News



Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who is Catholic, attends a candlelight vigil after a mass shooting Nov. 5 at the First Baptist Church in rural Sutherland Springs. A lone gunman entered the church during Sunday services taking the lives of at least 26 people and injuring several more. (CNS/Joe Mitchell, Reuters)



by Maria Benevento

View Author Profile
mbenevento@ncronline.org

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Related: 26 killed in church attack in Texas' deadliest mass shooting

In the wake of a Nov. 5 shooting that killed 26 people and injured 20 in a Baptist church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, many leaders expressed solidarity with the victims and their families and called for Americans to examine the causes of such violence.

"We must come to the firm determination that there is a fundamental problem in our society," said Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a statement. "A Culture of Life cannot tolerate, and must prevent, senseless gun violence in all its forms. May the Lord, who Himself is Peace, send us His Spirit of charity and nonviolence to nurture His peace among us all."

The gunman, identified as Devin Kelley, had received a bad-conduct discharge from the Air Force for allegedly assaulting his wife and child. He opened fire during an 11 a.m. church service and was found dead of a gunshot wound after fleeing the scene.

Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vermont, invited prayers for victims and their families in his statement, but added that we need "prayers for ourselves that we may as a country somehow find a way to have a meaningful dialogue about what is to be done to stop these mass shootings, with an openness to hear each other and to seriously consider new policies and laws to protect people from this horror."

Speaking at an event at the University of Chicago, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago also focused on policy changes, saying high-powered weapons, like the one used in the Texas shooting, should be illegal. "We don't need military weapons in our society," he told local media after an event at the University of Chicago Nov. 6.

"We're not supposed to be at war with one another. Let's make sure that we don't have weapons that declare war on each other," he said.

Bishop Richard Stika of Knoxville, Tennessee, called upon good people to stand up to "the forces of evil." He named "the abundance of guns in our society," the portrayal

of violence in mass media "as something glamorous and inconsequential" and "the breakdown in civil discourse" as major concerns.

Bishop David Zubik of Pittsburg also described a culture of violence, "where massacres are becoming commonplace," that needs to change.

"Too many of our movies glorify violence, too many television shows use violence as entertainment, and an increasing number of people use guns as the go-to option for expressing anger," he said. "We need to reclaim a culture of life and a civilization of love, in which people actually solve problems by helping others."

"There will always be wounded souls who seek to lash out in anger," Zubik added. "We need to do everything possible to make it unthinkable and difficult to express that anger with a gun."

Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Sillar of San Antonio wrote in a statement, "We are committed to work in unity with all our brothers and sisters to build peace in our communities; to connect in a more direct and substantial way."

Garcia-Sillar also condemned all violence in a series of tweets Nov. 5. "We have to let our leaders know that war, violence, arms do not help. Stop killings. Stop violence. We pray and work for peace. Care!" he wrote, adding a few hours later, "Governor, NO War, NO violence, NO guns. Enough is enough!!!!"

Non-Catholic leaders also weighed in on the attack, Religion News Service reported, some of them like Garcia-Sillar naming the availability of guns as a major cause of the shooting.

The Rev. Katharine Henderson, president of Auburn Seminary in New York, wrote, "God is setting before America a choice between life and death — we must choose the way of life that means a breaking of the death grip the National Rifle Association (NRA) has on our politics. The way of life is to grieve for those who have died and commit ourselves to a more peaceful future without this plague of gun violence."

The Rev. Robert Schenck, president of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute in Washington, D.C., said the nation needs to ask our professionals "how to deny murderous people the means for committing atrocities like this. … The question we must answer is why and how people bent on death and destruction can carry out their dastardly deeds so easily?"

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"We are ALL complicit and have blood on our hands because we have the answers to avoid senseless killings happening to us, Americans," wrote Phyllis Hill, Southeast regional director of the "LiveFree" campaign of faith-based organization People Improving Communities through Organizing.

"How long must we send our sincere condolences, thoughts and prayers? How long before we manifest our sincerity with a change in policies and leadership?" she asked.

Meanwhile, U.S. political leaders were divided in their responses, with some condemning current gun laws while others simply offered "thoughts and prayers."

President Donald Trump said in a statement, "We cannot put into words the pain and grief we all feel and we cannot begin to imagine the suffering of those who lost the ones they love." In a press conference, he attributed the shooting to mental health issues and said it was not a "gun situation."

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Connecticut) disagreed. "As my colleagues go to sleep tonight, they need to think about whether the political support of the gun industry is worth the blood that flows endlessly onto the floors of American churches, elementary schools, movie theaters, and city streets," he said.

Former Rep. Gabby Giffords of Arizona, who was shot in a 2011 assassination attempt, said mass shootings were "not normal."

"I am praying that our lawmakers find the courage to face our nation's gun violence problem," she said in a tweet.