

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL
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CATHOLICS HAVE MUCH TO OFFER IN DEBATE OVER FIREARMS SAFETY **By John Huebscher**

Popes Paul VI and John Paul II both described the Catholic Church as an “expert in humanity.” This term recognizes the truth that through its long history Catholicism has engaged and reflected on the fullness and complexity of the human experience. The Church’s insights on human experience provide a valuable resource to any generation seeking to craft more humane policies and more just societies.

Our national effort to draw the right lessons from the epidemic of firearm violence that afflicts our country is but the latest opportunity to share that expertise. It is a debate that will take place in Washington, in Madison, and in every village square in America. And Catholic voices have something meaningful to contribute to the debate wherever it may occur.

Papal encyclicals such as *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) *Evangelium vitae* (The Gospel of Life) and *Caritas in veritate* (Love in Truth), among others, are good places to start. At the national level, we would do well to consult the U.S. Bishops’ statement, *Confronting a Culture of Violence*, written in 1994. A second U.S. Bishops’ statement, *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, issued in 2000, is also very useful.

These and other documents can help us assess public policies in these areas through the lens of Catholic teaching.

Catholic teaching is not the only asset the Church has to offer. Our lived experience is another. Leaders of Catholic Charities agencies and health care facilities can also share insights drawn from many decades of caring for the mentally ill. These insights can enrich any discussion of the linkage between mental illness and the behavior that produced the unspeakable carnage in Newtown, in Aurora, in Tucson, in Oak Creek, in Columbine, and too many other places.

The coming debates will include a robust discussion of just how we can best balance the Constitutional mandate found in the Preamble to insure domestic tranquility with the Second Amendment’s guarantee of a right to bear arms. Here too, the Catholic experience has something to offer.

The Catholic understanding of the common good reminds us that no one special or private interest can trump the overall good of the community. And the Catholic notion of “ordered liberty” affirms that every right must be exercised in light of how its use affects the well-being of all. We can also assess the matter of rights in light of the Catholic understanding of freedom

summarized so powerfully by Pope John Paul II, who reminded us that true freedom was not the license to do what we want to do, but rather the ability to do what we ought to do.

We will debate these issues with passion. But passion must be tempered by charity and humility. No political party or segment of the political spectrum enjoys a monopoly on wisdom. Nor will every person of good will, be they Catholic or not, see eye to eye on every proposal debated.

But we can engage these questions with the sober reflection they deserve. And all Catholics can form their prudential judgments as to which policies are useful by drawing from the insights and experience of the “expert in humanity” – the Church of which we are all a part.

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