

Firearms and Moral Theology: A Response

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“THERE IS A LOCKDOWN RIGHT NOW. IT’S NOT A DRILL, I DON’T think. I hear yelling. I love you all so much.” My wife and I received this text message from our seventeen-year-old daughter at 9:12 a.m. (CST) on Monday, October 24, 2022. At the time, she was a senior at Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience, which shares a building and facilities with Central Visual & Performing Arts, both of which are magnet schools within the public school system in St. Louis, Missouri. It was 3:12 p.m. for my wife and me, though, because two months earlier, on August 21st, we had moved 3,897 miles away to Maynooth, Ireland. However, we hadn’t noticed the text message until 3:25, so thirteen minutes had already transpired before my wife texted our daughter back: “I love you!!! ... Text me asap. Where are you???” We panicked, worried that the worst might have already happened to her, but our daughter immediately replied, “We’re in AP Lit. In the basement. The door is barricaded.” She added, “Lots of yelling and screaming but no gunfire.” We felt relieved she was still alive, but our fear increased as we again typed back how much we love her.

Our daughter had chosen to stay in St. Louis during the fall semester to finish high school in December, rather than being required to spend two more years in secondary school in Maynooth. We didn’t wish to leave her behind, but supported her decision to stay, especially since it was for only four months, plus she was staying with the family of one of her best friends from school. Admittedly, my family occasionally heard gunfire during our seventeen years living in St. Louis—almost daily the last two years when we lived downtown, where most of our neighbors were Black persons disproportionately impacted by gun violence.¹ For two years straight, St. Louis has been identified as the most dangerous city in the United States.² I sometimes

¹ Monica Obradovic, “Missouri’s Black Homicide Victimization Rate Again Highest in US,” *Riverfront Times*, April 27, 2023, www.riverfronttimes.com/news/missouris-black-homicide-victimization-rate-again-highest-in-us-39941072.

² Laura Begley Bloom, “Report Ranks America’s 15 Safest (and Most Dangerous) Cities for 2023,” *Forbes*, January 31, 2023, www.forbes.com/sites/laurabegleybloom/2023/01/31/report-ranks-americas-15-safest-and-most-dangerous-cities-for-2023/.

videod gunfights on the streets several floors below our apartment and photographed bullet casings I saw on the streets and sidewalks during my daily runs, occasionally posting these on social media. In fact, a decade ago, while I was running on the sidewalk, as an oncoming car approached on the street, a passenger quickly aimed a gun out his window and shot me in the chest; keeling over, worried I wasn't going to see my family again, I was relieved to realize the liquid on me wasn't blood but paint. So, although we were concerned about the safety of our two daughters, including when they went to school (one once told us about how a boy along the street pointed a gun at her bus as it passed by), we never really thought an active-shooter situation would happen. Indeed, our older daughter's school is one of the most secure buildings in the city's system, with locked doors, metal detectors, and security officers. We later learned that a 19-year-old male, a recent alumnus, shot his way through the entrance.

We continued texting over the next three minutes. Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. At 3:29, our daughter wrote, "I can see police through the window. Four shots just went off." I asked if she had a desk or something to hide behind and whether she had anything to throw at the shooter. I wondered if she could escape through a window, but she replied that the windows were barred. She then heard the police yelling at the shooter. It was now 9:33 in St. Louis, 3:33 in Ireland. A minute later, our daughter updated us, "The police are coming door to door to evacuate kids." Three long and uncomfortably silent minutes later, we finally read the welcome words, "We're out."

We felt a wave of relief, but our daughter then reported that as she exited her classroom and entered the hallway, she had to step past a dead student. She couldn't recognize her, though. Months later I happened to meet the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (commonly called "ATF") agent, coincidentally a member of our former parish in St. Louis, one of the two law enforcement officers first on scene. He informed me that he had stood next to the deceased girl's body as my daughter and her classmates escaped. A brave 61-year-old teacher, Jean Kuczka, was also murdered in another location inside the school.

