

Father James J. Bacik

Introduction

1. The latest school shooting in Parkland Florida left 17 dead and has prompted a new discussion of gun control, energized by student survivors.
2. Catholic Social Teaching provides themes and perspectives to guide a discussion including serving the common good, participating in the democratic process, care for the marginalized, reading signs of the times, prudent discernment of God's will in complex situations, beginning to deal with major problems without a lot of clarity on how the process will work out, consistent ethic of life and non-violence.
3. Our complex gun problem requires a multi-faceted response: improving mental health services; hardening schools; requiring universal background checks; deconstructing our gun mythology; reducing the number of guns available; banning semi-automatic weapons; improving research and praying for guidance and courage.

I. The situation: Reading the signs of the times

A. Mass shootings – some of the worst in order of numbers killed.

1. Las Vegas: October 1, 2017, 54 killed and more than 515 wounded by Stephen Paddock, age 64, motive unknown.
2. Orlando, Florida; Pulse gay nightclub: June 12, 2016, 49 killed and more than 58 wounded by 29-year-old Omar Mateen, who claimed allegiance to ISIS.
3. Blacksburg Virginia, home of Virginia Tech: April 16, 2009, 33 killed and 17 wounded by 23-year-old Seung-Hei Cho.
4. Newtown, Conn; Sandy Hook elementary school: December 14, 2012, 28 killed (20 grade school children) by 20-year-old Adam Lanza. Motive: mental health issues.
5. Sutherland Springs, Texas: November 5, 2017, 26 died and 20 wounded by Devin Patrick Kelly age 26; motive unknown.
6. Killeen, Texas: October 16, 1991, 23 died and 22 wounded by George Hennard, age 35; killer of women and minorities.
7. Parkland, Florida; Stoneman Douglas High School: February, 14, 2018; 17 dead and 14 wounded by former student, 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz; parents both deceased, many clues of his intention missed by FBI, legally purchased over a dozen guns, walked into school with AR-15 in a bag, shot into five classrooms, left 150 rounds unfired, walked out with other students, apprehended while walking after several stops. Assistant football coach Aaron Feis, known as a compassionate, caring person, died while shielding three girls from gunfire.
8. Colorado Columbine High School: April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 13 and wounded 24. Motive: wanted to rival Oklahoma City bombing.

B. Gun Accessibility (Source: article in The Guardian)

1. About 42% of U.S. households have at least one gun.
2. We have 88 guns for every 100 people; more than 16 times as many as other developed countries.

3. About 71% increase in number of handgun owners since 1994.
4. Around 3% of the U.S. population own half the guns.
5. Among all murders, 73% happen by guns.
6. About 32% of men own a gun (down from 42% in 1994) and 12% of women (up from 9% in 1994).
7. As of 2012, there were an estimated 2.5 – 3.7 million of the AR-15 family of rifles in the U.S. There are many more different types of assault weapons, but they are hard to count because of different methods of classification.

C. Gun Deaths in the U.S. - Some stats from Everytown based on CDC numbers and FBI reports

1. On an average day 96 Americans are killed by guns; 2. On average there are 13,000 gun homicides a year; 3. For every one person killed by guns, two are injured; 4. 62% are suicides; 5. On an average day, seven children and teens are killed by guns; 6. In an average month, 50 women are killed by intimate partners; 7. Since 1994, background checks have blocked over three million gun sales to prohibited people; 8. Black men are 13 times more likely to be shot and killed than whites; 9. The presence of a gun in domestic violence situation increases the death of the woman by five times; 10. U.S. gun homicide rate is more than 25 times of other developed countries; 11. Over 80% of the murders each year are by handguns.

D. Assault Weapons

1. DOJ definition: semi-automatic firearm with a large magazine of ammunition designed for rapid fire and combat use. State legislatures define assault weapons in diverse ways determining which weapons are banned, for example, California includes shotguns with a revolving cylinder.
2. Manufacturers have made cosmetic changes in guns to avoid legislative bans.
3. Assault weapons which are semiautomatic are usually distinguished from fully automatic machine guns and from “assault rifles” which are fully automatic.
4. In 1994, Congress passed the Federal Assault Weapons Bill which banned the manufacture and importation of semi-automatic rifles, pistols and shotguns with detachable magazines and some other features. This ban allowed persons who already had these weapons to keep and transfer them. This law also banned manufacture and importation of magazines that held more than ten rounds of ammunition. This ban expired in 2004. Manufacturers often found ways to get around the ban by cosmetic altering.
5. In 2013 the Senate defeated a bill 60-40 that would reinstate the 1994 ban.
6. The most popular assault style weapon in the U.S. is the AR-15, modelled on the M-16 fully automatic rifle used by U.S. military. It was used at Sandy Hook in Newtown, San Bernardino, and Stoneman Douglas. It is easily modified so it functions more like a weapons platform.

