

## Gun Violence: Will change emerge from Newtown tragedy?

The tragic shootings of children and teachers at in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, 2012, have inspired new discussion on gun violence and firearms control. But will it become a turning point, a tipping point in a national debate that pits individual freedoms against public safety and the right to life?

Gun control advocates see this as a moment to strike while the iron is hot, or perhaps rather while the cooling steel of an automatic assault weapon might be beaten into some modern sort of pruning hook. Gun owners and their lobbyists are prepared to fight for their rights to own guns and ammunition of any caliber. The caliber of debate around our nation and eventually its hall of powers has changed, due simply to the sudden, severe images of children fleeing and crying as their peers lay dead and dying.



Parents rushed to the scene that day, while others hung by their TVs, computers and phones, feeling the Newtown parents' pain. And the father of two girls, ages 14 and 11, paused to compose himself as he sought words to honor the Sandy Hook victims when he addressed the nation he leads. All parents probably hugged their children a bit tighter and longer that winter night. Some of those same parents went out in the following days to purchase certain guns and ammunition they fear will be denied them if the emotions and thinking that Newtown inspired results in restrictive legislation.

All of this, including fervent prayer and urgent gun purchases, played out amid the spiritual preparations of Advent and the holiday shopping rush. Some thought the newfound goodwill after Newtown softened the Fiscal Cliff debates of late 2012, but what of that will remain when the first new piece of gun violence legislation is launched? Will it appear as a bright flare to illuminate the darkness, or as a clay pigeon in the crosshairs of its opponents? Will the post-Newtown landscape be a battleground, or will we find common ground?

Lasting peace, and the social change that leads to it, begins in the hearts of each of us affected by the Newtown shooting. And each of us is all of us. We send our children to school. We shop in malls, go to movies, or perhaps swing by the grocery store to meet our visiting congresswoman when she's in town. These places are safe, or so they seem. Would they be safer if no one had guns? Or safer, because of the specters of rage and mental illness, if everyone had guns?

Let's apply the Pastoral Circle – a model developed and promoted by Center of Concern – to explore this issue and work toward more effective advocacy

### Involvement

Through involvement we connect with social issues and make them our own. Our lived experiences – personal and communal – place us within the issue. Whether we were at the scene of the tragedy or following it virtually, each of us has our “where you when” moment with Newton. Let's use that as our entry point into a discussion on gun violence.

You may find it helpful to search online to revisit images, video and stories from Dec. 14, 2012. However, for many exploring this issue, the following questions will suffice:

- Where were you when you became aware of the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School?
- What images, experiences, or insights from that day touched you and linger with you still?
- Beyond your personal feelings, think socially. What were others thinking? Consider:
  - Loved ones of the victims
  - First responders, local authorities and national leaders
  - Parents or anyone concerned with protecting children and teachers in school
  - Anyone concerned with the spread of violence into other settings, including their own homes
- In that moment, did you find yourself wondering “When will this end?” Did you ponder “What can I do?”

Devote time to explore these questions, either personally or within your group or class, before moving on to the next step.

## Exploration

Now we ask the “why” questions from an involved perspective. Exploration searches out the relationships between values, events, structures, systems and ideologies. It places our involvement into a broader picture and draws connections between our stories. It ponders historical roots and future implications. Ideally, if you have time to prepare for this discussion or explore it over a number of days or weeks, it helps to bring resources to the table. If you are exploring this on your own, or lack adequate time to prepare, a computer or phone with internet access can be helpful. Regardless, let these contexts and questions frame your exploration. Stretch yourselves:

- ***From the personal to the societal:*** In moments of crisis, people look to their leader to set the tone and provide direction. Speaking in Newtown two days after the tragedy, President Barack Obama said:

“We can’t tolerate this anymore. These tragedies must end. And to end them, we must change. We will be told that the causes of such violence are complex, and that is true. No single law -- no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence in our society.

“But that can’t be an excuse for inaction. Surely, we can do better than this. If there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town, from the grief that has visited Tucson, and Aurora, and Oak Creek, and Newtown, and communities from Columbine to Blacksburg before that – then surely we have an obligation to try.

“In the coming weeks, I will use whatever power this office holds to engage my fellow citizens – from law enforcement to mental health professionals to parents and educators – in an effort aimed at preventing more tragedies like this. Because what choice do we have? We can’t accept events like this as routine. Are we really prepared to say that we’re powerless in the face of such carnage, that the politics are too hard? Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?”

What opportunities and challenges does this moment in time present to us as a society?

- ***From the anecdotal to the analytical:*** The Newtown tragedy is a painful moment in time, but just one of a series of highly publicized incidents involving high-powered weapons and/or individuals who may be mentally unstable. In another high-profile incident just 13 days before Newtown, Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher killed his girlfriend before killing himself. Whether two people or 27 die in an incident, the tragic loss of life ties together diverse incidents. Likewise, the rhetoric becomes deeper and more diverse as the gun-control debate heats up. There are many sources to explore data on this issue, one being [factcheck.org](http://factcheck.org), a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center. Find the resource at: <http://factcheck.org/2012/12/gun-rhetoric-vs-gun-facts/>

Do you trust the facts that reach you through word of mouth, or from your newspaper, radio, TV or computer? How does the information in the [factcheck.org](http://factcheck.org) resource challenge your perception of certain aspects of this issue?

- ***From the ahistorical to historical:*** It's important to explore the wording and intent of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which says "A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." Explore the history of the Assault Weapons Ban, which was signed into law in September 1994 and expired due to Congressional inaction in 2004. Also consider the arguments in cases concerning the Second Amendment, such as *District of Columbia v. Heller* and *McDonald v. Chicago*.