The shooter used an AR-15 (Armalite) style rifle and had six hundred rounds of ammunition. The devastation and disfigurement caused by this type of weapon, invented during the Vietnam war and intended for military—not civilian—use,³ was why my daughter did not recognize her fellow student who had been murdered. A note left behind in his car said he intended to kill more students, faculty, and

³ Sam Frizell, "AR-15 Inventor's Family: This Was Meant to Be a Military Weapon," *Time*, June 16, 2016, time.com/4371452/orlando-shooting-ar-15-military-civilian-family/.

staff than were murdered in other schools in Columbine, Colorado, in 1999, and Parkland, Florida, in 2018. This was one of 305 school shooting incidents in 2022.⁴ It is expected that the number will be even greater in 2023. As I write this, tears well up in my eyes. Almost every time I speak or write about it, the emotions from that day resurface. Each new day my daughter, her younger sister, her mother, and I dread hearing about another school or mass shooting happening. Even with counseling, our daughter is not the same. She has been traumatized. The sound of sirens, loud firecrackers, backfire from the exhaust of a car, even loud music in a pub all cause her trauma to resurface. One of our common loves, watching Marvel Universe superhero movies, is now a thing of the past. Any film or television show likely to feature bloodshed is more than she can handle.

My own experiences of violence enable me to understand to a certain extent. As a former reserve police officer, I have seen gunshot victims. I have entered houses where someone has been shot. I have viewed dead bodies and blood-soaked furniture, floors, and walls. I have observed loved ones as they wail and try to grasp what has happened. As a former corrections officer, I have booked alleged perpetrators, or did hospital duty monitoring inmates who had gunshot wounds. Decades later, these images, branded in my mind's eye, resurface—and I lament that our daughter, so young, will never forget what she heard and saw on that crisp autumn morning in her school. I also feel sorrowful for all others indelibly impacted by what happened: the loved ones of the two who were murdered; the other students, teachers, and staff who were there and their families, too; the first responders, including the ATF agent who shared with me how it has traumatized him as well; and the family of the shooter, also shot and killed that day.

Several months later, the Peace and Justice Commission of the Archdiocese of St. Louis contacted me and asked if I might recommend someone who could provide a Catholic theological-ethical perspective on gun violence at a summit on July 29, 2023. The archdiocesan staff knew I had published some opinion pieces on the question, including one about my daughter and her school.⁵ A decade ago, in the wake of the massacre of twenty children and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, I was also among

⁴ For more on school shootings, see the K-12 School Shooting Database, k12ssdb.org/all-shootings.

⁵ Tobias Winright, "A Parent's Worst Nightmare: An Active Shooter at My Daughter's School," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 2, 2022, www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/parents-worst-nightmare-active-shooter-my-daughters-school. For an earlier piece, see Tobias Winright, "What St. John XXIII Has to Say about Gun Rights," *America*, February 23, 2018, www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/02/23/what-st-john-xxiii-has-say-about-gun-rights.

the sixty scholars, priests, nuns, and two former ambassadors to the Vatican who issued a letter, in connection with the annual March for Life in Washington, DC, calling for “common-sense reforms to address the epidemic of gun violence in our nation.”⁶ Yet, few, if any, other moral theologians have addressed this issue, so I agreed to return and speak at the summit, which also included other presentations and workshops, with over 350 laity, religious, clergy, and other persons in attendance.⁷ Similarly, a couple of years ago, when staff at *America* magazine emailed me and requested names of Catholic moral theologians who might speak on the topic of gun violence, I was able to suggest only two of my peers, who had presented papers on the subject at professional conferences I had attended.⁸

Since then I have learned that two other Catholic moral theologians, William P. George and Richard C. Sparks, CSP, wrote about firearms, both published in 1996, the latter in two succinct pages and the former in an article that in retrospect seems very prescient and still helpful today.⁹ There is also a chapter in *Catholic Bioethics and Social Justice*, edited by M. Therese Lysaught and Michael McCarthy, on “Health Care Providers on the Frontline: Responding to the Gun

⁶ Laurie Goodstein, “In Fight over Life, a New Call by Catholics,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/01/26/us/politics/catholics-raise-issue-of-guns-amid-call-to-end-abortion.html.

