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A bald man in black sunglasses and a long black coat holds a microphone and speaks in front

Denver Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila speaks at a March 12, 2022, pro-life rally at the state Capitol in Denver. (CNS photo/courtesy Denver Catholic)

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Washington — December 28, 2022

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Denver Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila called it irresponsible and a "flat out lie" for The Denver Post daily newspaper and some other local media to scapegoat Catholic teaching on human sexuality as a reason for hatred against transgender people and the wider LGBTQ community that led to a mass shooting at a Colorado gay bar.

He made the comments in a Dec. 21 interview on the Dan Caplis Show on 630 KHOW, Denver's talk station, about a Dec. 8 op-ed the archbishop wrote for The Wall Street Journal.

Aquila was among many religious leaders who immediately condemned the Nov. 19 attack on Club Q in Colorado Springs that left five people dead and injured at least 25 others.

Police arrested the alleged gunman, Anderson Lee Aldrich, 22, after he was subdued by a couple of bar patrons. Aldrich faces 305 charges for first-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder, first- and second-degree assault charges and many counts of bias-motivated crimes.

"My state witnessed an unmitigated tragedy on Nov. 19 when a gunman opened fire in a gay club in Colorado Springs, killing five and wounding 25," Aquila wrote in The Wall Street Journal.

"Unfortunately the reaction has thus far fostered more vitriol and division than peace and unity as the press has blamed religious communities including the Catholic Church, to which the shooter has no apparent connection," the prelate said.

"'Anti-LBGQT rhetoric leads to violence,' read the headline of a recent Denver Post report," he continued. "The piece asserted that hateful rhetoric directed toward transgender people and the broader LGBTQ community has been aired from church pulpits to school board debates and libraries.

"It cited the Archdiocese of Denver's school admission guidance on transgender and same-sex attracted students to substantiate its claim. The archdiocese's policy allows schools to discern whether they can admit those who actively live or encourage sexual expression contrary to church teaching."

He added: "The New York Times has followed a similar script against the city's evangelical community casting the incident as reminiscent of the faith's long-held opposition to same-sex marriage."

Focus on the Family, a Christian ministry, is based in Colorado Springs.

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Aquila told Caplis, a prominent Denver attorney and himself a Catholic, that he wrote the op-ed out of concern for how the daily newspaper and other media were "portraying the Catholic Church and the teaching of the Catholic Church as if they were contributing to the hatred and the violence committed by the alleged suspect in this case."

Some days before the shooting, the prelate said, the archdiocese had been in the press "because of our approach to human sexuality and the understanding of human sexuality from the Catholic point of view that we teach in our Catholic schools and what we promote in our Catholic schools."

"Citing the guidance that we'd given our schools ... as if that contributed to the violence" is "just a flat out lie," the archbishop added.

The Denver Post in a Nov. 14 editorial had urged the Colorado High School Activities Association, which helps organize school sports, to expel the Denver archdiocesan high schools over the school admissions guidance.

"Today within society if you have a disagreement with a person or a different worldview than a person," Aquila said, "suddenly you're accused of hating the person. ... That was never true even 20 years ago, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 100 years ago -- when we had differing opinions, differing thoughts, people got along very well and civilly and respectfully."

The Catholic Church has always taught the Ten Commandments "very, very clearly," he said, adding that "the Fifth Commandment is: Thou shalt not kill. And that does not need any explanation."

Everyone is called "to respect all human life and the dignity of human life, and while we accept everyone where they are at, that does not mean that we affirm their behaviors. And there is a vast difference between accepting and affirming," Aquila said.

"Showing respect for people, always treating people with respect is something that the church promotes and speaks to," he told Caplis. "There is nowhere in Catholic teaching where we are called to hate another person. In fact, Jesus himself reminds us to 'love one another as I have loved you.' And he reminds us to even go so far as to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us."

For The Denver Post or other media to portray church teaching "as hate is nothing but ideology and a diminishment of the common good," he said.

"We need to return to civility in our society, and I mean very honestly both sides of the aisle are guilty of falling into the trap of vitriol and hatred and speaking words against one another that are not part of a civil society and certainly are not part of the common good," Aquila added.