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US preoccupation with guns is the enemy within

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

While 26 graves get colder in Newtown, Conn., and hearts everywhere continue to feel the pain of them, the sales of automatic weapons get hotter in this country by the day. In my own very average, very mild hometown, the local gun show with its proud display of heavy weapons was the biggest draw of Christmas week. In other parts of the country, guns that sold for \$700 a few months ago now go for well over \$1,000.

Invincibility sells, it seems. The only problem is that, despite the classic arguments in favor of guns, invincibility can't really be guaranteed.

"Guns don't kill people," the National Rifle Association argues on great billboards at great expense, "people do." Clever. At first glance. And even correct, at one level. But any child knows -- even children the age of the ones those guns killed in Connecticut know -- that guns can't kill unless people can get them. Any people. Mentally disturbed people. Distraught and depressed people. Angry people.

Countries in which guns are not so easily available to people do not have anywhere near the rate of gun deaths that we do. Our gun death rate is 10.2 people per 100,000. Japan's gun death rate is one person for every 2 million people. Go figure.

"Hunting is a legal sport," they remind us. Absolutely. I know that's true because I come from a family of hunters. But I also know something else about hunting rifles that is also true. The automatic weapons that are being legalized under the guise of hunting equipment would blow any deer to pieces far too small to eat.

"Only good guys with guns can stop bad guys with guns," one of the newer pro-gun arguments maintains.

Really? Check the casualty figures in any wartime operation. Check figures in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance -- countries in which our own amount and magnitude of firepower far exceeded the enemy's. The numbers of good, young U.S. dead and physically incapacitated and emotionally disabled are in the thousands. If having a gun against an attacker is such an advantage, why do so many of the armed die in the process?

It's true, yes, that being without a gun can get a person killed, but it is also true that simply having a gun does not guarantee survival. On the contrary, to accelerate a conflict is only to increase the damage, not to limit it.

"If we want to protect our children," we're told now, "we need to arm our teachers." Oh, good. By all means let's turn our schools into forts. Let's teach our children that every potential visitor is a potential danger, that every stranger is a potential enemy, and that everyone who is different than we are is a potential killer.

Better yet, rather than teach them to hide, teach them that when the someone appears encased in a flak jacket and helmet, with automatic weapons and 100-round magazines, that some fourth-grade teacher is going to stop the advance with a pistol. Or will they give our teachers AK-47's, too -- in malls and movie theaters and on college campuses -- so that we can be sure that we equalize the mayhem as well as the number of dead innocents caught in crossfire?

Is the size and effect of the gun culture in the United States being exaggerated? According to Paul Helmke, former president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, "In 2004 there were five gun deaths in New Zealand, 37 in Sweden, 56 in Australia, 73 in England, 184 in Canada and 11,344 murders in the United States. It's more than any other industrialized country." Quite a lot more.

According to the United Nations, the United States is first in civilian firearms ownership. In the United States 88.8 people per 100 own a gun. Yemen is in second place with fewer than 55 per 100. And in every other country, the number of gun owners falls precipitously.

Right now we are the most violent developed country on the planet.

Why is that? Is it working for us?

Why can't we get reasonable gun control laws through a supposedly civilized Congress? After all, we require the registration of cars, also a potentially lethal weapon, and the leashing of dogs that don't bite at all. Is the control of military weapons too much to ask? Or is it possible that car owners and dog owners don't buy as many members of Congress as gun owners do?

From where I stand, the situation in Newtown itself is the clearest argument against the casual presence of military weapons in civilian hands. After all, the high-powered weapons that killed 20 small children and six peaceful adults were bought by a woman who was preparing to defend herself, we're told, from impending social chaos.

The irony is that while she concentrated on the enemy outside, it was the enemy within that killed her and 26 others with her guns. Her preoccupation with being armed and its role in her own demise may be a metaphor for the entire country.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's column "From Where I Stand" is on the *NCR* website at

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