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Tide may be turning on how to address gun violence in US, speaker says

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Feb. 13, 2013
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Participants at a Catholic Social Ministry Gathering issue briefing on gun violence Monday believe the tide may be turning on the issue.

"Newtown changed the issue dramatically," said Vinny DeMarco, a former Maryland assistant attorney general who now heads Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence.

DeMarco compared the Dec. 14 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in which Adam Lanza killed 20 students and six school staffers before turning the gun on himself, to the police brutality in Birmingham, Ala., that gave new impetus to the civil rights movement in the early 1960s.

"The same momentum that gave us civil rights is going to give us gun violence prevention," DeMarco said.

Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence sent a letter to Congress Jan. 15 -- the birthday of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., himself slain by an assassin's gun. It was signed by 47 faith leaders, including 13 Catholics, urging "immediate legislative action" to impose universal criminal background checks on all gun purchases, cutting off the availability of "high-capacity weapons and ammunition magazines" to civilians, and the making of gun trafficking a federal crime.

"We have to ban these weapons of mass destruction. We just have to," DeMarco told a capacity crowd in a Washington hotel's meeting room, which was changed to accommodate more seating. "There's no reason why these weapons of destruction should be in private hands."

DeMarco said the one element of changing the nation's gun laws likely to get the least support is a reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons. "That law worked," he said. But the compromise to get it passed in 1994 was that the ban would expire after 10 years, unless was renewed. By 2004, Democrats were out of power in the White House and in both houses of Congress, and the Republican-controlled Congress let the expiration date lapse.

"Gun prevention laws work. These laws work," DeMarco said. "When we get this message out, Congress is not going to be able to ignore this."

DeMarco is helping organize a "gun violence prevention Sabbath" March 15-17 during which clergy would speak out in the pulpits against gun violence.

Guns continue to take their toll on Americans, according to federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention statistics compiled by Lucreda Cobbs, senior director of government affairs for Catholic Charities USA.

Female domestic violence victims are more likely to be murdered by a firearm than all other means combined, Cobb said.

In U.S. cities with a population of at least 10,000, 24.9 percent of homicides were gang related -- in Los Angeles the percentage is 50.9 -- and 94 percent of gang-related homicides were by gun. Among youths ages 14-19, 28 percent of fatal injuries involved a firearm. Homicide offenders also were more likely to use drugs.

About 90 Catholic Charities affiliates offer programs to treat victims of domestic violence. Its services to get addicts off drugs treated more than 80,000 clients.

A week after the Newtown shootings, three committee chairs of the U.S. bishops penned a "call for action" on gun violence.

"The intent to protect one's loved ones is an honorable one, but simply put, guns are too easily accessible," said the joint statement by Bishops Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; John Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of their Committee on Communications; and Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., chairman of their Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.

"Our entertainers, especially film producers and video game creators, need to realize how their profit motives have allowed the proliferation of movies, television programs, video games and other entertainment that glorify violence and prey on the insecurities and immaturity of our young people."

"The church has been a consistent voice for the promotion of peace at home and around the world and a strong advocate for the reasonable regulation of firearms," said a February 2013 issue brief from the U.S. bishops' Office of Domestic Social Development.

The issue brief quoted a 2006 document by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which stressed the importance of enacting concrete controls on handguns and noted that "limiting the purchase of such arms would certainly not infringe on the rights of anyone."

It also noted the U.S. bishops' own words from a 2000 pastoral statement, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," in which the bishops said: "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."

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