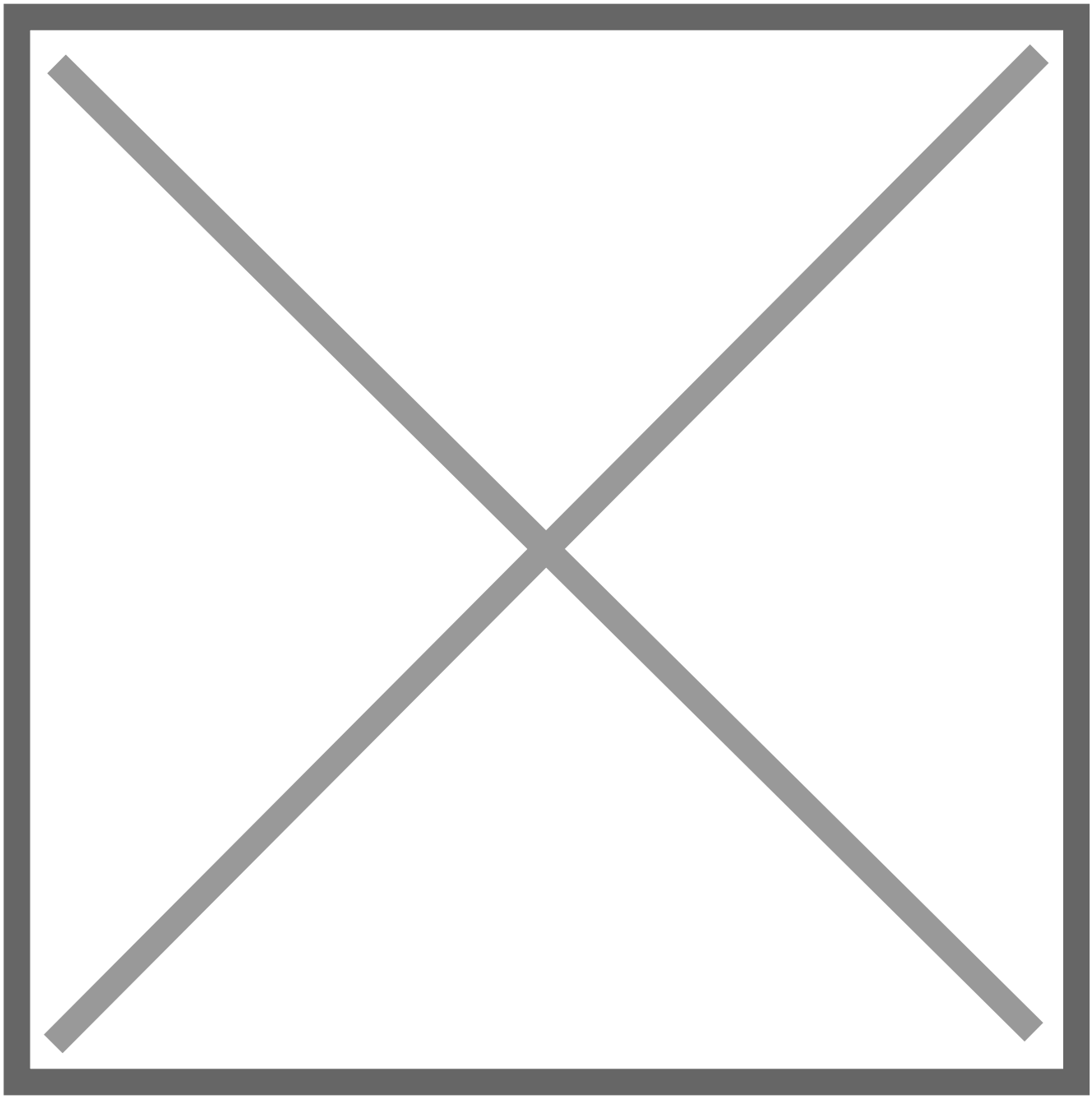


Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller of San Antonio speaks during a June 8, 2022, online dialogue on "After Buffalo, After Uvalde, After Tulsa: Broken Hearts, Broken Nation, Faithful Action." (CNS photo/YouTube)

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Catholic leaders in an online discussion June 8 urged the faithful to look at gun violence as a pro-life issue, address the roots of racist thinking that promotes such violence and press for commonsense gun laws.

"Think about the people affected by gun violence, and then organize the community for the common good, advocate with political leaders, use the faith we have learned from Jesus himself," urged Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller of San Antonio, whose archdiocese includes the town of Uvalde, where a gunman opened fire at an elementary school May 24.

"Put people first. Sensitize the community to the drama and the real consequences of mass shootings," the archbishop added.

García-Siller was one of five panelists taking part in a dialogue titled "After Buffalo, After Uvalde, After Tulsa -- Broken Hearts, Broken Nation, Faithful Action."

The talk was sponsored by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life and moderated by John Carr, the initiative's founder and co-director.

