



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3000

WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG • FAX 202-541-3339

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Dear Senator/Representative:

Last week, an eighteen-year-old carrying an AR-15 entered an elementary school and murdered nineteen children and two teachers. Fourth graders looking forward to their final week of classes, some of whom celebrated their place on the honor roll mere hours before, were brutally and senselessly massacred. This incomprehensible tragedy at Uvalde, Texas, comes as we are still grieving the loss of innocent lives in Buffalo, Dallas, Laguna Woods, and now Tulsa. These tragedies can only bring us to one conclusion: we must unite in our humanity to stop the massacres of innocent lives.

In our own sadness and prayerfulness, we echo Pope Francis' words that, "My heart is broken over the massacre at the primary school in Texas. I pray for the children and adults killed, and for their families."¹ As we continue to grieve these losses, we are reminded of the times the Gospels tell us Jesus was "moved by pity." Moved by pity, Jesus fed the hungry (Matthew 15:32), healed the blind (Matthew 20:34), and comforted the widow whose only son had died (Luke 7:13).

We urge all members of Congress to reflect on the compassion all of you undoubtedly feel in light of these tragic events and be moved to action because of it. There is something deeply wrong with a culture where these acts of violence are increasingly common. There must be dialogue followed by concrete action to bring about a broader social renewal that addresses all aspects of the crisis, including mental health, the state of families, the valuation of life, the influence of entertainment and gaming industries, bullying, and the availability of firearms. Among the many steps toward addressing this endemic of violence is the passage of reasonable gun control measures. In this, we implore you to join the Holy Father who, in his continued expression of grief over the tragedy in Texas, declared, "It is time to say 'no more' to the indiscriminate trafficking of weapons."

Although much more work will be necessary to address the root causes of gun violence, we encourage you to make two incremental, but meaningful, improvements in the firearm background check process by voting in favor of the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2021 (H.R. 8) and the Enhanced Background Checks Act of 2021 (H.R. 1446)². We have also spoken favorably of extreme risk protection orders and support the passage of the Federal Extreme Risk Protection Order Act of 2021 (H.R. 2377).³

Pope Francis has warned many times that we live "in a world marked by a 'globalization of indifference' which makes us slowly inured to the suffering of others and closed in on ourselves."⁴ As he had also said, in his address to a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress in 2015, "Here we have to ask ourselves: Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood."⁵ In the ten years since the massacre of children at Sandy Hook, very little has been done by Congress to regulate these weapons and prevent another catastrophe. We urgently call on members of Congress to work together in a bipartisan fashion to make these horrific attacks less likely to happen again.

¹ Pope Francis, [General Audience](#).

² Current law allows a firearm dealer to transfer a firearm to an individual if the FBI has not made a determination of denial within three business days; however, a U.S. GAO study published in 2016 found that 30% of background check denials due to misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence were determined after the three-day period. U.S. Government Accountability Office, "[Gun Control: Analyzing Available Data Could Help Improve Background Checks Involving Domestic Violence Records](#)."

³ [Responses to the Plague of Gun Violence](#).

⁴ Pope Francis, [Message of His Holiness Francis for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace](#).

⁵ Pope Francis, [Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress](#).

For many years, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has supported a number of reasonable measures to address the problem of gun violence and continues to support efforts by the U.S. Congress to advance these policies in legislation.⁶ It should not be the case that in the United States, a person needs character references to apply for a job but not to purchase military-style assault weapons.⁷ We support a total ban on assault weapons and limitations on civilian access to high-capacity weapons and ammunition magazines. Data show that limitations on high-capacity magazines can reduce the number of people killed in mass shootings by as much as 38%, and those injured by as much as 77%.⁸ We also support measures that control the sale and use of firearms, such as universal background checks for all gun purchases. We ask that Congress pass a federal law to criminalize gun trafficking. This is of particular importance since the United States not only suffers from domestic gun violence but is a major international exporter of weapons.⁹ Finally, the USCCB also supports recent proposals to set a more appropriate minimum age for gun ownership, and to ban 'bump stocks.'

While strengthened gun laws could reduce mass-casualty events, not even the most effective gun laws, by themselves, will suffice to address the roots of these violent attacks in our country. We need to acknowledge that "the weakening of the family... poses a threat to the mature growth of individuals, the cultivation of community values, and the moral progress of cities and countries."¹⁰ Many of the perpetrators of mass violence in schools have experienced childhood trauma including familial instability and suffering or witnessing physical abuse, emotional abuse, or substance abuse.¹¹ As we said in our pastoral statement *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, "We have to address simultaneously declining family life and the increasing availability of deadly weapons..."¹² We, therefore, in addition to seeking for all manner of policies be crafted to encourage cultivation of strong family life, call for improved access to and increases in resources for mental health care and earlier interventions. We also encourage peacebuilding in our communities through restorative justice models.

Bipartisanship is never more important than when it is required to protect life and end the culture of death. We invite you to support these measures and to be part of building up the culture of life that is so needed in our society, not just as elected officials but as mothers and fathers, grandparents, and aunts and uncles of little children or teachers whom you expect to return home safely today.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley
Archbishop of Oklahoma City
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development



Most Reverend Thomas A. Daly
Bishop of Spokane
Chairman, Committee on Catholic Education



Most Reverend Salvatore J. Cordileone
Archbishop of San Francisco
Chairman, Committee on Laity,
Marriage, Family Life and Youth



Most Reverend William E. Lori
Archbishop of Baltimore
Chairman, Committee on Pro-Life
Activities

⁶ [A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence.](#)

⁷ Carlsen, A. & Chinoy, S., "How to Buy a Gun in 16 Countries," *The New York Times*.

⁸ Siegel, M., Goder-Reiser, M., Duwe, G., Rocque, M., Fox, J. A., & Fridel, E. E., "[The relation between state gun laws and the incidence and severity of mass public shootings in the United States, 1976–2018.](#)"

⁹ World Atlas, "[World's Largest Exporters of Arms.](#)"

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 52.

¹¹ Langman, P., "School Shooters: The Myth of the Stable Home."

¹² [Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action](#), no. 2.