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America's Exceptional Gun Violence

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 18, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

No one can doubt, Mssr. Putin notwithstanding, that the United States is an exceptional nation. We are the only country on earth that, absent a civil war, routinely has mass killings of innocent civilians. The 12 killed at the Navy Yard on Monday, join the 20 children and six adults slaughtered at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, and the 12 gunned down in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, to say nothing of the hundreds killed one at a time in the streets of our cities. This latest massacre should bestir our political leaders to evidence more than sorrow, but it won?t.

Our country is swimming in violence because it is swimming in myths. The National Rifle Association lives off those myths but it also helps create them and propagate them. ?Guns don?t kill people. People kill people.? Well, yes. But it is a lot harder to kill someone with a knife than a gun, and a whole hell of a lot harder to kill a large number of people with a knife than a semi-automatic gun. Japan, with its strict gun laws, experiences homicides to be sure, but not at the rate here in the U.S. Why? Because in Japan, most homicides are committed with a knife not a gun.

The NRA is powerful. It has loads of money. It has a highly refined political organization. But, it?s real strength lies in its myths. It has millions of Americans who like to hunt convinced that an assault weapons ban will somehow keep the boys from going hunting next season. The NRA warns darkly that we do not want to live in a country in which only the police and the criminals have weapons, but surely the answer to that fear cannot be for everyone to be packing. Certainly, the young man who apparently was hearing voices in the weeks leading up to his shooting spree on Monday should not have had a gun.

Moreover, like all single interest groups, from the gay rights lobby to the Sierra Club to the National Association of Manufacturers, the NRA distorts our politics, emphasizing its narrow agenda to the exclusion of all other issues. Politics is always about building coalitions: We have come to understand that the competition for political influence among different interests in society is actually a guarantee of our liberties. But, there are times, and this is such a time, when political leadership is required to transcend the narrow politics of coalition building and articulate public policy that addresses a national need. Alas, such leadership is not on the horizon.

I read in the papers this morning about growing political unrest in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring was born. Much of the summer was dominated by news about the breakdown of democracy in Egypt. And, of course, Syria is a test case in what happens when politics fails. Commentary in the U.S. on these countries and their situations tends to speak about how ?those people? in ?that region? seem incapable of democracy, the suggestion being that they should be more like us. Setting aside the still vivid memories of Florida, 2000, it is true that ?those people? in ?that region? have not learned that democracy mostly works or even how it works, and that even when it is halting and ineffectual, democracy is preferable to the alternatives. I have great contempt for the Supreme Court decision Bush v. Gore, but I am glad there were no mobs in the street, that the army did not intervene, and that a smooth transition of political power was achieved, even if the result was questionable.

But, I know that people in the rest of the world look at the U.S. when it comes to guns the way we look at the Mideast when it comes to democracy. They wonder why we can?t get our act together. They perceive the obvious flaws in logic put forward by opponents of gun control. The NRA says that the assault weapons ban failed because, during its ten years on the books, gun violence did not decrease. Well, if you flood the nation with assault weapons for twenty years, and only ban the sale of new ones, it may take longer than ten years to get the residue off the streets. Such common sense observations are drowned out by the din of idolatry regarding the First Amendment. And, as in Florida in 2000, the Supreme Court is no help. Justice Scalia?s fetish for originalism plays its part in the violence on our streets as he fails to recognize, what I am prepared to acknowledge, that the Second Amendment clearly and unequivocally guarantees the right of American citizens to bear muskets.

I am no relativist. Countries that are more free are more happy. America is, in so many ways, the best place in the world to live. The protection of human rights in the U.S. is the envy of the world, and with good reason, and even when we fail, it is easier to correct our failures than it is in a country where the military holds the final say as in Egypt or one family controls the State and much of the economy as in Syria. But, on the issue of gun violence, we are the blindest of nations.

Will it ever change? This is a time to read Augustine, not to be depressed about the raw facticity of human sinfulness, but to recognize how that sinfulness really does require us to tame our ambitions and be more honest about ourselves. No amount of wishing will defeat the NRA. It is also a time to listen, to really listen, to Pope Francis and what he is trying to tell us about mercy. Our wonderful new pope is no apostle of self-esteem. He does not invite us to come to the throne of grace with our accomplishments in hand. Pope Francis calls us to be converted from sin not by some abstract reasoning of the natural law but by the great promise of God?s mercy. The pope calls us to conversion. And, on the subject of gun rights, those of us who want to see sane steps to restrict the free flow of guns into our streets must seek to convert those who have bought into the NRA?s myths. It will not happen overnight. It may not happen at all if the mounting death toll has not done it already. But, ?success? is not a name of God and is, therefore, not a Gospel category, as Balthasar used to insist. We are obliged to try. But our trying happens under the shadow of the Cross.

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