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Gun control: Church firmly, quietly opposes firearms for civilians

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Jan. 14, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- The Catholic Church's position on gun control is not easy to find; there are dozens of speeches and talks and a few documents that call for much tighter regulation of the global arms trade, but what about private gun ownership?

The answer is resoundingly clear: Firearms in the hands of civilians should be strictly limited and eventually completely eliminated.

But you won't find that statement in a headline or a document subheading. It's almost hidden in a footnote in a document on crime by the U.S. bishops' conference and it's mentioned in passing in dozens of official Vatican texts on the global arms trade.

The most direct statement comes in the bishops' "Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice" from November 2000.

"As bishops, we support measures that control the sale and use of firearms and make them safer -- especially efforts that prevent their unsupervised use by children or anyone other than the owner -- and we reiterate our call for sensible regulation of handguns."

That's followed by a footnote that states: "However, we believe that in the long run and with few exceptions -- i.e. police officers, military use -- handguns should be eliminated from our society."

That in turn reiterates a line in the bishops' 1990 pastoral statement on substance abuse, which called "for effective and courageous action to control handguns, leading to their eventual elimination from our society."

On the world stage, the Vatican has been pushing for decades for limitations not just on conventional weapons of warfare, such as tanks and missiles, but also for stricter limitations on the illegal and legal sale, trade and use of small firearms and weapons, said Tommaso Di Ruzza, the expert on disarmament and arms control at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Di Ruzza told Catholic News Service that the Vatican is one of just a handful of states that would like to see small arms and weapons included in the U.N. Arms Trade Treaty, which would better regulate the flow of conventional arms.

He said while many countries are open to limits on larger weapons systems, most nations aren't interested in regulating small arms even though they "cause more deaths than all other arms (conventional and non-conventional) together."

The Vatican's justice and peace council is working to update its 1994 document, "The International Arms Trade," to further emphasize the importance of enacting concrete controls on handguns and light weapons, he said.

The current document calls on every nation and state "to impose a strict control on the sale of handguns and small arms. Limiting the purchase of such arms would certainly not infringe on the rights of anyone."

The more weapons there are in circulation, the more likely terrorists and criminals will get their hands on them, the document said.

The Catholic Church recognizes that "states will need to be armed for reason of legitimate defense," as Pope Benedict XVI said in a message to a Vatican-sponsored disarmament conference in April 2008.

However, armed defense is something appropriate for nations, not for all individual citizens in a state where rule of law is effective, said Di Ruzza.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, individuals have a right and a duty to protect their own lives when in danger, and someone who "defends his life is not guilty of murder even if he is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow."

How that "lethal blow" could be licitly wielded is unclear, but the catechism clarifies that repelling the aggressor must be done "with moderation" in order to be "lawful" in the eyes of the church; using "more than necessary violence" would be unlawful, it says.

According to the catechism, the right to use firearms to "repel aggressors" or render them harmless is specifically sanctioned for "those who legitimately hold authority" and have been given the duty of protecting the community.

Di Ruzza said that in "a democracy, where there is respect for institutions (of law), the citizen relinquishes his right to revenge onto the state," which, through its law enforcement and courts system, aims to mete out a fair and just punishment.

"There is a sort of natural right to defend the common interest and the common good, and in 1791 (when the United States passed the Second Amendment), my right to have a weapon served the common good because there wasn't an army; the democratic institutions were young and a little fragile, and I could have been useful in a time of war as a soldier," said Di Ruzza.

But once a nation has a functioning army, police force and court system, "do I still serve the common good with my gun or do I put it at even greater danger?" and promote a lawless kind of "street justice where if you steal my car, I shoot you," he asked.

The Vatican's justice and peace council's 1994 document said, "In a world marked by evil and sin, the right of legitimate defense by armed means exists," but, Di Ruzza said, it wasn't lauding the potential of weaponry as much as it was lamenting the existence of arms in an imperfect world.

Nations have a duty, the document said, to reduce if not eliminate the causes of violence.

And as 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.

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