

## Voices of the Debate: An Interactive Focus on Gun Violence

*The 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., may have forever changed the landscape of gun politics in the United States. Sadly, as with any shocking tragedy, there are far more questions than answers. They bounce around the internet and our halls of power. This resource invites people to explore questions raised from a variety of perspectives in the debate through a role-playing exercise, to reflect on Scripture and church teaching, and to consider more effective steps toward action as our nation's leaders consider ways to prevent further tragedies from happening.*



### **Involvement**

Play the game *Look Down, Look Up*:

Players gather in a circle. A facilitator tells them “Look down.”

The facilitator then tells them “Look Up!”

All players look up at someone else.

If two people happen to look at each other (i.e. make eye contact), they both have to shout.

Whoever shouts last is excused from the circle.

If someone shouts when not making eye contact with anyone, they are also excused.

If a person does not make eye contact with another player, they remain in the circle.

The facilitator then says “look down,” and all players look down.

The facilitator then says “look up,” and the process continues.

The game continues until there are only two players left.

These two can be declared winners unless they're really competitive. If so, play “Rock, Paper, Scissors” to determine one winner.

**Leader:** Unlike our game, effective dialogue isn't a matter of speaking first or loudest. Its goal is not to eliminate everyone else. It requires, listening, patience, and often compromise. The change it might lead to may happen slowly, incrementally. And in the end, it can be possible to have more than one winner.

As time drifts further from Dec. 14, 2012, our memories of that day's tragic events may begin to blur. The focus that day was on the victims and their families. And the word on everyone's lips was “Why?”

Listen as I lift up a verse from a prayer many people prayed that day:

*Be with us in our pain today*

*As we mourn the loss of so many*

*Taken so soon*

*For a “why” we may never grasp.*

As the focus shifts to legislation that might curb future acts of gun violence, our nation no longer speaks with one voice. There are new questions to grasp: What went wrong? Who or what is to blame?

## **Exploration**

Provide each participant with a quote from the “What’s Being Said” sidebar (you can share or double-up quotes, depending on group size). Give them time to read it silently to themselves, and ask them to try to place themselves in the role and mindset of the speaker. They need not support that person’s viewpoint, but only try to understand it and share it with respect. Then ask participants to take turns reading the quotes aloud, in the order presented, with long pauses between each to allow time to absorb the thought shared.

After all have shared, say:

“Indeed, we do need to do something. Just talking is not enough. But talking intentionally, and that includes listening, is essential if we are to effect lasting social change.

“As we move on, try to think from the perspective of the speaker you just voiced. They may be powerful, a victim or loved one, an expert, or just a concerned face in the crowd. They may have strong opinions or none at all.”

Then ask, pausing for discussion on each point, Is the problem:

- Access to guns? Should we require every person who buys a gun to pass a background check?
- The type of guns or ammunition involved? Should assault weapons and high-capacity clips not be available to civilians?
- Our failure to act earlier along the spectrum that leads to violence? Could better understanding of mental illness, anti-bullying efforts, and more compassionate outreach to troubled individuals and their families help prevent future incidents of gun violence?
- A lack of political power or will? What will it take to find a balance of rights that places above all the right to life and safety?

Following the discussion, summarize by saying “We’ve heard some diverse and heartfelt thoughts from people on many sides of the gun violence issue, and tried to expand upon these with our own understandings. We may disagree with them or with each other, but we have tried to share and listen civilly. Now let’s reflect upon what our faith tradition says about this issue.”

## **Reflection**

Now we explore the issue in light of the Scriptures, Catholic Social Tradition and the lived faith of our community. Faith is not simply an intellectual process; it becomes a way of living. How does the wisdom of our faith regarding guns and violence transform us? Share one or more insights from each of the three sections, as time in your session(s) allows:

### **From Scripture**

“You shall not kill.” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to them as well.” (Matthew 5:38-39)

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.’ (Matthew 26:52)

*Ask: “Does our belief in God steer us toward nonviolence?”*

*“How do we move from our current reality toward the ideal?”*

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## **From Catholic Social Tradition:**

“We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.”

“A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.”

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “**Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching**”

“With regard to the regulation of fire arms, first, the intent to protect one’s loved ones is an honorable one, but simply put, guns are too easily accessible.

“We must also reflect on our own fears as we grapple with our prejudices toward those with mental health needs. Our society must provide health services and support to those who have mental illnesses and to their families and caregivers...

