

Testimony Submitted for the Record

On behalf of the

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

before the

***United States Senate
Committee on the Judiciary***

***“Proposals to Reduce Gun Violence: Protecting Our Communities While
Respecting the Second Amendment”***

February 12, 2013

Introduction

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is grateful for the opportunity to provide this testimony for the hearing on *Proposals to Reduce Gun Violence: Protecting Our Communities While Respecting the Second Amendment*.

The tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, as well as the many other tragedies that have happened in our communities, homes and throughout the world, shatters the peace of us all. There are countless examples: Columbine, Virginia Tech, mall and cinema shootings in Oregon and Colorado, and the assassination attempt on Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. Sadly, gun violence, the global illicit trade of weapons and ammunition, and other acts that strike at the life and dignity of persons, are an all too common reality.

More than ever, the Church and all people of good will must work together to confront the pervasive culture of violence and instead build a culture that values life, peace and the inherent dignity of all. We join Pope Benedict XVI who stated in his *2013 Message for the World Day of Peace*, "Life in its fullness is the height of peace. Anyone who loves peace cannot tolerate attacks and crimes against life." Today, we particularly call on Congress to pursue policies that will contribute to reducing gun violence in our society and help save lives.

The Work of the Church

The Church has been a consistent voice for the promotion of peace at home and around the world and a strong advocate for the reasonable regulation of firearms. 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 the production, possession, and trade in weapons, including handguns, calling for them to be regulated "by paying due attention to specific principles of the moral and legal order."

The USCCB has also been a consistent advocate for peace and the prevention of gun and other forms of violence that strike at the life and dignity of persons. In 1994, recalling the words of Pope Paul VI, "if you want peace, work for justice," the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral message, *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action*. In their message the bishops stated, "We have an obligation to respond. Violence -- in our homes, our schools and streets, our nation and world -- is destroying the lives, dignity and hopes of millions of our sisters and brothers." The USCCB was also a supporter of the Assault Weapons Ban initially passed in 1994 but which expired in 2004.

In 2000, the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*. In the statement the bishops called for all people to work for a culture of life and to do more to end violence in our homes and to help victims break out of patterns of abuse. In regard to gun violence prevention, the bishops wrote, "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."

In the aftermath of the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, the chairmen of three committees of the USCCB issued a joint statement to decry violence in society. They said the tragedy had given rise to

discussions about national policies and steps that can be taken to foster a culture that protects the innocent and those most vulnerable among us. In their statement the bishops called on all Americans, but especially legislators, “to address national policies that will strengthen regulations of firearms and improve access to health care for those with mental health needs.”

On January 15, Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, Chair of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development joined 46 other national religious leaders in signing the letter of *Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence*. The letter urges Congress to support policies that:

- Require universal background checks for all gun purchases;
- Limit civilian access to high-capacity weapons and ammunition magazines;
- Make gun trafficking a federal crime, and;
- Improve access to mental health care for those who may be prone to violence.

In addition to policies intended to curb gun violence, we must also look to our entertainers, especially film producers and video game creators, and encourage them to reflect on how their profit motives have allowed the proliferation of movies, television programs, video games and other entertainment that glorify violence and prey on the insecurities and vulnerabilities of our young people. Such portrayals of violence have desensitized all of us. We must improve our resources for parents, guardians and young people, so that they can evaluate entertainment products intelligently. The viewing and use of these products have negative emotional, psychological and spiritual effects on people, especially the young.

Our society must recognize the urgency for providing health services and support to those who have mental illnesses and to their families and caregivers. As a community we need to support one another so no one feels unable to get help for a mentally ill family member or neighbor in need. Burdensome healthcare policies must be adjusted so people can get help for themselves or others in need. Just as we properly reach out to those with physical challenges we need to approach mental health concerns with equal sensitivity. There is no shame in seeking help for oneself or others; the only shame is in refusing to provide care and support.

Tragic events such as what occurred in Newton, Connecticut, and the violence that occurs in our homes and communities and around the world, should lead us to live out what Pope Benedict calls “our innate vocation to peace.” Together we must confront the culture of violence with love and work together to promote a culture of life and peace.