

Panel discusses the Church's response to the crisis of gun violence

Catholics are called to respond to the alarming number of mass murders in America by prayer, advocacy, legislation and in the corporate boardrooms of gun manufacturers, according to a panel of experts that included Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller of San Antonio.

Organized by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, the group participated Wednesday in an online discussion under the theme, "After Buffalo, After Uvalde, After Tulsa – Broken Hearts, Broken Nation, Faithful Action."

"What does faith offer and demand in the face of such evil and loss?" asked John Carr, co-director of the initiative and former director of justice and peace efforts of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, who moderated the discussion. "How are disciples of Jesus called to comfort those who mourn, to hunger and thirst for justice and to become peacemakers?"

Archbishop García-Siller, whose archdiocese includes the city of Uvalde, said his imperative when he heard of the shooting at Robb Elementary School during a meeting was, "I needed to be there and connect with people without my knowing what was happening. Two were dead when I headed to Uvalde, and the number increased as I traveled there."

An 18-year-old gunman armed with an AR-15 rifle killed 19 fourth graders and their two teachers on May 24 in a scenario that achingly encompasses many of the issues swirling around gun control – namely, inadequate gun sales regulations and poor security of schools.

On May 14 in Buffalo, New York, an 18-year-old man engaged in white supremacy allegedly killed 10 black shoppers at a grocery store with an AR-15 rifle and faces 25 charges stemming from the shootings. The gunman hunted out a location to kill as many Black people as possible and traveled 200 miles to do so.

On June 1, a 45-year-old disgruntled medical patient carried an AR-style rifle and a handgun the same day he bought them onto the campus of St. Francis Health System in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he killed his doctor and three others. He died of a self-inflicted wound.

“We must open ourselves to connect with anyone, no matter their faith, who is suffering, in pain and numb from shock,” said Archbishop García-Siller, who has helped to lead the pastoral care for the families of the victims and the Uvlade community.

The panel also included Sister Judy Byron, an Adrian Dominican sister who heads the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center in Seattle and is director of the Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment, where she is a leader in corporate responsibility efforts on gun safety; Rhinas Guidos, a reporter and editor for Catholic News Service who is covering the Church’s response to the shootings; Sister Mary Haddad, a member of the Sisters of Mercy and president and CEO of Catholic Health Association, who is a longtime advocate for sensible gun policies; and Father Bryan Massingale, a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University and author of “Racial Justice and the Catholic Church.”

Tending to the communities where these shootings took place requires “support in solidarity with the survivors,” Archbishop García-Siller said. “People of faith ask to be led by the Spirit; otherwise, we use our talents and gifts, but that is not enough.”

Sister Mary Haddad praised “the great resiliency of health care workers” from working during the COVID pandemic to caring for victims of mass shootings.

“That such violence is happening at a health care center pushed me to the edge. ... We must hold elected officials accountable. ... We need action.”

Health care must be at the center of response to the explosion of gun violence, Sister Mary said.

“Our position is informed by our faith and seeing the results (of shootings),” Sister Mary said. “We must make all the institutions safe. In Tulsa, the reality is faced everyday. There is a financial issue, because money is diverted from care of patients and salaries to increase security; there is the increasing gun violence issue, [which] is a health crisis, [as] gun violence has increased by 75% in 10 years; and there is a health equity issue, [as] 77% of persons injured by gun violence are people of color.”

Race is the key issue for Father Massingale. “Hate crime sends a message: This is a country where our lives don’t matter. White people can end our lives because they think we do not belong here. Buffalo is the end result of years of racial manipulation and the replacement (theory) of whites being replaced by blacks.”

“We need a deeper respect for life past birth,” Father Massingale said. “We cannot turn a blind eye to racism. Do we believe in the presence of Christ in black and brown bodies?”

Sister Judy Byron advocates pressuring gun manufacturers where they will feel it: their wallets.

“We never hear from the gun manufacturers” when mass shootings happen, she said. So, she has been going into the belly of the beast since 2017 by encouraging purchase of shares in the gun companies to gain entry to shareholder meetings. She has

targeted Sturm, Ruger and Co., and Smith and Wesson, and has won majority votes to direct the companies to investigate the effects of their gun production. The resulting reports are a disappointment, she said.

“We are like the woman in the Gospel who begs for crumbs every year since 2019,” Sister Judy said. “We are asking for the companies to adopt a human rights policy. We want an assessment of impact on human rights. We want them to monitor and study their markets. Sixty-nine percent of shareholders have stood up to support us.”

Reporter Rhinas Guidos summed up the dilemma facing all responses to gun violence: “How do we turn the words into action?”

“In a way, politics has become religion, where it is more likely to turn life issues into a politics issue,” Guidos said.

Sister Judy advised that Catholics have an obligation to act against gun violence.

“We need to educate ourselves,” she said. “For many, the only contact they have with the Church is on Sunday in the homily. We need to build a critical mass in our states to confront gun violence.”

Joseph R. LaPlante writes from Rhode Island.