⁷ Tony Messenger, “I Went to a Gun Safety Talk. I Ran into an Even Bigger Moral Problem,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 3, 2023, www.stltoday.com/news/local/column/tony-messenger/messenger-i-went-to-a-gun-safety-talk-i-ran-into-an-even-bigger-moral/article_5a74ba6c-3161-11ee-a7be-d7932f7faa3c.html?fbclid=IwAR1y3FvECm_OgXwYSzk2t1ihv4563CDGAQ4_p-1nD3A7xAE_pIYY9PTTJek; Valerie Schremp Hahn, “Hundreds Gather for Gun Violence Summit Hosted by St. Louis Archdiocese,” *Catholic Health World*, September 1, 2023, www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/archive/article/september-1-2023/hundreds-gather-for-gun-violence-summit-hosted-by-st.-louis-archdiocese.

⁸ Patrick T. McCormick presented a paper, “Addressing the Structural Causes of America’s Unique Epidemic of Firearm Suicide,” at the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics in New Orleans, and earlier he published a short column piece also on firearms and suicide, “Weapons of Self-destruction,” *US Catholic* 74, no. 1 (January 2009): 42–43. For an interview of McCormick by Sebastian Gomes, Executive Editor at *America* and host of the podcast *Voting Catholic*, see Robert David Sullivan, “Voting Catholic: Is There a Catholic Approach to Gun Policy?,” www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2022/10/31/voting-catholic-2022-guns-244037. Krista Stevens Inman presented a paper, “The Barbarian at Our Gate: A Common Good Argument for Stricter Gun Control,” for the Catholic Social Thought Topic Session at the 74th Annual Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America in Pittsburgh, which is noted in Patrick Flanigan’s report in the *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 74 (2019): 108–109.

⁹ William P. George, “Guns and the Catholic Conscience,” *Chicago Studies* 35, no. 1 (April 1996): 82–95; Richard C. Sparks, CSP, *Contemporary Christian Morality: Real Questions, Candid Responses* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 136–137.

Violence Epidemic,” that applies principles of Catholic social teaching to this public health problem; however, its four coauthors are health care professionals, not moral theologians or bioethicists.¹⁰ As for non-Roman Catholic theological ethicists, two of my teachers—pacifists John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas—concentrated on the problem of wars between nations, giving minimal attention to the gun violence on our streets and in our homes, schools, churches, cinemas, workplaces, concert venues, and shopping centers.¹¹ If, as Hauerwas claims, “The question of violence is the central issue for any Christian social ethic,”¹² it is striking that gun violence has garnered such lack of scrutiny from theologians. Otherwise, most of the extant literature offering a Christian ethical perspective, as noted by Michael Grigoni in the introduction to this special issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology*, is from pastors and activists, or from bishops and church leaders, rather than moral theologians.¹³

¹⁰ Michelle Byrne, Virginia McCarthy, Abigail Silva, and Sharon Homan, “Health Care Providers on the Frontline: Responding to the Gun Violence Epidemic,” in *Catholic Bioethics and Social Justice: The Praxis of US Health Care in a Globalized World*, ed. M. Therese Lysaught and Michael McCarthy (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 31–45. See also Alexander Garza, MD, “Guns, Germs, and Health Care: Lessons Observed and Learned,” *Health Progress* 100, no. 6 (November–December 2019): 9–13.

¹¹ John Howard Yoder, *What Would You Do? A Serious Answer to a Standard Question*, expanded ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992), 20–42; Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 145–147, where he recalls when, while he was a student at Yale Divinity School and visiting his family back home in Texas, his father crafted a deer rifle and gave it to him. Hauerwas retells this story in his foreword to *God and Guns: The Bible against American Gun Culture*, ed. Christopher B. Hays and C. L. Crouch (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021), ix–xi.

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 114. An exception is Episcopalian priest and theologian Lyndon Shakespeare, “Friendship, Love, and Mass Shootings: Toward a Theological Response for Gun Control,” *Anglican Theological Review* 95, no. 4 (November 2013): 607–625.