“The events in Newtown call us to turn to our Lord in prayer and to witness more profoundly Christ’s perfect love, mercy and compassion. We must confront violence with love

“We reiterate our call...to:

1. Support measures that control the sale and use of firearms
2. Support measures that make guns safer (especially efforts that prevent their unsupervised use by children and anyone other than the owner)
3. Call for sensible regulations of handguns
4. Support legislative efforts that seek to protect society from the violence associated with easy access to deadly weapons including assault weapons
5. Make a serious commitment to confront the pervasive role of addiction and mental illness in crime.

From **Call for Action in Response to Newtown Tragedy**, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Dec. 21, 2002. Read more at <http://uscgb.org/news/2012/12-219.cfm>

[A]s Pope Benedict wrote in his message to the disarmament conference, no reduction or elimination of arms can happen without eliminating violence at its root. Every person “is called to disarm his own heart and be a peacemaker everywhere,” the pope said.

From: **Gun control: Church firmly, quietly opposes firearms for civilians**, by Carol Glatz, Catholic News Service, Jan. 14, 2011. Read more at <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1100159.htm>

“If a man in self-defense uses more than necessary violence, it will be unlawful: whereas if he repels force with moderation, his defense will be lawful.”

- St. Thomas Aquinas, **Summa Theologica**, quoted in **Catechism of the Catholic Church** (2264)  
Read more at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm)

*Ask “What does Catholic Social Tradition tell us about the right to defend oneself, as well as control of access to powerful weapons?”*

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## From the lived faith of our community:

“I saw it in my emergency room when gang members would drive by and dump one of their comrades who had been shot, when people would come after them to finish the job, when people would come in dead that we could do nothing for. There were even people shot on our hospital grounds. When you work in an inner-city hospital, sadly, gun violence is all too routine...”

“As we suggest these measures (universal background checks, bans on military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and stricter legislation against gun trafficking), we do so with great respect for our Constitution and the rights of hunters, but we join that to a respect for the lives of the people of our country...I believe there is a balance between gun ownership and the broad availability of weapons that can only lead to tremendous violence.”

- Sr. Carol Keehan, president and CEO, of the Catholic Health Association<sup>12</sup>

“The frequent mass shootings over the course of 2012 reflected a tragic devaluing of human life, but also pointed to the moral duty of all people to take steps to defend it.”

- Bishop Stephen Blaize of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development<sup>13</sup>

“The world is not full of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ people. That is not what our Scriptures teach us. We are as human beings both good and bad. ... As individual persons we have both good and bad in us – and when we are bad, or isolated, or angry or furious or vengeful, or politically agitated, or confused or lost, or deranged or unhinged, and we have the ability to get and use weapons only designed to kill large numbers of people, our society is in great danger.”

- Rev. Jim Wallis, President and CEO, Sojourners magazine<sup>14</sup>

*Ask “What can people of faith learn from reading the signs of the times?”*

*“What new signs and voices are you seeing and hearing?”*

## Action

Exploration and reflection lead to more enlightened and effective decision and action. Complex social issues such as curbing gun violence seldom lend themselves to simple or easy solutions. Many believe that Congress will not pass bans on assault weapons or high-capacity ammunition clips, but that legislation on background checks seems more likely to succeed. What do you think can happen, and what role will you and your parish, class or group play?

As the debate unfolds, be proactive in seeking discussion, forming consensus, and working in coalition with others to make a difference. Many efforts and resources are emerging or growing on this issue. The key first step is to think, but as thought moves to action, consider these and other efforts that range from simple petitions to focused legislative advocacy:

- **Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence** is a diverse coalition of more than 40 denominations and faith-based organizations united by the call of our faiths to confront America’s gun violence epidemic. <http://faithsagainstgunviolence.org/> Find out more about the Interfaith Call-In Day on Feb. 4 at [www.faithscalling.org](http://www.faithscalling.org)



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- **Sandy Hook Promise:** A group founded by residents in Newton, Conn., whose goals include to identify and implement holistic, common sense solutions that will make our community and our country safer from similar acts of violence through education, outreach and grass-roots discussion. <http://www.sandyhookpromise.org>
- **20 Children:** A non-partisan, grassroots movement of parents and families across the U.S. who have come together to end gun violence. [www.20children.org](http://www.20children.org)
- **Americans for Responsible Solutions:** A group formed to encourage elected officials to stand up for solutions to prevent gun violence and protect responsible gun ownership, founded by former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, a survivor of gun violence. <http://americansforresponsiblesolutions.org/>

Also watch and discuss “TRIGGER: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence.” This documentary, created by filmmaker David Barnhardt for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), explores how gun violence affects individuals, communities and society. It addresses prevention by moving away from polarizing extremes and lifting up the voices of those who seek common ground. Learn more at [www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/trigger/](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/trigger/) or order it at (800)524-2612.