E. The Second Amendment – passed by Congress Sept 25, 1789 Ratified Dec. 15, 1792

1. “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.”

2. Background: a general fear among Founders that governments are prone to use soldiers to oppress the people; the Constitutional Convention, aware that militia forces could not provide adequate national defense gave federal government power to establish standing armies and regulate militias. The Second Amendment was designed to protect states and people from the power of the federal government to deprive militias of their weapons, just as the First Amendment prevents it from abridging freedom of speech and free exercise of religion. Some scholars claim James Madison, a Federalist from Virginia proposed the Amendment to secure Virginia votes for the Constitution, ensuring the state that the government would not force them to drop their system of slavery.
3. Today the balance of power has radically changed between the federal military with nuclear weapons and local militias with available conventional weapons. Most citizens do not fear an attack by the regular army and reasonable people do not think a militia could win.
4. In the Heller Case (2008) the Supreme Court 5-4 ruled that the Second Amendment protects the right of individuals to have arms for their own defense.
5. In the McDonald case (2010) struck down 5-4 a state law banning handguns in the home on the grounds that the 14th Amendment protects against state infringement same as the Second Amendment prohibits federal infringement. These decisions left open the possibility of lawful regulation such as prohibiting guns to felons and mentally ill, not taking them into schools etc. (Justice Scalia)
6. The Partisan Divide.

F. National Rifle Association (NRA)

1. Founded in 1871 to promote rifle marksmanship.
2. In 1934 NRA supported the first federal gun-control law and also the 1968 Gun Control Act (GCA) which restricted certain types of guns.
3. In 1977 their annual convention moved to become active in preserving Second Amendment Rights. Since then they have become more politically active in support of gun rights, contributing large sums to influence elections.
4. In their 1991 convention they named Wayne LaPierre executive vice-president and he has remained a prominent spokesperson.
5. NRA opposed the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban which passed and successfully lobbied for its expiration in 2004.
6. They rate members of Congress on their support of for gun rights and the Second Amendment. For example, A+ means they will not support a primary challenge.
7. Starting in 1980 NRA began endorsing presidential candidates supporting Reagan over Carter. They opposed Obama in 2008, spending \$10 million to defeat him and supported Trump 2016 with \$30 million.
8. In 2012 after Sandy Hook, NRA proposed a “National School Shield Program” with armed police in every school, and improved building design, access control, teacher and student training.
9. NRA claims five million members. A 2017 Pew study found 14 million consider themselves members, suggesting they agree with its policies.

10. After Parkland, NRA is opposing moving age to 21 for purchasing semi-automatic weapons as well as other restrictions.

G. Cautions

1. The last 20 years there has been a steady decline in homicides by firearms by almost half from 1994 to 2014. (Pew Study)
2. Mass shootings account for only about 2 or 3% of gun deaths (almost 2/3 are suicides).
3. About 80% of guns in mass shootings were legal as in Parkland.
4. The 1994 assault weapons ban did not have a great effect on fatal gun violence although gun violence dropped.
5. Mental illness: The vast majority of mentally ill do not kill anyone; most mass murderers do not have a history of mental illness; strict background checks in Connecticut kept guns out of the hands of mentally ill but reduced crime rate by only 1%.
6. Confiscating guns reduced gun crime in UK and Australia but is unconstitutional in U.S.
7. These cautions suggest the need for comprehensive approaches to reducing gun violence for example, jobs for youth gangs. "The best defense against a bullet is a job." (Fr. Greg Boyle of Homeboys Industries in L.A.)