¹³ I should note, too, that Catholic moral theologians have published blog posts about the problem of gun violence: Andrew Kuzma, “The Children of God: The Catholic Response to Gun Violence,” *Catholic Moral Theology*, May 1, 2018, catholicmoraltheology.com/the-children-of-god-the-catholic-response-to-gun-violence/; Tom Bushlack, “Guns, God, and Rights,” *Catholic Moral Theology*, December 20, 2012, catholicmoraltheology.com/guns-god-and-rights/; Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, “Environmental Racism, Gun Violence Homicides, and the Construction of Memorial Acclamations,” *Catholic Moral Theology*, June 21, 2015, catholicmoraltheology.com/guest-post-as-environmental-racism-gun-violent-homicides-and-the-construction-of-memorial-acclamations/; David Cloutier, “A March for Peaceableness,” *Catholic Moral Theology*, March 24, 2018, catholicmoraltheology.com/a-march-for-peaceableness/; Marcus Mescher, “Guns in America: Ideology or Idolatry?,” *Millennial*, August 31, 2015, millennialjournal.com/2015/08/31/guns-in-america-ideology-or-idolatry/; and Tobias Winright, “*Pacem in Terris*, The US Gun

So, I was pleased when the editors invited me to write a response to these thoughtful and timely articles on this question of “special urgency” today.¹⁴ I am grateful to the authors, whose essays help fill a curious lacuna, one that the Board of the College Theology Society, in a recent statement on gun violence, has called on theologians to study and address.¹⁵ Each contributor tackles the issue of guns in the United States, drawing on their respective areas of expertise while analyzing different facets of the problem. In this way, redundancy and repetition are avoided—this special issue of the *Journal* is not beating a dead horse—and the articles complement one another so that an overarching argument is constructed and reinforced. In what follows, I offer a few thoughts prompted by these articles, with the hope that this conversation shall continue and, most importantly, bolster efforts to curtail gun violence.

In his article, “Gun Laws and Gun Deaths: An Empirical Analysis and Theological Assessment,” Conor Kelly, who has written extensively in the area of Catholic health care ethics, culls from empirical data on firearms deaths to establish persuasive reasons why Catholics should endorse policies that further restrict (not ban completely) access to firearms. These fatalities, which disproportionately impact the vulnerable in society, are preventable. Throughout his article, Kelly notes relevant themes and concepts from Catholic social teaching and theological ethics: common good, structural sin, preferential option for the poor, and neighbor love.

The statistics Kelly highlights should speak for themselves, but he anticipates skepticism that might arise about whether such information can move people to advocate change from the status quo. Indeed, I must confess my own doubt, at first, because on other questions in recent years—climate change and COVID-19 vaccines, for example—many Americans have been in denial even when given the empirical and scientific data. Kelly persuasively shares evidence that laws limiting access to guns can and do impact the inequitable distribution of firearm mortality. At the same time, I appreciate his

Legislation Debate, and Rights,” *Catholic Moral Theology*, April 11, 2013, catholicmoraltheology.com/pacem-in-terris-the-us-gun-legislation-debate-and-rights/.

¹⁴ Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”) addressed certain “questions of special urgency”: marriage, culture, socioeconomics, politics, and peace. Although gun violence—such as school and mass shootings—was not treated, I think it warrants the attention of more moral theologians, especially in the United States. See Judith A. Dwyer, SSJ, ed., *“Questions of Special Urgency”: The Church in the Modern World Two Decades after Vatican II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986).

¹⁵ A link to a pdf of the statement, adopted on June 1, 2023, is available on the website of the College Theology Society, www.collegetheology.org/.

exercise of the virtue of epistemic humility, recognizing possible limitations to the studies on which he relies, as well as the conundrum of determining causality in these connections. His proposals for public policy are reasonable even as he observes that connecting the dots between the empirical data and public policy recommendations is not easy. In addition, Kelly does not shy away from responding to likely objections, such as from those who allege that easier access to guns or “stand your ground laws” will deter and decrease firearms fatalities. As he notes, the overall empirical evidence shows otherwise, although I still hear from Catholics and others that they are not convinced by this. At the summit in St. Louis, during a break after my presentation, one woman continued to refer to a 2013 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and conducted by The National Academies’ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council that reported, “Defensive use of guns by crime victims is a common occurrence,” with survey results from the 1990s, which was unpublished, leading her and others to hold onto the view that defensive gun use saves lives.¹⁶ Still, such a position at best maintains the status quo, though the statistics about rising suicides, accidental killings, and gun homicides reflect that the “status quo” is actually worsening over time. In the end, Kelly rightly calls for the virtue of prudence, and on Catholics to guard themselves against a callous disregard for the human lives lost from gun violence, recommit themselves to the common good, and accept their responsibilities for making sure a right to keep and bear arms does not undermine it, points I too have made elsewhere.¹⁷

