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Pope expresses grief over Newtown shooting, calls for acts of peace

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — After 20 children and six adults were shot dead in Connecticut, Pope Benedict XVI offered his condolences and prayers, urging all to dedicate themselves to acts of peace in the face of such "senseless violence."

After reciting the Angelus on Monday, the pope, speaking in English, said he was "deeply saddened" by the shooting Friday at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn. In addition to the students and staff killed, the gunman took his own life.

"I assure the families of the victims, especially those who lost a child, of my closeness in prayer," he said. "May the God of consolation touch their hearts and ease their pain."

Just before blessing the Nativity-scene statues of the baby Jesus that Italian children brought to the square, Pope Benedict urged people to use the rest of Advent to dedicate themselves more "to prayer and to acts of peace."

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state, sent a message Friday to the Diocese of Bridgeport, which includes Newtown, saying the pope had asked the cardinal "to convey his heartfelt grief" and his prayers to the victims, their families and "all affected by the shocking event."

"In the aftermath of this senseless tragedy, he asks God our father to console all those who mourn and to sustain the entire community with the spiritual strength which triumphs over violence by the power of forgiveness, hope and reconciling love," the cardinal wrote.

A front-page article Saturday in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, said the people of the

United States must look at ways to "stem the violence that strikes them from within, heinous violence that is increased by easy access to increasingly lethal weapons and this time struck children in an elementary school."

"The Newtown massacre is destined to reopen the debate about the free circulation of guns," it said. While many individuals and groups called for more stringent gun-control measures in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, "the National Rifle Association, on the other hand, entrenched itself behind an embarrassing silence," the Vatican newspaper article said.

"In a pure coincidence, the massacre of the Connecticut children occurred on the eve of the anniversary of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees the right to have weapons. It was ratified Dec. 15, 1791, and was made to measure for the United States as it was 221 years ago," the article said.

Before reciting the Angelus on Gaudete (rejoice) Sunday, Pope Benedict celebrated a morning Mass at the parish of St. Patrick in Colle Prenestino, a suburb on the eastern outskirts of Rome, and met with parents of babies baptized in the past year.

In his homily at the Mass, Pope Benedict said the Prophet Zephaniah's exhortation to "shout for joy" and "be glad and exult with all your heart" is a proclamation of good news.

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"The prophet wants to tell us that there is no reason for mistrust, discouragement, sadness, no matter what situation we face, because we are certain of the presence of the Lord, which alone is enough to cheer us and give joy to our hearts," the pope said.

Returning to the Vatican to recite the Angelus with visitors in St. Peter's Square and to bless the baby Jesus statues that will be the center of Nativity scenes in homes, schools and hospitals throughout Rome, Pope Benedict prayed that people would embrace the call to conversion, honesty, respect for others and love for neighbor.

As the pope spoke from his apartment window high over St. Peter's Square, two small groups of protesters held up signs. The handful of protesters inside St. Peter's Square had black and white signs in English, Italian and Spanish; one said, "Gay marriages do not harm peace. Weapons do." The group outside the square held up colored hearts with messages in Italian such as "Love your neighbor" and "Marriage for all."

The groups were protesting a section of Pope Benedict's World Day of Peace message, which affirmed Catholic teaching on marriage as the lifelong bond of a man and a woman. The message said attempts to redefine marriage "harm and help to destabilize marriage, obscuring its specific nature and its indispensable role in society."

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