II. Some Reactions to Parkland

A. President Trump

1. Visited Parkland and had a listening session with students and parents in White House, met with NRA leaders and State governors.
2. At first he talked of extending the age to 21 but has backed off since.
3. Now is pushing for arming some trained teachers with concealed weapons and paying them extra. He stressed getting action on the problems now. Will there be a follow-up with reluctant Congress?
4. Criticized FBI for missing clues and sheriff's deputy for not entering the building.
5. Ordered Justice Dept. to propose regulations to ban bump stocks or will do it himself.
6. Wants better background checks, need better mental health care, hardened schools, and says sometimes it is necessary to fight NRA.
7. On Weds, Feb. 28, the President met with 17 Congressional lawmakers: urging quick bi-partisan action on a single comprehensive bill; telling them they are too fearful of the NRA; advocating armed staff in schools, stronger background checks, better mental health care, ban on bump stocks; suggesting they consider raising purchase age to 21; telling Senators Murphy, Cornyn, Manchen and Toomey to try and combine their bills, strengthening "Fix Nics."

B. Governor Rick Scott

1. Armed officers in all Florida schools: one for every 1000 students.
2. Raise age to 21.
3. Ban sale of bump stocks.
4. Against armed teachers.

C. Sen. Rubio

1. Raise age to 21 for buying rifles, ban bump stocks, and expand background checks.
2. Considering limiting size of magazines
3. Participated in CNN Town Hall Feb 21, only GOP there.

4. Considering “gun violence restraining orders” that enable families or police to petition a court to take away guns from at-risk persons, also known as “red flag laws.”

D. NRA

1. Resisting all suggestions for gun control claiming they would make us less free – the gun as a symbol of freedom.
2. More armed security in schools, harden schools.
3. Mainstream media love mass shootings and use them “to juice their ratings and push their agenda.”
4. “The only defense against a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”
5. About a dozen corporations including Delta Airlines have severed their ties with the NRA. Dick’s Sporting Goods, Walmart and Kroger will no longer sell assault weapons and will raise the age to 21 to purchase a gun.

E. Public

1. A recent CNN poll shows 70% now favor stricter gun control law up from 52% in Oct 2017. Highest level in 25 years.
2. Another poll – 97% favor universal background checks; 83% favor a mandatory waiting period; 67% favor a ban on assault weapons; 40% think stricter gun control would reduce violence in schools compared to 34% for metal detectors and 20% said armed teachers.

F. Parkland Student Leaders

1. Have transferred their feelings of grief, anger, fear into political, showing truly remarkable courage, resolve, and poise.
2. Leaders: Cameron Kasky (interviewed on CNN came up with name of the movement – “Never Again” which he co-founded, confronted Sen Rubio at CNN town hall. Alphonso Calderon cofounder stressed voting power to counter power of NRA. Jaclyn Corin, 17-year-old junior class president, lost close friend, went to grief counselling, advocated stricter gun laws immediately, helped organize Tallahassee trip, had written a paper for class on gun control. David Hogg, reporter for school paper, did TV interviews calling for action by elected officials, 140,000 followers on Twitter, appeared on Meet the Press. Emma Gonzales did TV interview, gave major speech at gun control rally in Fort Lauderdale on Sat. Feb 17.
3. Events: Shootings Ash Weds, Feb 14 (Valentine’s Day); Thursday night vigil; Sat Feb 17 gun control rally in Fort Lauderdale; Sunday Feb. 18 announced March for Our Lives on March 24th ; Weds Feb 24, 160 students with 15 chaperones made the long trip in 3 buses to Tallahassee, trying rather unsuccessfully to meet with state representatives; a few students and parents met with President Trump in White House for listening session; CNN town hall where students and teachers questioned Florida senators and Dana Loesch representing NRA.
4. Upcoming events:
 1. Continue pressure on elected officials for stricter gun control laws. A 14-year-old girl, on national television, said the students are now the teachers of the adults, reflecting the new cultural factor that young people know more about something important (social media) than adults.

2. National School Walkout, Weds, March 14th sponsored by the organizers of the Women's March in support of student goals. At 10 a.m. in each time zone asking students and teachers to walk out of school for 17 minutes in honor of those killed in Parkland.
3. March for Our Lives, Sat., March 24 in Washington and other cities. Details pending.

G. Other responses

1. Peggy Noonan (Wall Street Journal) root problem deteriorating culture and compares reluctance of Democrats to favor reasonable restrictions on abortion and Republicans to support common sense restrictions on guns (both fearing a slippery slope).
2. Bret Stephens (NYT) wants to repeal the Second Amendment.

H. Governor Kasich

1. Prohibit sale of armor-piercing ammunition.
2. Prohibit straw purchase sales
3. Strengthen ability of law enforcement to get protection orders against those dangerous to themselves or others.
4. Force local government to promptly report data into National Background System.