In “Natural Law’s Return: Uncovering the Roots of Intractability on Guns as a Prelude to New Growth,” John E. Carter meticulously brings his expertise in theology and jurisprudence to bear regarding the right to self-defense and the Second Amendment “right of the people to keep and bear Arms.” An impressive contribution to the growing scholarship on this controversial amendment in the Bill of Rights and recent Supreme Court opinion related to it, Carter’s article attempts to clarify the history and legal issues surrounding gun rights to carve out space for the possibility for moral deliberation and discourse rather than intractability and intransigence. Although as an undergraduate I took two semesters of Constitutional Law, and have read elsewhere treatments of the Second Amendment, Carter took me

¹⁶ See, for example, Paul Hsieh, “That Time the CDC Asked about Defensive Gun Uses,” *Forbes*, April 30, 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/paulhsieh/2018/04/30/that-time-the-cdc-asked-about-defensive-gun-uses/?sh=4d4b9a5f299a.

¹⁷ Winright, “A Parent’s Worst Nightmare.”

to school on the subject.¹⁸ I share his hope that a retrieval of the natural law tradition, which moral theologians across the supposed conservative/liberal spectrum are reviving in various ways, may help address the problem of gun violence. May Carter's erudite article be read widely by legal scholars and theological ethicists.

Luis Vera's article, "Guns, Agency, and Attention in a Technocratic Context," inspired by Pope Francis's critique in *Laudato Si'* of the "technocratic paradigm," offers a more comprehensive vantage point for analysis of guns as technologies. In particular, Vera engages seriously those who justify their gun ownership to protect oneself and others, and interrogates their assumptions about agency and responsibility.¹⁹ I found especially insightful the section in which Vera examines "situational awareness," something I learned while in law enforcement (e.g., sitting in a restaurant against a wall with a clear view of the entrance and everyone in the room) and only now, while living in Ireland, where there are no guns (most police officers are not armed), I notice that I do not need to practice such alert attentiveness. While Vera is correct that most US citizens "live in relative safety from gun violence," my family and I did not while we lived in St. Louis. Of course, he rightly observes that the risk is higher for people who are young, urban, Black, and poor. I agree that many armed white men may be "disconnected from reality" with regard to their assessment of threats, but what to do for non-white citizens whose reality truly is dangerous on a daily basis? Indeed, increasingly Black, LGBTQIA, and other minority persons are arming themselves for self-defense.²⁰ If their situational awareness is more connected to reality, is it also captured by the technocratic paradigm and a myth of autonomous choice? Questions such as these, I trust, will not be

¹⁸ See relevant chapters in, for example, Adam Winkler, *Gunfight: The Battle over the Right to Bear Arms in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); Firmin DeBrabander, *Do Guns Make Us Free? Democracy and the Armed Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); and Hugh LaFollette, *In Defense of Gun Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁹ The question of guns as technologies was also considered more, I think, succinctly, clearly, and helpfully in George, "Guns and the Catholic Conscience," 91–93. Like George, who persuasively argues that "technologies have intentions built into them" (92), Shakespeare writes, "Guns may not have agency, but they do have a purpose" ("Friendship, Love, and Mass Shootings," 615). Indeed, assault weapons, for instance, "are built to guarantee maximum destruction" (614), as my daughter saw in the hallway at her school. See also Mark Ryan, "Guns and Practical Reason: An Ethical Exploration of Guns and Language," *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, no. 1 (2022): 85–106.

²⁰ See, for example, Ryan Young, Dakin And one, and Pamela Kirkland, "Gun Sales Rise among Black People as They Look for Firearm Training and Education," *CNN*, June 23, 2021, edition.cnn.com/2021/06/23/us/black-gun-owners-sales-rising/index.html.

neglected by moral theologians who respond to Vera's call to "engage gun owners with regard to how their best concerns could be done better justice through fully ecological reflection."

