

LENT 2018

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm

I'm going to write about Lent and guns. Should you expect anything else from a friar?

Tuesday, Feb. 13, I was walking north on Clark Street at 2 p.m. and noticed that the State of Illinois building was surrounded by countless blue lights. I knew immediately it was a crime scene. Commander Paul Bauer had been shot 6 times. CPD smothered the area and captured the offender. Commander Bauer died and was honored with full Catholic burial rites and Chicago CPD customs.

Feb. 14, Ash Wednesday and this year our day of love, a disturbed young man went into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and ended 17 lives. Ended dreams, shattered families and forever etched horror into the hearts of young people.

Social media exploded with the usual reactions to another mass shooting: anger, pain, self-righteousness, religious views that defy categorization and language no one should use in public. Newspapers' editorials proclaimed fault and television/radio talking heads pushed us against the wall. Again.

That Friday I preached at morning Mass on Isaiah 58:1-9: *Proclaim to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. They seek me day after day... they desire to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, but you do not see it? Afflict ourselves, but you take no note?" God rebuts their self-justification and conceit about their concept of fasting....Is this not, rather, the fast that I want of you: release those bound unjustly, untie the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bring the afflicted and the homeless into your home, clothe the naked and do not turn your back on your own flesh?*

Sunday, Feb. 18, another friar and I joined a few thousand people to march through the Loop, simply calling awareness to this plague, this horror that continues to snuff out God's sacred gift of human life. There were many points of view expressed in signage and chants.

And there were many, many young people among us.

I watched just a few moments of Commander Bauer's funeral and realized tears were running down my cheeks. Television interviews with students from that high school in Florida showed everyone their suffering and their hopes for the future of the US. They also expressed very, very strong messages to any and all legislators to do all they can to bring about change in gun laws and mental health policies. Or just initiate discussions.

Six years ago I lived at our small place for the arts in the west Loop. While unloading groceries in front of our building across from Whitney Young High School and one block from the Chicago Police Academy three young men accosted and pistol whipped me then drove away with our car. It all happened in the blink of an eye and I was cut and badly bruised. The police said I was lucky they just bashed my face with the gun and didn't fire it.

I have no idea what it would be like to have bullets rip through my body. No idea of seeing my friends be splayed apart in seconds. I've only shot a gun once when I was about 12 and have never touched one since. I have no children so I cannot begin to imagine the horrendous pain of seeing a child die. One of the most challenging moments in my 39 years of priestly ministry came when I helped a young couple bury one of their newborn twin boys. The father got down on his knees and placed a tiny white coffin in the ground himself. I cried but could not imagine what he and his wife felt! After 14 or more years of nurturing a child, how do all the parents of these dead students and the families of the teachers slain continue to see the goodness of life? Where do they find hope for a future? How are thousands of gunshot survivors expected to be happy in life after experiencing such inhumane terror?

We've all seen the lists of deaths and places of mass killings; in the 2017 November Legionnaire article I had a list of towns where there was a mass killing. Nearly **two million** people in the United States have been killed by guns since 1968. Look anywhere in social media or online and you can find plenty of famous legislators who are given **millions of dollars** in

Pieta by Vincent van Gogh, 1890.
Vatican Museum

donations from the National Rifle Association. **MILLIONS!** Some of us on Medicare cannot afford to eat so we can buy medicine; others choose to eat and go untreated. That's certainly seeking the common good, isn't it? And at the risk of being sarcastic, you know and I know – we all know – there is no justice in this country when someone we chose to guide us fails time and again to guide us. As I write this article in late February, one week after the Parkland massacre, the Florida House and Senate – with Parkland students in attendance – refused to pass a bill that would restrict the purchase of assault weapons to people over 21. Refused to even consider discussing the issue. Refused!

As a Franciscan I will no longer be quiet. I cannot accept the command a lady once gave me in church to: “Shut up. A priest shouldn't be involved in this political stuff.” What is political about caring for human lives? Tell me that when I watch people kill one another for gang initiation or because of misguided anger. I'm supposed to ‘shut up’ and not say anything? I have spent 50 years as a friar caring for human beings and offering people care and hope in the midst of their suffering. And I'm not supposed to bring Christ into any discussion or action about gun control or seek a solution to violence and hatred? That's a doctor telling a nurse to not take care of someone because ‘he's gonna die anyway.’ Quite frankly, apathetic attitudes and self-righteousness do not belong in a Catholic heart. They express nothing of God's love or Christ's compassion; such attitudes or constrictions on Church ministry are wrong.

Do I have strong feelings? Yes, yet anger is not among them. Part of my frustration is with legislators who do nothing. I understand that we need conversations about the regulations for gun purchase and use. If I had choice, there would be NO guns. Mental health and health care in our country is in dire need of reform. Yet it seems there is no discussion. I have lots of friends in other countries and they are astounded at our health care system. Germans do not understand why there are guns for anyone and everyone. Other countries have solutions that we could use but no...we're self-reliant and have all the answers. And we continue to annihilate our future. A gun is manufactured to take life. The

sole purpose of a firearm is to take life, whether to defend or hunt. That's why they were invented in the 14th century. How is the taking of life consistent with the message of Jesus Christ? I am tired of crying and no action. I want so badly for people to discover the joy of what it's like when we care for others and see that our human community in its diversity is a divine gift.