III. Christian Perspective

A. Non-violence

1. Jesus taught us to love others even our enemies. He practiced non-violence, insisting that Peter put away his sword, for those who take up the sword will perish by the sword (Matt 26: 52).
2. Long Christian tradition of non-violence with a great contemporary witness in Martin Luther King who demonstrated its effectiveness in gaining civil rights.
3. There is also a tradition of legitimate self-defense which must be proportionate and not excessive.
4. Challenges notion that more guns are the answer to gun violence.

B. For Christians the cross is the great symbol of freedom not the gun.

1. The symbolic role of guns in American mythology: the westward movement required guns for protection in entering unexplored territory: images of gun toting posse going after the bad guys; the good cowboy with a six-shooter eliminates the bad guy; a gun represents freedom from fear, coercion. Historian Richard Slotkin, author of three volumes on violence in U.S. culture including *Regeneration through Violence* and *Gun Fighter Nation*. He claims "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience." Colonists displaced Native Americans through warfare. The westward movement required guns for exploring new territory. Guns symbolize power and freedom. JFK spoke of the new frontier. Movies like *High Noon* portray and reinforce the myth that proper order is restored by the gun. Richard Nisbett, social psychologist links violence to a deep "culture of honor" that prizes personal reputation and responds to insults with violence. Some see this at work with high school students who respond to humiliation and bullying with violence. Violence becomes a means of self-preservation. There is no clear evidence that video games contribute to violent behavior.
2. The cross represents a richer, more fulfilling notion of true human freedom. Out of love and obedience to his Father, Jesus freely accepted death on the cross as a byproduct of his fidelity.

Christian freedom involves freedom from the prison of selfishness and is isolation and freedom for doing good, loving others and promoting the common good.

3. This challenges the assumption constantly reinforced by the NRA that links guns with freedom and gun control with coercion.
- C. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) sees human rights in the context of the common good and corresponding obligations.**
1. NRA claims the right to own a gun is absolute without context.
 2. CST insists gun rights are limited by other considerations such as potential harm to others and by the obligation to use the gun responsibly.
 3. This is the basis for denying guns to unstable persons and for making sure a gun is not used to harm others or diminish the common good.
- D. Christian discipleship demands responsible citizenship**
1. Some want to rule out of public debate faith-based claims. Some believers practice a private faith that has little connection with public debates such as gun control.
 2. CST insists that Christians participate in the political process, especially by intelligent voting that avoids single issues politics and considers all relevant positions of candidate. U.S bishops favor a consistent ethic of life that, for example, opposes the proliferation of weapons as well as abortion.
 3. Voting is an obligation for Christians and positions on gun control are relevant.
- E. Human relations which should be loving and respectful are distorted by the presence of guns.**
1. Available guns facilitate suicides and domestic violence.
 2. In disputes, guns make reasonable solutions less likely and violence more likely.
 3. The Catholic bishops following Catholic Social teaching see gun control as a right to life issue. We have a duty to defend life by regulating guns. We can do this by requiring universal background checks for all gun purchases; limiting civilian access to high capacity weapons and ammunition magazines; making gun trafficking a federal crime; improving access to mental health care for those who may be prone to violence. In general, CST emphasizes that human responsibilities accompany human rights.
- F. American Bishops Statement**
1. 1975 USCCB issued a document “Handgun Violence: A Threat to Life” calling for a ban on Saturday Night Specials as well as registering and licensing of handguns.
 2. 1990 statement on drug abuse that included their “repeated call for effective and courageous action to control handguns, leading to their eventual elimination from our society.”
 3. A 2000 document on criminal justice: “We suggest measures that control the sale and use of firearms and we reiterate our call for sensible regulation of handguns.”
 4. 2016 Bishop Kevin Farrell of Dallas criticized congressional kowtowing to the gun lobby and the “cowboy mentality” that allowed open carry law to pass in Texas. He wants “to close the loopholes in our pitiful gun control laws to reduce the number of mass shootings, suicides, and killings that have become a plague in our country.”
 5. After Parkland Cardinal Daniel DiNardo President of USCCB called for prayers and sacrifices for healing and consolation for all effected by violence so we have communities marked by peace.

