News



St. Louis Archbishop Robert J. Carlson at an Interfaith Prayer Service for Peace and Solidarity at Kiener Plaza in downtown St. Louis in September 2017 (CNS photo/Teak Phillips, St. Louis Review)



by Peter Feuerherd

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For years, the U.S. bishops have pushed for gun control, most recently in a statement in the aftermath of the Parkland, Florida, school shooting. They have promoted a ban on assault weapons, limitations on the purchase of handguns, and safety measures, such as locks that prevent children and anyone other than the owner from using guns without permission.

At least one prominent Catholic hunter agrees with them.

St. Louis Archbishop Robert Carlson is among the few bishops who know what it's like to shoot a gun, with hunting experience dating back to the time he served as bishop for the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, diocese from 1995 to 2004.

"I agree with raising the age for purchasing firearms," he told NCR during a phone interview, describing one measure promoted by students in Parkland, who convinced the Florida legislature and governor to do that after the Feb. 14 killing of 17 students and teachers. Carlson also said there is no reason for anyone to own an assault weapon like the kind used in the recent Florida school shooting.

St. Louis has a serious violent crime problem, and last year recorded 205 murders in the city with a population of slightly more than 300,000. By contrast, New York, with a population of more than eight million, recorded fewer than 300 murders that year. Carlson has spoken out against the rash of street violence with other St. Louis religious leaders.

But hunting is a different issue entirely, he said, noting that those who hunt responsibly are not part of the spike in gun violence.

Ordained in his native St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, archdiocese in 1970, Carlson first began hunting soon after being named bishop of Sioux Falls. He came to St. Louis in 2009, after serving as bishop of Saginaw, Michigan.

While hunting, he uses a 20-gauge shotgun, which fires shells to kill pheasants, not regular bullets. Each year while bishop of Sioux Falls, he participated in a charity fundraising hunting trip with diocesan priests in South Dakota. Since coming to the

more urban St. Louis area, he has hunted only twice in 10 years. The pheasant are not so plentiful in Missouri, he said.

Serious hunters have a credo that, Carlson said, he tries to follow: "You never hunt for anything you are not willing to eat." Carlson will give away his excess meat to convents. He said the best part of hunting is to watch the work of the trained dogs.

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Besides gun control measures, the scourge of violence needs to be combatted by preventing violence in families, and, reiterating a favorite phrase of bishops, Carlson said that the dignity of each human person needs to be respected. In response, he has spoken in favor of extending citizenship rights to Dreamer students, the children of immigrants born in this country, and recently urged his priests to speak against racism on the first Sunday of Lent this year.

"All has to be part of the national debate," he told NCR. "We have to listen to one another and not just be thinking about what we are going to say next."

[Peter Feuerherd is a correspondent for NCR's Field Hospital series on parish life and is a professor of journalism at St. John's University, New York.]

This story appears in the **Gun Violence** feature series. View the full series.