

Reflections on Mass Shootings

By Fr. Dave Heney

These tragic events have caused tremendous pain for all of us as well as a deep desire to know their causes and especially some effective solutions. How can these horrible events be stopped? Here are some reflections for your review.

Who Are the Shooters? Psychologists have discovered a general profile. *While each individual feature is not causative of violent behavior, together they can combine to make violent action more likely.* Shooters are often young men who experienced severe childhood trauma but did not have a mature father figure in their youth to model appropriate male development and a way to positively grow from their hurts. Shooters therefore often retreat as loners who feel deeply hurt from past traumatic events such as extreme family violence or school bullying. They often spend hours online with violent video games and websites that advocate violence that they irrationally perceive as a form of revenge for their unfortunate circumstances. Violent video games portray human targets where emotionally hurt loners can literally practice shooting at human images with no consequence, and are even rewarded extra points! If a trauma of a past hurt recently reoccurs, this may be enough to push them over the line into violence. *Potential shooters are often alone, aggrieved ...and always online.*

What About Hate Groups? Shooters will often align themselves with some larger political cause to provide an excuse for their feelings and actions. It may be from left, right, or even international causes, but actually has nothing to do with their irrational underlying motivation to avenge their deep sense of hurt and isolation. Tragically, they think these larger causes offer an aura of “greatness” and “respect” that will alleviate their sense of extreme alienation.

What About Access to Guns? The Second Amendment reads: *A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.* Supreme Court cases have ensured this access for adults, and especially for ordinary military style weapons for potential use in a *militia*. However, the courts have also affirmed the State can place some access restrictions, for example denying extraordinary weapons like machine guns. *So what are other ways to deny access to guns?*

Background Checks: It is easy to stop a felon’s access to weapons in stores and trade shows but what about those with mental health issues? While mass shooters are clearly mentally ill, it is not against the law to be so. Moreover, who decides who is mentally ill and who is not? What about a person who is responsibly taking medication under a doctor’s care? What about privacy laws that protect everyone’s medical history? These are not easy cases to solve.

Social Media Monitoring: This is a very successful tactic that our government has used since 9-11 to combat terrorism. Computer algorithms can quickly determine online sources of violent trends and possible threats. This has stopped more threats than any other program. This government monitoring, and what follows, is the “Red Flag” process that surfaces violent people from their online and social activity.

Family and Friends Monitoring: Family and friends often recall patterns of violent words and behavior from shooters beforehand. The 9-11 event produced the phrase *"If you see something, say something."* If someone you know has demonstrated violent threats then say something to the police. However, the police also need a reliable way to distinguish real warnings from friends and family from those who just want to accuse someone they don't like.

Selfishness and Sin is Magnified by Technology: In the past, a mentally disturbed person could only annoy a few nearby people. Now, with modern weaponry, one person's delusion can produce harm for many victims and in just a few seconds of deadly fire. Still the underlying sin is the selfishness of a person who puts their need for affirmation over others' lives. Moreover, their violent impact can be magnified by graphic television images. I am glad that most networks now have chosen to not name or show images of perpetrators. They now fortunately deny the *"fame"* these selfish people wanted for their violent actions.

Our Catholic Response of Faith: Beginning from the selfishness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to our time today, our faith has been entirely about changing selfishness to love. This was the message of God to Abraham, Moses, the prophets of the Old Testament, and the message of Jesus to His church today.

We know that selfishness can arise anywhere and at any time, even in the Garden of Eden that God Himself designed, *but you must never let another person's lack of love affect your love!* Jesus sent His disciples into the world as *Lambs amongst wolves* and yet He expected them to maintain their faith, hope, and love no matter who they met. You can certainly do the same if you stay connected to Our Lord.

You can only do that if you have a regular event that reaffirms His love for you and reaffirms your commitment to love others just as He loves you. *That event is our regular Sunday Mass.* It is very unlikely that anyone would resort to violence if they have a regular weekly reminder that they are loved no matter what trauma they might have experienced in childhood. Our Lord becomes their reliable *Father figure* who teaches how to reconcile hurt into victory. After all, the largest item in most Catholic Churches is the image of Jesus Christ, an innocent person crucified on a cross, and yet who demonstrated great love ...even while being persecuted.

Final Thoughts: Almost everything in the news today will be brought up into current very volatile election campaigns, where opposing groups will do whatever they can to frame events for political gain. That is understandable given the social media culture of today, but also unfortunate, because it will be very difficult now to discern good information that is not slanted one way or the other. This will sadly happen for many months to come!

Sunday Mass can also be that peaceful time away from politics where you can engage in thoughtful reflection and prayer to hear God's word of faith, hope, and love, to you and your family.

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