News



A resident reacts while praying with others June 1, 2019, outside the municipal government complex in Virginia Beach, Virginia, following the May 31 mass shooting that left 12 people dead. (CNS/Reuters/Jonathan Drake)



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Amid the multiple mass shootings that took place in the U.S. during 2019, Catholic leaders spoke out against them, urged legislators to make changes to put a stop to these actions and asked Catholics to pray and work toward possible solutions.

Some of the year's major shootings included:

- The Aug. 3 shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, which killed 22 people and wounded at least 24.
- An Aug. 4 shooting in Dayton, Ohio, which left nine people dead and another 27 injured.
- An Aug. 31 drive-by shooting spree in Odessa and Midland, Texas, killing seven people and wounding 24.
- A May 31 shooting in a municipal building in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where a former city employee killed 12 people and wounded four.

During the summer, Bishop Edward Braxton of Belleville, Illinois, decried "a crisis of gun violence" in the United States and asked Catholics in his diocese to come together and think of ideas to stop these tragedies from recurring.

"The crisis is caused, in part, by a small number of gun owners who abuse the firearms that are readily available to them and by the lack of consensus on the part of the American people and their elected representatives," Braxton said in a message, issued Aug. 6, days after the mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton.

In his reflection, "A National Crisis: A Pastoral Reflection on the Deadly Epidemic of Gun Violence in the United States," he asked Catholic leaders — clergy, religious and lay — to establish opportunities to pray for an end to gun violence and to search for solutions. He also acknowledged that answers have been hard to come by, noting that many Catholics have told him they "feel helpless, even paralyzed," to respond

to the ongoing violence, a frustration that he said he equally shares.

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, similarly addressed not only the gun violence but its racist undertones in a pastoral letter "Night Will Be No More" issued Oct. 13.

The letter began and ended with a focus on the Aug. 3 shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, where authorities believe the gunman targeted Latinos.

He wrote: "Hate visited our community and Latino blood was spilled in sacrifice to the false god of white supremacy" and said the shooting rampage was an example of the racism toward Latinos that has reached "a dangerous fever pitch" in the nation.

The bishop also urged authorities to spare the life of accused shooter Patrick Crusius, 21, who is said to have left messages on social media saying he was carrying out the shooting because of the "Hispanic invasion of Texas." Texas prosecutors have said they will ask for the death penalty if he's convicted.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, then president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, then chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, spoke out against many of the shootings during the year. After the shootings in El Paso and Ohio, they said in a statement: "We can never again believe that mass shootings are an isolated exception. They are an epidemic against life that we must, in justice, face."

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After the Aug. 31 shooting in Texas, which occurred as a gunman sped along highways in Odessa and Midland, Bishop Michael Sis of San Angelo committed diocesan parishes to assisting the community in its healing.

"There are no easy answers as to how to end this epidemic of gun violence in our state and in our country. I ask the Lord to enlighten all of our hearts and minds, especially our government leaders, so that we can have the insight and the courage to move from a culture of death to a culture of life," the bishop said.

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago said the Chicago Archdiocese "mourns and prays" for the victims of the shootings in El Paso and Dayton, but it also stands "with their loved ones demanding an end to this deadly status quo."

The archbishop, who lives in a city that has seen its share of gun violence in recent years, emphasized that an end to tragedies that occurred in Dayton and El Paso "begins with holding accountable our elected officials who have done nothing to address gun violence."

He also said it requires holding others accountable, "including some leaders who fuel these violent acts by dividing humanity through hateful rhetoric. This must stop — along with the silence of our elected officials who have failed to condemn hate speech, for they are the very ones who have sworn to keep our nation safe."

Pope Francis joined U.S. Catholic leaders in expressing sorrow for back-to-back mass shootings in Texas and Ohio Aug. 3 and 4. After the Aug. 4 Angelus in St Peter's Square, he said he wanted to convey his spiritual closeness to the victims, the wounded and the families affected by the attacks. He also included those who died a weekend earlier during a shooting at a festival in Gilroy, California.

"I am spiritually close to the victims of the episodes of violence that these days have bloodied Texas, California and Ohio, in the United States, affecting defenseless people," he said.

DiNardo and Dewane said in their Aug. 4 statement that the bishops' conference has long advocated for responsible gun laws and increased resources for addressing the root causes of violence and called upon the president and congress to set aside political interests "and find ways to better protect innocent life.

At a Nov. 11 presentation to the U.S. bishops at their annual fall assembly in Baltimore, Dewane said Catholic clergy and lay leaders can play a role in bringing together people along the rural-urban divide to build understanding of the need for sensible policies that can end the scourge of gun violence. He also outlined the U.S. bishops' conference long-held stance of the need for "common sense" legislation that governs the availability of guns.



A memorial in El Paso, Texas, is seen near the site of the Aug. 3, 2019, Walmart mass shooting during a visit by U.S. bishops and others Sept. 26. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

In an interview with Catholic News Service, the bishop said the U.S. bishops' work on the legislative front was important, but that a pastoral response to gun violence was needed.

Over the years, he said, the bishops have supported "common sense" actions such as an assault weapon ban, limits on large capacity magazines, a federal law to criminalize gun trafficking, mandatory gun lock and safe storage requirements, improved access to mental health services and assessment of the impact of the portrayal of violence in various media on society.

"Such regulations are helpful," he remarked, but said they should go along with societal efforts to look at the "danger signs in others that can lead to the loss of empathy."

The bishop also raised the possibility of utilizing the U.S. bishops' conference's socially responsible investment guidelines to encompass the gun industry. Divestment from gun manufacturers "would send a strong signal," he said.

Dominican Sr. Judy Byron, director of the Seattle-based Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment, has seen action on this very front.

"ICCR members did some initial work on guns in the early 2000s, and it's been over the past couple of years that we picked up the issue again," said Byron, referring to the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, to which the Northwest Coalition belongs.

The current tactic, she said, is to urge firearms makers and sellers to adopt human rights policies.

After many of the year's shootings took place, Catholic parishes provided places for prayer and priests were at the scene, particularly in El Paso, to comfort family members as they learned of the deaths of their loved ones.



People pray during a healing Mass Aug. 7, 2019, at the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Dallas for the 31 victims killed in the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, Aug. 3 and 4. (CNS/The Texas Catholic/Jenna Teter)

Fr. Fabian Marquez, pastor of El Buen Pastor Catholic Mission (Church of the Good Shepherd), in Sparks, Texas, was with 17 families when they heard the news that their loved ones died in the El Paso gunfire.

In the days after the shooting, he met with families and helped plan funerals and memorials.

He spoke to CNS by phone from the memorial at the El Paso shopping center where he said there was "a lot of pain, hurt, tears from early in the morning until night." He said people have left rosaries and prayer cards and are ministering to others and crying with each other.

"Our community needs to be strong together," he said before adding: "We will be strong because God is with us."

A similar sentiment was expressed Aug. 6 at the Knights of Columbus Convention in Minneapolis when the Knights honored Kendrick Castillo, a teen who died in May trying to save the lives of his classmates during a shooting at his suburban Denver high school.

The group posthumously named the teen a Knight and presented his parents, John and Maria Castillo, the Caritas Medal on his behalf. The award, created in 2013 to recognize extraordinary acts of charity and service, is the second-highest honor of the Knights of Columbus.

"Kendrick wanted to be a Knight of Columbus because he wanted to help not only people, but his community. And in his last moments, Kendrick Castillo did both," Supreme Knight Carl Anderson told more than 2,000 convention attendees.