



From left to right: Pat Damer and his daughters Sophia, an Oxford High School senior; Isabella, a Michigan State University junior; Mia, an Oxford freshman; and his wife Jeanne in front of Oxford High School. Sophia survived the Oxford shooting and Isabella survived the MSU shooting. Photo credit Valaurian Waller.

## A CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO GUN VIOLENCE

**Like anyone, Pat Damer never thought it could happen to him or his family. But it did. Twice.**

His daughter was at Oxford High School the day of the 2021 shooting that claimed the lives of four students and injured seven people. Her class barricaded themselves and armed themselves with scissors and textbooks. She survived.

A year later, another of Pat's daughters was on campus at Michigan State University the night when a gunman

walked into two buildings and killed three students and injured five others. She also survived.

Those experiences changed Pat.

"I think it was the direct impact to family and friends—and specifically my daughters—that drew me more into the issue" of gun violence, Damer said, who said he had a "healthy respect" for guns growing up. He now serves on his parish's peace and justice committee working to educate Catholics on gun violence.

"The Church can be part of the solution to gun violence, by being the Church—the mission is to teach and preach the Gospel and live it out," he said. "I think the Church ... can and needs to play a vital role in this discussion."

In recent months, the Michigan Legislature has approved bills to implement gun safety reforms and curb gun violence. Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) testified in support of the bills, in continuity with positions taken by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and other state Catholic conferences in supporting gun safety reforms to protect human life and address violence in society.

While there are many factors that influence gun violence, gun regulation is still part of the conversation. Acknowledging that gun policies alone will not solve every problem, this edition of **focus** will examine gun safety policies and why they are part of the Catholic response to gun violence.

## The stats on gun violence

Statistics show an increasing number of deaths in this country and state are involving guns. In 2021, the United States hit a record of 48,832 gun deaths<sup>1</sup>, and firearm deaths have been climbing nationwide since 2014.<sup>2</sup>

The gun death rate in Michigan increased by 25% over the past decade,<sup>3</sup> and in 2021, four Michiganders died from gun violence each day, on average. Since 2011 in Michigan, the number of deaths from firearms “far exceeds” the number of deaths from car crashes.<sup>4</sup>

Many people associate gun violence with mass shootings, but the plague of gun violence runs deeper than those high-profile events. Firearms were the leading cause of deaths for children and teens ages 1–19 in Michigan in 2021. The 117 Michigan

children killed by guns was four times more than by drowning or poisoning.<sup>5</sup> Gun suicides accounted for 53.9% of the country’s gun deaths in 2021, another record high. More than half of Michigan’s 2021 gun deaths were related to suicide.<sup>6</sup>

## The shooter or the gun?

Not everyone is convinced more gun regulation is an appropriate response to this violence. When people say, “guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” it is a recognition there are numerous factors for why a person decides to commit violence.

Catholics do not have to settle into an either/or mindset. Rather, the faithful can and should embrace a both/and approach. With gun violence, it is no different.

“It’s about guns, but it’s also about other societal problems that we have that we are not dealing with,” said Fr. John Mckenzie, a priest *in solidum* of Christ the King Parish in Detroit. Taking guns off the street is important, but he said that until deeper issues are addressed, “we’re going to always circle back” like a “dog chasing its tail.”

While the USCCB has advocated for gun safety reforms, the body has also acknowledged the prevalence of violence as the root issue.

In a 2022 letter to Congress, the U.S. bishops called for addressing violence through “dialogue followed by concrete action to bring about a broader social renewal that addresses all aspects of the crisis.” They listed “mental health, the state of families, the valuation of life, the influence of entertainment and gaming industries, bullying” as issues of concern.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the bishops also mentioned the “availability of firearms,” adding

## RESPONDING TO GUN SAFETY REFORM OBJECTIONS

The topic of guns is a contentious one with strong opinions on all sides of the debate. The responses below, grounded in Catholic social doctrine and amplified by academic studies, are intended to address the concerns of those who do not believe gun safety reforms are necessary or good public policy. It is important to remember that conversations around this topic should take place with charity and respect for one another. Listening to and understanding another person’s concerns does not require retreating from one’s own thoughts or beliefs, but rather being considerate of how another thinks and believes.