What did the Second Amendment mean in 1791, and is its meaning different today?

- ***From guilt to responsibility:*** Bumper-sticker rhetoric, such as "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," oversimplifies the complex issues involved in this discussion. Bullet vs. trigger-finger arguments are as unproductive as chicken vs. egg. Current debate centers around a ban on the manufacture and sale of assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, universal background checks and the mental fitness of those who purchase and use guns, and whether violence in media desensitizes people to violence in real life.

Who's to blame? The guns? The people? The mindset? Or more importantly, who is willing to take responsibility to lead and participate in effective dialogue that leads to change?

HOW MANY ARE  
TOO MANY?

## Reflection

Now we explore the issue in light of the Scriptures, Catholic Social Tradition and the lived faith of our community. Faith is not just an intellectual process; it becomes a way of living. How does the wisdom of our faith regarding guns and violence transform us?

- From Scripture:
  - “You shall not kill.” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17)
  - “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.” (Matthew 5:38-39)
  - “Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’” (Matthew 26:52)
  - “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mt 5:4, 9)
  - “Let the little children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14)
  - “(Herod) ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more’” (Matthew 2: 16b-18)

What does Christ’s love of the vulnerable and marginalized in society say about how we should respond? Does our belief in God steer us toward nonviolence and pacifism? How do we journey from reality toward ideal?

- From Catholic Social Tradition:
  - “With regard to the regulation of fire arms, first, the intent to protect one’s loved ones is an honorable one, but simply put, guns are too easily accessible. The Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in their document, *The International Arms Trade* (2006), emphasized the importance of enacting concrete controls on handguns, for example, noting that ‘limiting the purchase of such arms would certainly not infringe on the rights of anyone’...
  - “We must also reflect on our own fears as we grapple with our prejudices toward those with mental health needs. Our society must provide health services and support to those who have mental illnesses and to their families and caregivers...
  - “The events in Newtown call us to turn to our Lord in prayer and to witness more profoundly Christ’s perfect love, mercy and compassion. We must confront violence with love...

“We reiterate our call made in 2000, in our statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, for all Americans, especially legislators, to:

1. Support measures that control the sale and use of firearms
2. Support measures that make guns safer (especially efforts that prevent their unsupervised use by children and anyone other than the owner)
3. Call for sensible regulations of handguns
4. Support legislative efforts that seek to protect society from the violence associated with easy access to deadly weapons including assault weapons
5. Make a serious commitment to confront the pervasive role of addiction and mental illness in crime.

From *Call for Action in Response to Newtown Tragedy*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Dec. 21, 2002. Read more at <http://usccb.org/news/2012/12-219.cfm>

- “As bishops, 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.

“[W]e believe that in the long run and with few exceptions – i.e. police officers, military use – handguns should be eliminated from our society.”

*Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000.

- [A]s Pope Benedict wrote in his message to the disarmament conference, no reduction or elimination of arms can happen without eliminating violence at its root. Every person “is called to disarm his own heart and be a peacemaker everywhere,” the pope said.

From: *Gun control: Church firmly, quietly opposes firearms for civilians*, by Carol Glatz, Catholic News Service, Jan. 14, 2011. Read more at <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1100159.htm>

- “If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful.”

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2264) Read more at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm)

- In the 1994 statement *The International Arms Trade*, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace calls on every nation and state “to impose a strict control on the sale of handguns and small arms. Limiting the purchase of such arms would certainly not infringe on the rights of anyone.” The more weapons there are in circulation, the more likely terrorists and criminals will get their hands on them, the document said.

From: *Gun control: Church firmly, quietly opposes firearms for civilians*, by Carol Glatz, Catholic News Service, Jan. 14, 2011. Read more at <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1100159.htm>

What does Catholic Social Tradition tell us about the right to defend oneself, as well as control of access to powerful weapons?

## Action

Exploration and reflection lead to more enlightened and effective decision and action. Complex social issues such as curbing gun violence seldom lend themselves to simple or easy solutions. As so the messy effort begins. One month after telling America “surely we can do better than this,” and days prior to his second inaugural, President Obama presented a series of proposals aimed at reducing gun violence in America, broaching one of the most politically toxic issues. What will happen, and what role will you and your parish, class or group play?

What does doing “better than this” mean to people of faith? Do we strive toward an ideal that firearms in the hands of civilians should be strictly limited and eventually completely eliminated? The questions will only get deeper as we move toward action.

As the debate unfolds, be proactive in seeking discussion, forming consensus, and working in coalition with others to make a difference. Many efforts and resources are emerging or growing on this issue. The key first step is to think, but as thought moves to action, consider these and other efforts that range from simple petitions to focused legislative advocacy:

- Demand a Plan: A coalition of U.S. mayors and survivors of gun violence to lobby for legislation that will require a criminal background check for every gun sold, ban assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines, and make gun trafficking a federal crime. [www.demandaplan.org](http://www.demandaplan.org)
- Sandy Hook Promise: A group founded by residents in Newton, Conn., whose goals include to identify and implement holistic, common sense solutions that will make our community and our country safer from similar acts of violence through education, outreach and grass-roots discussion. <http://www.sandyhookpromise.org>
- 20 Children: A non-partisan, grassroots movement of parents and families across the U.S. who have come together to end gun violence. [www.20children.org](http://www.20children.org)
- Americans for Responsible Solutions: A group formed to encourage elected officials to stand up for solutions to prevent gun violence and protect responsible gun ownership, founded by former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, a survivor of gun violence. <http://americansforresponsiblesolutions.org/>

As always, be aware how your action brings about new involvements that call for further exploration, reflection and action. Allow the process to become a spiral that draws you and your community deeper into action for justice.