



Franciscan Friars
Holy Name Province
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Holy Week 2013

My dear Franciscan Brothers and Friends in Christ,

I write you this Holy Week on a topic, gun-violence, about which I have been thinking and praying for some time but especially during Lent. In Holy Week we remember the extreme love and sacrifice that God shows for the entire world. In Holy Week we are able to see the darkness of the world, but we also anticipate the Light of Easter that will overcome the long night.

Let me start my reflection by stating that I personally am not against guns. I grew up with guns in my family and youth. I was an avid hunter and shooter; I was quite a good shot at one time in my life. However, the tragedy of the killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut demands that we hold difficult conversations in an effort to find new ways to deal with gun violence. The mass killing of children and their teachers in a small town brings a shock that is too often ignored in the all too frequent individual deaths throughout our nation resulting from gun and other interpersonal violence. Since the killings at Sandy Hook, an estimated 2823 persons in the U.S. have been killed by guns. Each day we allow ourselves to be anesthetized by trivial pursuits rather than be horrified at this destruction brought upon so many. While each victim may be judged as good or bad in the eyes of society, each is of an inestimable value to God. God weeps at each death, much as he wept over Jerusalem prior to his passion. We too must allow ourselves to feel this brokenness and then invite God to enter into us as we reflect on a way forward.

I believe a realistic conversation about guns and violence must take two areas into consideration. First, what factors make the widespread presence of guns such a challenge to the U.S.? And second, how do we as Catholics understand rights?

There are four significant factors that must temper and mediate our thinking about guns in the U.S., and must be active parts of the conversation.

First, the slaughter at Newtown makes clear, as is seen daily in our cities and even in rural areas, that guns and their ammunition have become ever more lethal. In a little over two hundred years we have moved from simple muskets, capable of firing maybe once a minute, to guns that can shower a literal curtain of bullets on a person. This increase in shooting power has accelerated in the 20th Century with the unholy marriage of war and modern industry. What has resulted is the increased ability to harm and kill with guns. However the human capacity to restrain their usage has not improved. The result? We witness the power of weapons of war move to our streets and communities.

A second factor that should impact our thinking about guns and violence is the reduction of available services for those with psychological disorders. Beginning in the 1980s to this day we have seen a steady decline in the services that care for persons with mental illness. The majority of the mass killings that we have watched in horror over the past years have been perpetrated by persons with mental illness. With fewer resources

available to care for those with mental illness, these people slip through the cracks of the overburdened system with tragic results.

Third, the popular culture of the U.S. seems to have absorbed and enhanced the violence of the world. In movies, television shows, video games, and even political discourse, we consistently witness violence to and dehumanization of the other. By the time children graduate from high school, how many “deaths” have they seen on screen? How many sounds of death have they heard? With the preponderance of violence, we are all left desensitized. Such desensitization, such a deadening of our humanity, enables us to see the killing of others as “normal.” This normalization of violent death should jolt us into renewed action to bring about change.

A fourth and final particular piece of the culture that shapes our thinking on gun violence is the culture of the news media. Of course the news can be a conduit for learning about the tragic death of others. But in the broad sharing of the information, the media often increases our desensitization to violent death and contributes to its normalization. We all are familiar with the adage “if it bleeds it leads” and have witnessed the results in news coverage. Unfortunately, with the 24-hour nature of today’s coverage these moments of tragedy are raised to a higher level of exposure, to the level of celebrity. The news media, and we by supporting and watching it, turn killers into the next public personalities. This phenomenon invites the “copy cat” to act, and results in an erosion of sensitivity to the death of others.

These four factors taken together are a volatile combination, and should give us pause.

The second area that will help us in our conversation is a review of our Catholic approach to rights. As people of faith we are reminded that rights are always balanced with responsibilities. They are two sides of the same coin, to use an old metaphor. To illustrate this, let us consider the right to life. This right is paired with a responsibility to use one’s life and talents to care for others. If one only pays attention to one side of the coin, then decisions that are made to support the right or the responsibility have the potential to lead us to make incomplete or even wrong decisions. This sense that we have towards rights and responsibilities is also grounded in the Constitution. For example, the right to free speech in the First Amendment is not absolute, it is tempered by the fact that it cannot be allowed to cause inordinate harm to others (e.g., slander or yelling “fire” in a movie theater). Similar balancing is seen with regard to the freedom of religion. In our nation’s founding documents, there is an attempt to strike a balance between the individual and community good. To me, the living out of these rights, whether they are understood as our human rights or Constitutional rights, is tied to a balance between individual and community good that evolves as history and factors change. That is why the four factors mentioned above are important to our understanding of violence in our world, and the impact of guns within that structure.

To bind all these points together, I am fortunate to return to our Franciscan narrative within the Catholic-Christian story. Our story starts from the vantage point that each human is a gift from God to the entire world. As such, a point of reference in determining policy is to consider its impact on humans as both individuals and as a community. We do not see humans merely as individuals but as parts of community and social constructions.

Given our current national condition, one that has created a propensity for violence that is potentially more tragic when combined with the increasing lethality of guns, decreased mental illness support and the news media and popular cultures, we need to place some limitations on the presence of guns in our nation. Taking into account these factors, I think, at a minimum, our policies should:

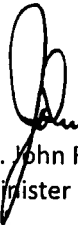
- 1) Include background checks on everyone who wishes to purchase a gun. This policy prescription should especially be linked to mental illness background checks.
- 2) Include stiff penalties for anyone who purchases a gun and allows someone who would not be able to pass a background check to have access to a gun.

- 3) Remove the most lethal guns from our nation. As a test, if the weapon is something that would be used for military service or is a close proximity thereof, it should be controlled.
- 4) Increase the support and structures to care for those with mental illness. People will “slip through” the system if there is not an adequate level of support. This element might be a great challenge in our time of increased fiscal austerity, but if we want to possess the right to guns, then we must create an environment to allow this to happen.
- 5) Finally, we need to regulate the amount of violence in the popular media and news media. This regulation is not one that can, nor should, be done by government. Rather, we as consumers must be judicious in what we and our families consume. As Church, we must work to help our people and the larger society make these wiser decisions.

Such changes will not address *all* the problems of violence, or keep guns from adding to the tragedy of this violence expressed against others. However, this approach takes steps toward realizing how a few smart gun policies can reduce the incidences of harm. More importantly, it reminds us of the need to place human well-being as a central determinant in public policy decisions.

As we take the journey of Holy Week from Jerusalem to Calvary, may we all experience an Easter joy and renewal not only in our own lives, but in the larger world in which we live. We pray that such a journey of prudence, in the weighing of our rights and responsibilities with guns, may be a part of this renewal.

May the Lord give you peace,



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