**Objection:** Guns are needed for the possibility of armed resistance to a tyrannical government.

**Response:** The *Catechism* contemplates the limited circumstances where armed resistance would be permitted against a government. Since armed resistance is essentially violent conflict against the government, the high threshold of just war principles must be met, including such standards as “there is a well-founded hope of success” and “all other means of redress have been exhausted.”<sup>20</sup>

**Objection:** You cannot legislate away evil. Homicides will continue despite these laws.

**Response:** Catholics believe civil law expresses the moral order and promotes the common good in society. Although it is true that civil law alone cannot prevent all bad acts, there is extensive research that certain gun safety policies are very likely to save lives, thereby promoting the value of human life and peace to society.

that, “among the many steps toward addressing this endemic of violence is the passage of reasonable gun control measures.”

This approach was echoed by MCC in supporting Michigan gun safety legislation, noting “the real issue at hand” is “violence in our society” and called for policy actions that “embrace and foster a culture of life.”

## Why ‘ready availability’ of guns is a problem

The U.S. bishops have pointed out that guns—particularly their availability to people in conflict—are what can turn something like an argument into a deadly tragedy.

“Most homicides are not the result of criminal design but rather they are the outcome of quarrels and arguments among spouses, friends and acquaintances. In these situations, it is the ready availability of handguns that often leads to tragic and deadly results,” according to the statement *Handgun Violence: A Threat to Life* issued by a U.S. bishops’ committee.

Deacon Tom Bousamra, who has been engaged in jail ministry in the Diocese of Gaylord for 36 years, said most people he ministers to suffer



Jeanne Damer, (far left) Pat Damer, (far right) and their daughters inside of Christ the Redeemer Catholic Community in Lake Orion, where Pat and Jeanne serve on the parish’s peace and justice committee to promote awareness of gun violence. Photo credit Valaurian Waller.

from mental illness or struggle with addiction. Their ability to access guns just makes situations worse.

“Take guns out of that equation and there might be less of a criminal reality,” he said.

The U.S. bishops’ advocacy has focused on the “easy availability of deadly weapons,”<sup>8</sup> considering that “weapons that are increasingly capable of inflicting great suffering in a short period of time are simply too accessible.”<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. has more guns than people<sup>10</sup>, and research has shown that developed countries and American states with more guns experience more homicides.<sup>11</sup> The national

bishops’ conference has called for “measures that control the sale and use of firearms and make them safer,” particularly “efforts that prevent their unsupervised use by children or anyone other than the owner.”<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that Catholic bishops are not calling for guns to be taken from law abiding citizens nor is hunting discouraged. In fact, the *Catechism’s* teaching on self-defense acknowledges that “someone who defends his life is not guilty of murder even if he is forced to deal his aggressor a lethal blow.” The *Catechism* also states, “legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for

**Objection:** Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.

**Response:** People live in a fallen world where conflict is sometimes inevitable. The question is whether that conflict will become deadly. The availability of a gun to people involved in violent or angry conflict reasonably leads to an increased risk of serious injury or death.

**Objection:** The government should just enforce the laws on the books instead of adding new laws to control guns.

**Response:** Catholics are encouraged to pursue a both/and approach. There is merit to evaluating current laws and policies and understanding how they are being enforced and implemented, just as there is also merit to adding new policies that strengthen and improve existing laws to promote peace and protect human life.

one who is responsible for the lives of others.”<sup>13</sup>

Church teaching does, however, discuss small arms and light weapons from the perspective of states’ responsibility to regulate them, given that “the sale and trafficking of such weapons constitute a serious threat to peace.”<sup>14</sup>

The Church holds that “the production and the sale of arms affect the common good of nations and of the international community. Hence public authorities have the right and duty to regulate them,”<sup>15</sup> even stating that “it is indispensable and urgent that Governments adopt appropriate measures to control the production, stockpiling, sale and trafficking of”<sup>16</sup> small arms.

