun control legislation. In this year alone, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued six statements related to gun violence. Go to the website [uscgb.org](http://uscgb.org) and click the links “Human Life and Dignity” and “Violence” and you will find these statements along with a connection to the document “Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action.”

One can seek to learn more about addressing the issue of Racism by reading the recent statement of the Bishops “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism.” The document is available on the same USCCB website, and a special discussion will take place on August 24<sup>th</sup> at Saint Martin de Porres Parish in Milwaukee. Contact the Archdiocesan Offices of UrbanInitiativeMKE or Intercultural Ministries for more information.

More information on supporting immigrants and those seeking asylum can be found on the website [justiceforimmigrants.org](http://justiceforimmigrants.org) – which includes notices of the United States Bishops statements on this issue and “action alerts” on how to contact and influence legislators. And, you can help people within our own Archdiocese by making contributions to Catholic Charities of Milwaukee and its “Legal Services for Immigrants” via the website [ccmke.org](http://ccmke.org)

Another tremendous resource for promoting issues of Social Justice within our own state is through the advocacy of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference. All the Bishops of our state meet regularly with the lobbyists of the Conference to prioritize and articulate the voice of the Church on important bills to the legislators of Wisconsin. Via the website [wisconsinatholic.org](http://wisconsinatholic.org) you can learn about the pressing issues being discussed in Madison. There also is an annual one-day conference hosted by the WCC in Madison called “Catholics in the Capitol,” which teaches how to approach and influence our elected officials. The WCC also can send “action alerts” on how and when you should contact such officials when issues related to Catholic Social Teaching are being considered for passage.

There is no simple solution to the horrendous problem of mass shootings. As we have heard, the causes of the problem are deeply rooted in some of the failings of our own nation and very culture. And, as Cardinal DiNardo reminds us, there is the terrible truth that we no longer treat them as isolated incidents. We must marshal more resources than we ever expected and persevere in our confrontation much longer than we ever hoped. This is an issue which will require ongoing vigilance. And, yet, we are blessed with a God whose Providence never rests, whose spirit is everlasting and whose promise assures us that the Gates of the netherworld, the power of Evil, will never prevail against us!