I watched a video clip the other day. Cleverly, someone had a hidden camera and followed a 13 year old boy (with his Mom) on a planned shopping spree. He tried to buy a 6 pack of Bud and was laughed at. He was turned down immediately when he asked for a pack of Marlboros. He wanted to buy a scratch-off lottery ticket and when he told the clerk he was 13, she said: “not a chance, honey.” The final part of the spree was, yup, a stop at a gun show. This 13 year old boy walked up to a table full of rifles and pistols. He asked the price of a certain rifle; the male clerk took his cash and simply said: “good luck.” No questions. No I.D. No problem. This is the world we have created for ourselves in these not quite united States.

I'll repeat my theory I gave you last November. Over the past 40 or 50 years people in the U.S. have screamed for freedom. In all the demands for more and more freedom, we have created a society where no one is completely free. Yes, we have more freedom than some countries. However, freedom without responsibility is not freedom. Why do we have to take off our shoes in airports? Who gives a person the right to run a red light? Why would a group of young people raid a store, destroy displays and take the merchandise they want? I once had to handle a 16 year old girl who came directly to St. Peter's after aborting her baby at Cook County Hospital. I am so tired of crying! It is morally wrong to hurt and kill one another. Our young people, our future, need our attention. And you and I, as disciples of Christ, bear the moral responsibility to take what we are freely given by God in the Eucharist and **live it consistently!**

What has gun control, mental health and shattered teenage dreams have to do with Lent? Let me help you understand. The Great 40 Days came about to prepare catechumens for the Sacraments of Initiation at Easter - basic 3rd and 4th century liturgical history. A woman or man

prepared three years for Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist by completely changing all behavior and attitudes that were the polar opposite of Gospel values. That meant soldiers had to become pacifists. People trapped in twisted relationships had to turn away from all aberrant behavior or infidelity. Adults were required to forsake any form of life, any sinful actions that were contrary to Christian morality. So are we. Once again, Isaiah 58: *Is this not, rather, the fast that I want of you: release those bound unjustly, untie the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bring the afflicted and homeless into your home, clothe the naked and do not turn your back on your own flesh?*

That last clause is the key to all the mayhem we've created in the U.S. When a 13 year old boy can buy a rifle and I cannot bring a large bottle of water on an airplane, something is slightly askew. Something is askew when 1% of U.S. citizens have more wealth than the bottom 90% [New York Times]. When we *turn our backs on each other* we have **lost sight of the common good**. One of my degrees is in sociology and a time-honored function of human communities is that **everyone is taken care of by the group**. The social and sexual mores of any society reflect exactly who that people is. Witness how we've cheapened human life. Why was the Me Too movement necessarily birthed by and for women? Is our present state of affairs even close to the ideal American experiment of freedom, as our founders saw it? Is this good stewardship? Is this the ideal of God's creation?

I don't know if you've ever realized this but the Eucharistic Prayers we use at Mass are written and prayed in first person plural. E.g. *we give you thanks...we ask you to send your Spirit upon these gifts...*The presider speaks in the name of the community. The central action of our lives as Catholic Christians is about **us**, not 'me and Jesus'. If the **common good** is the center of both our faith lives and our lives as citizens, any inconsistency will be obvious. There is an axiom in liturgical praxis that there must be a correlation between liturgy and life. Christ is present within us every moment of the day and that includes not just our intellect but

also the essence of who we are, our attitudes, our morals – everything.

The young people of Parkland, FL are convinced that their **Never Again** movement will bring about change. They are vocal. They are brave. They are eloquent. They are passionate. As **Never Again** spreads throughout the country, I'm sure those young voices will be heard and I pray their efforts (and ours) will, indeed, bring some change to the present situation. We cannot continue to bury our children. It is wrong. We are called to live for the common good. Both as solid citizens and as faith-filled followers of Christ Jesus we bear the responsibility to do what is good for all.

Isaiah 55: 10-11: *Just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.* God's Word became flesh in the Prince of Peace. This Word lives on in us through our own words of truth, our own actions as people who care about the lives of all who live on earth. You and I are the ones who impede the flow of God's word to continue doing what it is intended to do. You and I are also the ones who, individually and collectively, carry within us The Word of God's Forgiveness and give it to others. We share the creative power of God by choosing each day to be forgiveness and peace. That may mean we are compelled to support restrictions on guns, to advocate for patient rights, publicly support the Never Again movement mounted by our future leaders or hold civil discourse about how to counteract violence within our cities. Jesus dealt with the Roman Empire and hypocritical religious leaders. When we commit to God, we step into the unknown, just as Jesus did when he left the desert.

We pray in gratitude for your support of our service here at St. Peter's. May Lent be a source of empowerment for your witness as disciples of the Crucified One. Pray over these words of one of my favorite liturgical scholars, Godfrey Diekmann, osb (1908-2002): "What difference does it make if the bread and wine turn into the Body and Blood of Christ and we don't?" May God give you peace and everything that is good. *Fr. Bob Hutmacher, ofm*