

Editorial: It is time to demand an assault weapons ban

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Gun control is a pro-life issue and the time has come for U.S. Catholics to weave strong gun control legislation into the list of life issues demanding our attention. A first step involves lobbying for strict legislation banning assault weapons and the military-style clips used in attacks on our communities.

It is our national shame that otherwise innocent names and places have become synonymous with mass killings: Columbine, an Amish schoolhouse, Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, Gabby Giffords, Aurora, the Sikh temple, and now Sandy Hook Elementary School. The shame is only compounded by the fact that it has taken the slaughter of 20 innocent schoolchildren to finally spur some serious talk about regulating the sale of military-style weapons.

It is imperative that we not allow the deaths of 27 people in Newtown, Conn., to slip from memory before something is done. Action is long overdue. There have reportedly been 31 schoolhouse shootings since Columbine; 62 mass shootings since 1982.

U.S. weapons manufacturers, sellers and traders have for too long fanned the flames of paranoia among gun users, claiming that any legislation limiting any guns will lead to a ban of all guns. Serving narrow interests, they have drained reason from the Second Amendment.

In the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre, however, even some of the most ardent gun advocates are saying it is time for change.

Pervasive violence has many causes, and such matters as education, better care for the mentally ill, and a serious look at other sources of violence in the culture all need to be part of the solution. Much has to be done, too, to enforce universal background checks and close the huge loophole in current law allowing private sale of weapons at gun shows with virtually no restraints. According to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 30,000 Americans die annually as a result of firearms.

Comprehensive action is necessary, but we must not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. We cannot do all at once, but we can at least begin by catching up to where we once were. After five years of efforts, Congress passed legislation in 1994 aimed at banning assault weapons. The law was riddled with loopholes and its impact has been disputed. It included a sunset clause and the law was allowed to die during the George W. Bush administration.

Arms trade is a global phenomenon and the U.S. rests at the center of much of it. Sales from 44 U.S.-based companies accounted for more than 60 percent of all arms sales by the top 100 producers in 2010, according to one business report. No wonder assault weapons remain so accessible in our communities. Proliferation and trade know few borders. Meanwhile, powerful interests have their sway in Washington.

At the moment polls show a majority of Americans support banning the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition clips. A majority also supports laws requiring background checks before all gun purchases. Catholics by a sizeable majority favor stricter gun control. The course forward is clear. Those who support life need to seize the moment and galvanize sentiments, helping to direct them into political action. Much can be done without interfering with the rights of legitimate gun owners -- those who use guns for sports and hunting or feel the need to own a gun for protection.

The time is right. The window is small. Call out for a strict assault weapons ban.

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