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by Aaron Schrank by Religion News Service

Gun Violence

As the Senate takes up a heated debate over gun control and background checks, Catholic bishops have used the months since the Newtown, Conn., school shootings to push gun control in email blasts and Senate Judiciary Committee testimony. But among the Catholic faithful, not everyone supports gun control measures.

Call them the NRA Catholics.

John M. Snyder, a lifelong Catholic and former seminarian, is one. Snyder isn't thrilled to be opposing the bishops, but he sees little choice. An outspoken gun rights activist for decades -- once the chief Washington lobbyist for the Citizens Committee For the Right to Keep and Bear Arms -- he doesn't see any discord between his faith and his activism.

"Advocating for the rights of people to defend themselves with the appropriate weapons is part and parcel of my Catholicism," said Snyder, of Washington. "I do feel a great loyalty to the church and the bishops and it pains me to see them behaving so foolishly."

In the midst of the heated post-Newtown gun control debate, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued firm support for increased regulation of firearms, citing Catholic teaching on the ethic of life. After President Barack Obama announced a package of legislative gun control proposals, the bishops joined a coalition of faith leaders in urging members of Congress to support them.

While most U.S. Catholics fall in line with the bishops' stance on guns -- about 62 percent support gun

control, according to a poll by Washington-based the Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service -- many in the pro-gun minority protest or disregard their leaders' pronounced role in the debate.

"The Catholic church is a spiritual guide, but it's not a guide in determining my rights," said Mark Cunningham, a Salinas, Calif., Catholic who opposes increased gun control laws. "They're offering an opinion, but it's not something that I have to believe in as a Catholic."

Snyder, the former lobbyist, said he hopes Catholics will feel at home in the group he runs, the St. Gabriel Possenti Society, dedicated to promoting the 19th-century Italian priest as "the patron saint of handgunners." In 1860, the priest used a handgun to scare away a band of soldiers from raping and pillaging his small village.

The pro-gun crowd is not unique in its willingness to oppose the bishops. U.S. Catholics are increasingly parting ways with the church's moral and political guidance on a range of social issues.

The bishops are best known for wading into the national political conversation to oppose contraception coverage, but 82 percent of Catholics consider birth control morally acceptable, according to a 2012 Gallup poll. And 58 percent support a federal mandate for religiously affiliated employers to cover birth control costs in their health insurance plans, against vociferous opposition from the hierarchy.

Likewise, the church is opposed to gay marriage, but a March Quinnipiac University poll showed that 54 percent of U.S. Catholics support same-sex marriage.

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The bishops' conference publishes pastoral statements on a range of policy issues, including the federal budget and immigration. And despite no definitive Catholic teaching on gun control, it has consistently pushed for increased regulation. As far back as 1975, the bishops called for "effective and courageous action to control handguns, leading to their eventual elimination from our society."

"We believe in the protection of life," said Anthony Granado, policy adviser in the bishops' Office of Domestic Social Development. "There are far too many people who are being killed in our streets and our homes."

The bishops' recent statements earned them a spot on the National Rifle Association's list of anti-gun national organizations (since removed from the NRA's website) alongside a number of other religious groups and Hollywood celebrities.

Philip Cathell is an NRA member living in rural Maryland and a committed Catholic. He says he knows plenty of Catholic clergy and laypeople who oppose the bishops' teachings on gun control.

"In a perfect world, if people obeyed laws, the bishops' stance might be effective," said Cathell, a 25-year-old engineer. "But criminals aren't going to be turning in their guns."

In 2007, Cathell was a student at Virginia Tech and heard the gunshots that left 32 people on his campus dead. When it comes to prevention of such mass shootings, he favors the NRA's plan to put armed guards in schools.

Among the most prominent pro-gun Catholics is former vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan. A self-

professed "Catholic deer hunter," the Wisconsin congressman boasts an "A" rating from the NRA for his pro-gun rights policies -- and has been criticized by the bishops for his budget proposals.

Earlier this year, a group of Catholic leaders sent an open letter to Catholics in Congress urging them to stand up to the NRA. The letter specifically names Ryan as well as Speaker John Boehner and Indiana Democratic Sen. Joe Donnelly, who are also Catholics with "A" ratings from the NRA.

Those missives are unlikely to sway pro-gun Catholics such as Snyder, who cites the same Catholic concerns for the protection of life as the basis for their objections to restricting firearms.

"Well, it's all a matter of salvation," Snyder said. "I need a crucifix to save my soul and a handgun to save my ass."

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