News

A police vehicle and other emergency vehicles are visible along a sidewalk where a small gro

Emergency personnel surround a Dollar General store in Jacksonville, Fla., after a white man armed with a high-powered rifle and a handgun killed three Black people Aug. 26, 2023, before shooting himself in what local law enforcement described as a racially motivated crime. (OSV News photo/Bob Self, USA Today Network via Reuters)

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A Florida Catholic bishop condemned a racially motivated shooting that took place late Aug. 26 at a Dollar General store Aug. 26 in Jacksonville, saying, "Violence and bigotry have no place in our hearts or our society."

"A senseless act of violence claimed the lives of three individuals in our community," Bishop Erik T. Pohlmeier of St. Augustine, Florida, said in a statement shared Aug. 27 with OSV News.

"It has come to light that the shooter's motivations were fueled by hatred and bigotry, as he targeted innocent lives solely because of their race," said Pohlmeier, whose diocese has its offices in Jacksonville. "This reprehensible act reminds us of

the deep-seated wounds that still afflict our society -- wounds rooted in prejudice and racism."

A white gunman, who was identified by authorities as 21-year-old Ryan Christopher Palmeter, fatally shot three Black people at the Dollar General store in an attack authorities said they were investigating as a racially motivated hate crime. Authorities said he fired 11 rounds at one woman sitting in her car, before he entered the store and shot two more people.

Palmeter was armed with an "AR-15 style" rifle with swastikas on it, as well as a handgun, and was wearing a tactical vest, authorities said. The gunman died after shooting himself.

Sheriff T.K. Waters of Jacksonville said at a press conference that "this shooting was racially motivated, and he hated Black people," Waters said, adding there were "several manifestos" by the killer detailing his hatred of Black people.

"The hate that motivated the shooter's killing spree adds an additional layer of heartbreak," said Waters, who later confirmed Palmeter had no previous criminal history and lived with his parents in Clay County.

Pohlmeier called on Catholics to "pray for the victims and their families during this painful time." A majority of the diocese’s Catholics live in Florida’s First Coast area, which includes Jacksonville.

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"Let our prayers serve as a source of comfort and healing," he said. "Additionally, let us pray for the conversion of hearts that harbor prejudice, that they may be transformed by the grace of God and embrace a spirit of love and reconciliation."

"In times like these, it is crucial for us to come together as a community, to support one another and to stand against hatred in all its forms," Pohlmeier continued. "Let us remember that violence and bigotry have no place in our hearts or our society. We must actively work to promote understanding, respect and unity among all people. May we find strength in our faith, hope in God's mercy and a renewed commitment to fostering a just and inclusive society.

Authorities said that the gunman first went to the campus of Edward Waters University, a historically black college, where he refused to identify himself to an on-campus security officer and was asked to leave the property.

The university said in a press release that "the individual returned to their car and left campus without incident. The encounter was reported to the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office by EWU security."

The statement also offered prayers for the victims and their families.

The groups Interfaith Alliance and Interfaith Alliance of Southwest Florida condemned the shooting in a statement, noting it took place "on the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington no less."

"Unfettered access to guns, paired with the continuing normalization of white supremacy and extremism, has paved the way for yet another devastating racially motivated mass shooting."

"Armed with a military grade weapon covered in swastikas, the shooter deliberately targeted Black lives," the statement said. "Until our leaders act swiftly and deliberately against the scourge of racial violence and white nationalism that continues to plague this country, atrocities like this will continue to happen. Condemnations aren’t enough -- we demand action."