As always, be aware how your action brings about new involvements that call for further exploration, reflection and action. Allow the process to become a spiral that draws you and your community deeper into action for justice. And let each of these steps be guided by prayer. Again, we close by praying:

Be with us in our searching today  
As we seek to grasp answers  
That lessen future pain  
That bring hope to life... Amen.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Lucy Madison, “Obama Calls for Sweeping New Gun Laws,” [www.cbsnews.com](http://www.cbsnews.com), Jan. 16, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Mark Memmott, “Only ‘A Good Guy With A Gun’ Can Stop School Shootings, NRA Says,” [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) Dec. 21, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, “Sandy Hook parents speak out against gun violence,” Tampa Bay Times, January 15, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Testimony before Connecticut Legislature, Jan. 28, 2013

<sup>5</sup> Michael Scherer, “The Next Gun Fight,” Time Magazine, Jan. 28, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Ripley, “Your Brain Under Fire,” Time Magazine, Jan. 28, 2013

<sup>7</sup> Liza Long, “I Am Adam Lanza’s Mother,” The Anarchist Soccer Mom blog, <http://anarchistsoccermom.blogspot.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Kate Gordon, “A Better Response to Mental Illness,” <http://millennialjournal.com/2013/01/03/a-better-response-to-mental-illness/>

<sup>9</sup> Michael Scherer, “The Next Gun Fight,” Time Magazine, Jan. 28, 2013

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Filteau, “Obama proposals on gun control align with religious leaders’ pleas,” National Catholic Reporter, Jan. 28, 2013 <http://ncronline.org/news/politics/tough-gun-measures-obama-proposals-align-religious-leaders-pleas>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



## What's Being Said:

“Because while there is no law or set of laws that can prevent every senseless act of violence completely, no piece of legislation that will prevent every tragedy, every act of evil, if there’s even one thing we can do to reduce this violence, if there’s even one life that can be saved, then we’ve got an obligation to try. This is our first task as a society: Keeping our children safe. This is how we will be judged. And their voices should compel us to change.” - President Barack Obama<sup>1</sup>

“The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun,”  
- Wayne LaPierre, chief executive officer, National Rifle Association<sup>2</sup>

“I do not want to be someone sharing my experience and consoling another parent next time. I do not want there to be a next time.”<sup>3</sup> - Nicole Hockley, whose son Dylan was killed in Newtown on Dec. 14, 2012

“I think there’s much more promise for a solution in identifying, researching and creating solutions along the lines of mental health issues — I think there’s a lot of work that can be done there. I believe the solution may not be as easy to implement as I might hope, but it’s a simple concept. We need civility across our nation.”  
- Mark Mattioli, whose son James was killed in Newtown on Dec. 14, 2012<sup>4</sup>

“There is nothing that has gone to the heart of the matter more than the visual image people have of little 6-year-old kids riddled – not shot by a stray bullet but riddled, riddled – with bullet holes in their classroom.”  
- Vice President Joe Biden<sup>5</sup>

“I wish to God (the principal) had had an M-4 in her office, locked up, so when she heard gunfire, she pulls it out... and takes his head off before he can kill those precious kids.”  
- Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas<sup>6</sup>

“I am Adam Lanza’s mother. I am Dylan Klebold’s and Eric Harris’s mother. I am James Holmes’s mother. I am Jared Loughner’s mother. I am Seung-Hui Cho’s mother. And these boys—and their mothers—need help. In the wake of another horrific national tragedy, it’s easy to talk about guns. But it’s time to talk about mental illness.”  
- Liza Long, mother of mentally ill 13-year-old boy<sup>7</sup>

“But I keep wondering how things might have been different if (Adam Lanza’s) struggles were not so thoroughly hidden? If someone had known the family well enough to pick up on warning signs? If Nancy had not been taught by our society to keep her challenges hidden?”  
- Kate Gordon, sister of mentally ill woman<sup>8</sup>

“We are saying the question that Americans are asking is ‘How do we protect our kids?’ The question is not ‘How do we ban guns we don’t like?’” - David Keene, president, National Rifle Association<sup>9</sup>

“The NRA is only powerful if you and I let them be powerful.” - Michael Bloomberg, mayor, New York City<sup>10</sup>

“We need to do something. We’ve got to stop just talking about this.”  
- Former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, victim of gun violence<sup>11</sup>