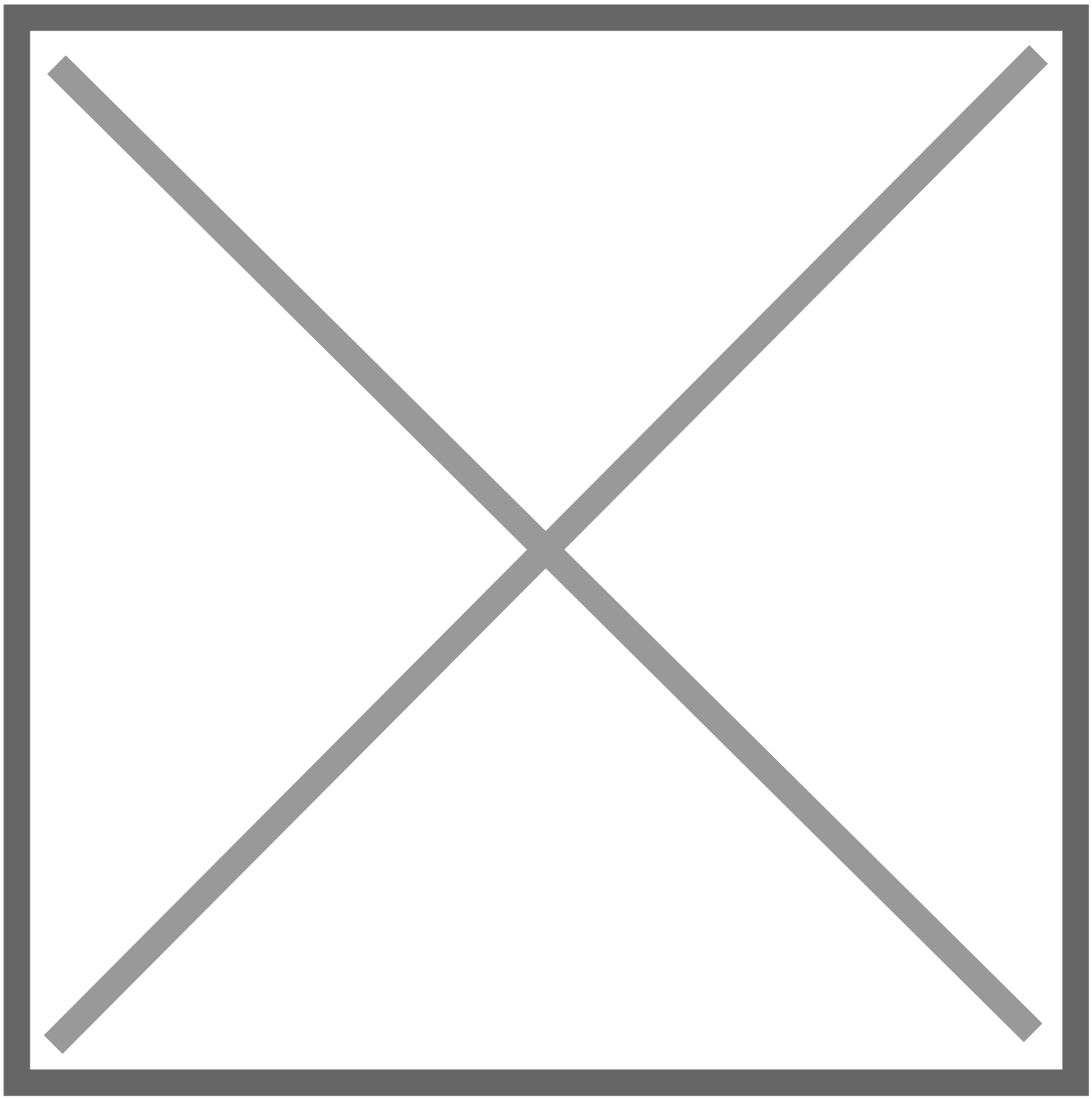
News



Bishop Michael C. Barber of Oakland, Calif., gives the homily at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome Jan. 31, 2020. He was robbed at gunpoint of his wallet and bishop's ring by a man on a bicycle near Oakland's Paramount Theater May 22, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



by Catholic News Service

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In his homily on Pentecost, May 23, Bishop Michael C. Barber of Oakland recounted how terrified he was when he was robbed at gunpoint the afternoon before while out walking, but he also said he had to look beyond the fear to forgive the suspect.

"The only way we defeat evil and crime and hatred is to pour out the love of Jesus wherever we find evil and crime and hatred and things like that," he told the congregation during Mass at the Cathedral of Christ the Light Church.

He also reminded them that a shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

In an interview with ABC7 News in the Bay Area, Barber said he was talking a walk and praying the rosary near the cathedral when he noticed a young man following him.

Just as he was thinking he should return home, the young man put a gun in his face "and said give me your wallet," Barber explained. "He said give me the cash, so I gave him the cash, and then he said give me that ring."

The prelate gave the robber his bishop's ring, and the young man, who he said appeared to be in his 20s, sped off on his bike.

"I had just given a sermon that morning. I ordained two new priests in the cathedral and my sermon was about a Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep," Barber told ABC7 News.

The bishop was not injured but was very shaken up. The Oakland Police Department is investigating the incident.

Just a couple weeks before he himself became a victim of rising crime in Oakland, Barber addressed growing gun violence and other crime in a May 6 statement.

He noted that gun violence and homicides "have risen at an alarming rate this year in Oakland"; as of May 27, the city recorded its 54th homicide of 2021. He called on the Catholic faithful to pray for an end to gun violence in our neighborhoods and communities."

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"Violence begins in the heart. It can also end when hearts are reconciled with Christ," he wrote.

"We know we are brought into this world to love: Our Catholic faith teaches of a God who is all-loving, merciful and intent on bringing each us to our salvation," he continued. "Sadly our human nature is not always true to God's intent for us. Violence is due to sin, and it seems to be escalating again in Oakland field by a proliferation of guns in our homes and on our streets."

He said that "issues quickly escalate when a gun is part of the situation," such as "when another driver's behavior angers a gun-carrying individual," or when there's "a difference of opinion with a fellow employee or a store clerk."

"Instead of resolving these issues by peaceful, civil actions, guns reduce us to a 'Wild West' mentality of every individual for himself," Barber said. "The result is so often death and a terrible disrespect for the dignity of human life."

He noted that Oakland has seen reports of gunshots rise by 137% in the last year — more than doubling the previous year's rate. He also said there are 10 deaths a month due to homicide.

Barber said many solutions are being offered to this crisis but "I believe we will only be successful if we begin from a place of prayer and reliance on God."

He announced the Oakland Diocese and other faith communities would be hosting a monthly ecumenical — "not political" — prayer vigil on the fourth Sunday of each

month to pray for an end to gun violence. He urged all people of faith and goodwill to join him, pastors and other church leaders for the vigils.

"Without our hearts and minds focused on God's loving guidance, any work we do toward peace and justice will fail. Let's start this movement by standing together in prayer," Barber said.