On May 14, Peyton Gendron, an 18-year-old gunman opened fire in a racially motivated attack at a Buffalo, New York, supermarket, killing 10 Black people and injuring three others. Ten days later in Uvalde, 18-year-old Salvador Rolando Ramos

stormed into Robb Elementary School and shot dead 19 children and two teachers. On June 1, a gunman identified as Michael Louis, 45, killed four people at a medical building on the campus of St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before killing himself.

"Gun violence is a pro-life issue when you start looking at the statistics and the impact that gun violence has on life and the destructive impact it has on society," said panelist Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association. St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa is a CHA member.

"The thought of such violence happening at a medical center really pushed me to the edge," she said. She added that such violence "is not only a safety issue, but a financial issue. Hospitals have to spend more dollars for security, and that is money being diverted from care and treatment of patients."

Haddad urged Catholics to "hold our elected officials accountable and demand that action be taken to address gun violence in our country through sensible gun polices."

That call was echoed by panelist Fr. Bryan Massingale, a professor of theological and social ethics at Fordham University in New York.

"All too often we frame this (issue of gun violence) as a political issue, not a life issue," he said, calling for lawmakers to support "commonsense gun legislation" including banning assault weapons, raising the age to legally purchase firearms and requiring mandatory waiting periods.

He said the lawmakers are influenced by the power and money of groups such as the National Rifle Association.

"The church needs to stop being afraid of controversy, we need to name names," he said. "The reasons why (gun legislation) is not being enacted is because of the influence of money."

Speaking of the supermarket shooting in Buffalo, Massingale stressed that it was a racially motivated hate crime.

"What happened in Buffalo was a hate crime, and hate crimes are intended to send a message. The message was received ... that this is a country where our lives are not safe, where our lives do not matter," said the priest, who is Black. "What

happened in Buffalo was not accident ... the end result of years of racial manipulation."

Catholic social teaching, he said, "calls us to have deeper respect for life, even post-birth ... especially for Black and Brown lives."

"We need to be forthright and talk about the fear that keeps good, white Catholics silent on this issue (of racism)," Massingale said. "We need an infusion of courage among good, decent white Catholics to speak up that racism is wrong, and to turn that into action."

García-Siller recalled rushing to Uvalde after the shootings, comforting those who lost children, visiting the wounded and celebrating Mass.

"The experience was something you don't expect to see or live. I need to be there and connect with people. I had to be with the people and help them recognize that every life is important -- those who died, those who survived and those around them," the archbishop said. "I didn't know how to express myself except though gestures ... to be of comfort and consolation."

He added that in the aftermath of the shooting, the people of Uvalde -- many of them Catholic -- clung to their faith.

"The faith component was there. People were asking for prayers and trying to understand that God was at work," the archbishop said, adding that "at that stage, faith was not missing, it was increasing."

Sr. Judy Byron, an Adrian Dominican sister who is the associate director of the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center in Seattle and the director of the Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment, called on gun manufacturers to address and take responsibility for the damage their products cause.

"Gun manufactures have not taken any responsibility for gun violence," Byron said. "We are asking them to look at the guns they manufacture and how to make them safer and to monitor how they market them."

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Similar to other members of the panel, Byron urged the church to be an active voice for an end to the violence.

"We need to educate ourselves. In our parishes we need to educate the faithful," she said. "Most people experience the church only on Sunday, and we need to use the Sunday homily to call the people to the common good and to the issues of our day."

Byron praised the Catholic response to the shootings, saying "from the pope to the bishops to this panel -- the response of the church has been as it should be. I am proud to be a Catholic at this sad time."

Panelist Rhina Guidos, who has reported on the church's responses to the Buffalo, Uvalde and Tulsa mass shootings for Catholic News Service, also praised the church's response to the wave of shootings.

"The response from the Catholic Church is exactly what the pope intended when he talked about (the church as) a field hospital," she said.

Noting how bishops have visited the shooting sites and have spoken out against the violence, Guidos said that and the rapid response of Catholic Charities and the laity in those instances reflect "the physical manifestation, the incarnation of a field hospital that the pope very much wanted of the church."

Guidos said the faithful must examine this issue from a moral, not a political perspective.

"In a way politics has become a religion, and we have to look at that," she said. "We need to talk to each other and look deep inside ourselves. Think about 'How am I looking at this?' and 'How does my decision affect another person?'"

García-Siller called on the faithful "to be led by the Spirit and listen to the stories of the people who were there. ... We have to examine this at the level of policy where guns have become idols -- sacred items that kill people."

"We have systems that are obsolete and failing, keeping communities in fear. Young people are afraid. Children don't know what to do. The respect for other people is not there," he said. "There is much to lose -- we are losing the lives of children and young people and adults and elderly in hospitals and schools and churches. We need to do something about these dead bodies. It is enough, enough, enough."

Carr, the moderator of the panel, noted that more than 2,500 people registered to follow the event via various social media platforms, saying: "There is a hunger for civil dialogue at this time."

"In the end this is about human beings made in the image and likeness of God," Carr said. "Let us resolve we are not just going to think, but we are going to act and make our voices heard."

[Szczepanowski is managing editor of the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Washington.]