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Curbing gun violence 'builds a culture of life,' bishop tells senators

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Days before the Senate began debate over gun-control legislation, Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., urged senators to support a bill that "builds a culture of life by promoting policies that reduce gun violence and saves people's lives in homes and communities."

Blaire, head of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, said in a letter to Senate members Monday that one bill, S. 649, was "a positive step in the right direction."

The bill requires universal background checks for all gun buys and makes gun trafficking a federal crime.

On Wednesday, the day before debate began, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Sen. Patrick Toomey, R-Pa., announced a compromise deal on the background-checks provision of the bill that they believe will win bipartisan support.

The background checks would not apply to unadvertised gun sales, according to the compromise. Further, gun owners who have passed background checks within the past five years for a concealed-carry permit can use that permit to buy guns in other states. The compromise would relax some restrictions on hunters traveling with their guns through states that ban them. It also would allow active members of the military to buy firearms in their home states; the practice is illegal when they are stationed outside their state.

Blaire asked senators to consider amendments to the bill that would ban assault weapons and limit civilian access to high-capacity ammunition magazines.

He also asked them to reject expanding the use of mandatory-minimum sentences for gun-violation convictions. "One-size-fits-all policies are counterproductive, inadequate and replace judges' assessments with rigid formulations," Blaire said, adding the "pervasive" use of mandatory minimum sentences accounts for rising incarceration rates.

"Sadly, gun violence is too common a reality," Blaire added. "Tragic events, such as the recent event in Newtown, Conn., and the violence that occurs daily in our homes and communities, should lead us to answer the call of Pope Francis to 'change hatred into love, vengeance into forgiveness, war into peace.'"

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