6. American Episcopal Bishops statement: prayers for victims that bring consolation and healing and make evident the work God is calling us to today; acknowledge our own complicity in unjust systems; contact representatives to support legislation banning AR-15s large magazines and bump stocks; poverty, misogyny and racism contribute to violence; soaring rates of suicide are also a challenge; problem of gun violence is complex and we must address it in small pieces so it does not overwhelm us, "Your voice should be heard above the NRA."
7. After Parkland, Cardinal Blasé Cupich, of Chicago wrote: "Let us make it clear to our elected officials that the weapons and ammunition that facilitate this carnage have no place in our culture." Cardinal O'Malley of Boston: "Our thoughts and prayers must be joined with action. We can and must do more to prevent such attacks."

IV. Actions

A. Guns are a major problem in the U.S which requires persevering efforts in all relevant areas.

1. Pope Francis reminds us that first steps are important in solving complex problems.
2. In the U.S. our polarized politics makes it harder to find workable solutions.
3. Areas of concern: the mythology of guns; the excessive number of guns in the U.S.; large number of semi-automatic weapons; disturbed individuals with access to guns; lack of proper care for mentally ill; children growing up in dysfunctional families; history of school violence since Columbine in 1999.
4. Need research on violence. The NRA backed Dickey Amendment to 1996 gun bill effectively limited federal research on gun violence. We have no way of knowing how many assault weapons are really available. There is no registry of firearms, owners or transactions.

B. Suggestions

1. Vote, keep consistent ethic of life in mind.
2. Join March 14 and 24 national events.
3. Contact elected officials at all levels for reasonable gun control.
4. Help a disturbed friend or relative by being a good listener and/or suggesting professional assistance.
5. Practice non-violence.
6. Pray for victims, perpetrators, and effective solutions.
7. Promote healthy family life where disputes are settled non-violently.
8. Consider symbolic actions like the 2016 anti-violence March in Chicago led by Father Michael Pfleger in the Magnificent Mile as hundreds marched with wooden crosses bearing the names of victims of the city's gun violence.
9. Encourage pastors to preach on the issue.
10. The Church could sponsor research on the causes and cures of violence perhaps led by Catholic hospitals.
11. The Church could encourage contacting elected officials as we have done on abortion and recently immigration.
12. Catholic high schools and colleges could encourage students to join the March 24th March For Our Lives.

A Prayer

In Florida, on Feb. 14, 2018,
seventeen got up in the morning,
ate and brushed their teeth,
and headed for school.

On this ordinary day,
in their ordinary lives,
they followed their ordinary routines.

Then, in an instant,
as a volley of shots ripped through the air,
terrified students hid in closets
and covered under desks.

And seventeen died.

As our faith seeks understanding,
let us remember these victims of violence
in our own land,
cut down by a troubled youth
in a violent gun culture
with senseless gun laws.

May we find in ourselves the courage to act,
peacefully and non-violently,
but persistently,
to do what we can to change laws
that allow such tragedies.

In this way, let us honor these seventeen.

And let us pray for God's blessing
on those whose lives were snatched away
and also on ourselves.

Sister Patricia Schnapp, R.S.M.

Accessing other Father James Bacik lectures and reflections is easy:

You can access previous lectures at: www.frjimbacik.org and you can access WGTE's video library of Father Bacik lectures at the Franciscan Center at: www.knowledgestream.org

If you would like to receive Father James Bacik's Weekly Meditations and Monthly Reflection, send your request to jamesjbacik@gmail.com

Father Bacik's 2018 Lecture Dates at the Franciscan Center:

Fr Bacik's Annual Easter season lecture series will examine the *Acts of the Apostles* for guidance on dealing with contemporary issues.

Thursday, April 5: *Easter Season Lecture Series*

The Jerusalem Church: Guidance for a more fruitful pluralism.

Thursday, April 12: *Easter Season Lecture Series*

The Council of Jerusalem: Guidance for more inclusive communities.

Thursday, April 19: *Easter Season Lecture Series*

Pentecost: Guidance for improving communications.

Thursday, May 31: Sixth Annual Karl Rahner Lecture

Guest Speaker: Mary Catherine Helkert, O.P.

Thursday, July 12 (Topic TBA)

Thursday, August 9 (Topic TBA)

Thursday, September 13, 2018 (Topic TBA)

Thursday, October 11 (Topic TBA)

Thursday, November 8 (Topic TBA)

Thursday, December 13, Advent Reflection

Thursdays, 5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. in the Franciscan Center

\$10 Pre-registered; \$15 at the door

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