## How is gun safety related to Catholic social principles?

Addressing gun violence is directly connected to protecting human life, a bedrock Catholic social principle.

“You see how many people are dying from this ... it really comes down to the human life and dignity of the person,” said Karen Swietlik, parish staff liaison to Christ the Redeemer’s peace and justice committee, the group Oxford parent Pat Damer serves with that is educating parishioners about gun violence.

Deacon Bousamra said he believes gun safety regulation is a public safety issue, and the U.S. bishops have said, “the unlimited freedom to possess and use handguns must give way to the rights of all people to safety and protection against those who misuse these weapons.”<sup>17</sup>

In his argument for protecting people suffering from mental health issues from hurting themselves or others, Deacon Bousamra also sees addressing gun violence as connected to the Catholic principle of providing a preferential option to the poor and marginalized.

The number of children killed or wounded by guns is also grounds for Catholic action based on protecting the vulnerable, said Nancy Clancy, a

member of the Christ the Redeemer peace and justice committee.

“No child should die from a gunshot wound,” she said, adding that gun violence is not only killing children but also “causing such a fear in our children.”

Widely publicized mass shootings, routine school shooter drills for children, or the persistent threat of gun violence in troubled neighborhoods all increase fear. That fear contributes to a lack of peace, which the *Catechism* teaches is required for achieving the common good.<sup>18</sup>

## Catholics in action

Christ the Redeemer parish’s proximity to the Oxford tragedy meant many parishioners were personally affected by the shooting.

“You experience a certain amount of tragedy when you read about it in the paper, but when it hits closer to home, your horror level rises,” Clancy said. “This should not be happening to our friends and to our parishioners ... it shouldn’t be happening to anybody.”

**Objection:** These restrictions only take guns out of the hands of law-abiding citizens. It would be safer to arm law-abiding citizens so they can protect themselves.

**Response:** While sometimes unwelcome for law-abiding and gun-owning citizens, the measures discussed in this **focus** are intended to protect the innocent from others likely to commit deadly violence. Well-intentioned hunters are not the source of cultural and societal gun violence, and the *Catechism* supports the right for self-defense.<sup>21</sup> Gun safety laws are intended to implement common-sense standards on weapons that can seriously injure or kill. Additionally, research shows that changing laws to allow more people to carry firearms in public are associated with increases in violent crime.<sup>22</sup>

**Objection:** These measures violate the Second Amendment and my freedom as an American to own a gun.

**Response:** Catholic social principles hold that with rights come responsibilities, and that applies to the Second Amendment. As the American bishops have taught, “the unlimited freedom to possess and use handguns must give way to the rights of all people to safety and protection against those who misuse these weapons.”<sup>23</sup> Catholics do not advocate for freedom from obligation or restriction, but rather freedom for human flourishing. The common good of society includes respect for life and for peace.<sup>24</sup> A peaceful society is not possible if violent death by gunfire is increasingly prevalent. ■



# ANALYSIS OF MICHIGAN GUN SAFETY LEGISLATION

Michigan lawmakers have approved bills to implement three gun safety reforms: Expanded background checks, safe storage requirements, and extreme risk protection orders. The following explains how the policies can help minimize gun violence and death.

## BACKGROUND CHECKS

**What:** An expansion of Michigan’s background check law to include all firearms.

**Why:** Michigan’s background check law is a permit-to-purchase law for private sales of pistols and a background check-only law for purchases from federally licensed firearms dealers. But there are gaps that could allow those legally prohibited from having firearms to purchase one. For example, there is currently no background check or purchaser licensing requirement for purchase of a long gun from a private seller.<sup>25</sup>

A 2015 study found that 22% of Americans who acquired their firearm in the prior two years did so without completing a background check.<sup>26</sup> States that go beyond the federal background check requirements have seen significant reductions in firearm homicides, suicides, and trafficking.<sup>27</sup>

**Status:** House Bills 4138 and 4142 were signed into law April 13. The legislation will likely take effect the spring of 2024.

## SAFE STORAGE REQUIREMENTS

**What:** Implementation of a safe storage requirement for firearms that could be accessible by minors, along with penalties for violations.

**Why:** There was no statutory requirement or penalty in Michigan for a person who does not store their gun safely, which allows for young children or teenagers to access, transport or fire the weapon at themselves or others.

Strong child access protection (CAP) laws, like the Michigan bills signed into law, have been associated with lower rates of hospitalization for child firearm injuries than states with weak CAP laws. CAP laws have also been associated with a 26% decrease in nonfatal gun injuries for minors, and lower rates of teen suicide by firearm.<sup>28</sup>

**Status:** Senate Bills 79–82 were signed into law April 13. The legislation will likely take effect the spring of 2024.

## EXTREME RISK PROTECTION ORDERS

**What:** Establishment of Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), which would allow the temporary confiscation of firearms from individuals deemed by a court process to be a danger to themselves or others.

**Why:** A growing body of research suggests ERPOs are tools to prevent various forms of gun violence. A study estimated that Indiana’s ERPO law was associated with a 7.5% reduction in firearm suicides, while Connecticut’s extreme risk law was associated with a 13.7% reduction in firearm suicides.

A study in California examined 159 orders issued between 2016 and 2018 and found that in 21 orders, the subject showed clear signs that they intended to commit a mass shooting and after the orders were issued, no mass shootings, suicides, or homicides occurred.<sup>29</sup>

**Status:** Senate Bill 83 and House Bills 4146–4148 were signed into law in May. The legislation will likely take effect in the spring of 2024. ■

In response to gun violence, the parish committee initiated a letter-writing campaign to lawmakers to urge support of gun safety reforms moving through the Michigan Legislature. The committee encouraged individual parishioners to sign, and hundreds of letters were ultimately sent to lawmakers.

In Detroit, St. Charles Lwanga Parish has taken a different approach to tackling gun violence by offering parishioners the opportunity to safely surrender unwanted guns through parish-funded gun buyback events.

“It relieves an innocent person from being in a situation of violence,” said Fr. Theodore Parker, pastor of the parish, adding that gun buybacks take excess guns out of circulation and prevents them falling into the wrong hands.

## Catholic voices: What’s next?

Pat Damer believes the entire Church should pay more attention to gun violence. Until recently, he had not heard gun violence addressed in a homily.

“The Church is its people, right? I need to do more, and the leadership of the Church needs to do more. It needs to be a cohesive effort,” Damer said. “We have an obligation to help be a part of the solution.”

The polarization present in society means that sometimes the very mention of guns can shut down the



“2023 Michigan State University shooting memorial” by Guettarda / CC BY-SA 4.0

conversation, Karen Swietlik said. People in the pews have varying opinions on this, which could explain the hesitancy for why it hasn’t been addressed more often by church leaders, she said.

“I think that so many people see it as a political issue, a Second Amendment issue,” Nancy Clancy said, but added that people should see it as a “moral obligation to care about what’s happening to our neighbors.”

While the Michigan and U.S. bishops nationally have identified gun safety reforms as good public policy, at the same time, “not even the most effective gun laws, by themselves, will suffice to address the roots of these violent attacks in our country.”<sup>19</sup>

That’s where the Church comes in. Fr. McKenzie said that as the Body

of Christ on Earth, we cannot “just sit back and let our society just go to waste.” When it comes to understanding mass shootings, Fr. McKenzie said these shooters have sometimes documented their despair or lack of hope ahead of time.

“I think we need to bring new hope and light to people ... that’s a first step, bringing hope and light that is Jesus Christ Himself to communities and people in the world today,” he said. ■

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