Presbyterian pastor and public theologian Katie Day considers shootings in recent years at mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, and churches, including Black churches such as Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the impact that this threat—rare as it may actually be—has on how these communities view the world and make meaningful sense of, or narrate, their identity (their "lived ecclesiology"). Her study of how congregations have responded to a growing sense of the threat of gun violence (e.g., active shooter training, security teams) is very useful. When I worked in law enforcement, it disturbed me whenever a fellow officer told me he or she had a firearm on them in a sanctuary during worship. Now even pastors and parishioners are carrying guns. I worry about this trend. A highlight during the summit in St. Louis was my former parish, St. Margaret of Scotland, in which was formed a group that seeks to steer clear of a fortress mentality to instead foster an ecclesiology of hospitality in such a way that, as Day suggests, "security is uncoupled from physical safety and takes on a deeper meaning, rooted in the community of Christ."²¹

I believe I first met Michael Grigoni in person when I convened the session in which he presented his paper "Just War Theory, Handgun Ownership, and Everyday Life" during the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics in Louisville, Kentucky. His present article, "The Christian Handgun Owner and Just War," also the subject of his doctoral research and dissertation, further develops his train of thought. His work resonates with my own in many respects, both intellectually and experientially. Although my lived experience as an actual gun owner was not as much due to choice, especially a decision to study it—I became a law enforcement officer to work my way through undergraduate study, being the only person in my working class family of farmers, factory workers, and cops to go to university—I appreciate Grigoni's choice to undertake an ethnographic study of gun ownership, not only by interviewing Christians with guns but by sharing in their experience by taking Bill's course on concealed carry.²² Likewise, although my scholarly interest

²¹ See www.stmargaretstl.org/parish/get-involved/ministry/gun-sense-for-the-common-good/.

²² Ryan also claims to use an ethnographic approach by threading throughout his article reflections on his experiences with his gun-owning brother-in-law "Joe." Although indeed insightful, what he shares is more anecdotal and narrative in content and style rather than ethnographic (see Ryan, "Guns and Practical Reason"). Grigoni notes the work of Todd David Whitmore, a Catholic theological ethicist who has done pioneering work on ethnographic fieldwork and Christian ethics. My PhD

in just war theory evolved from my experiences as a law enforcement officer (and as an Army ROTC student) and my concerns about justifying and constraining the use of force, I welcome Grigoni's utilization of just war reasoning for possible normative guidance on the question of gun ownership and use.²³

Because most Christians, at this time, are not pacifists or have not yet centralized nonviolent practices for responding to violent threats, Grigoni's effort to uncover their moral reasoning for firearms ownership and use, I think, is noteworthy. In my presentation at the archdiocesan summit, I used his point that the "everyday form of just war reasoning" that surfaces amongst the Christian gun owners he encounters goes beyond the requirements of the law, such as stand-your-ground laws. When I showed PowerPoint slides with Tertullian and other early church pacifists, followed by Ambrose and Augustine, who provided criteria for the use of force by soldiers and magistrates but not for private self-defense, the strict criteria Aquinas provided for self-defense, and then the strict guidelines for "legitimate defense" in the Catechism (nos. 2263–2267), attendees recognized how a Catholic perspective on gun ownership and use differs from the stand-your-ground mentality. In short, although nonviolence, de-escalation, and other practices should be prioritized in our churches and their institutions (schools, universities, hospitals, etc.), for those who do not "voluntarily set aside our rights" to gun ownership, as Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, CSsR recently urged,²⁴ this everyday form of just war reasoning still should voluntarily moderate and limit these weapons and their use.

I am less persuaded, though, by the apparent distinction between Christian handgun owners ("Christian-protectors") and "citizen-protectors," whereby the former hold "a centripetally-oriented posture with their guns" and the latter possess "a centrifugally-oriented posture of policing." I am surprised that the Christian-protectors from Grigoni's sample would not try to protect another citizen, who is not a biological or ecclesial family member, from lethal harm. Perhaps

dissertation, "The Challenge of Policing: An Analysis in Christian Social Ethics" (University of Notre Dame, 2002), was directed by Whitmore.

²³ For a popular op-ed by a lawyer that suggests, inspired by just war reasoning, the formulation of a theory on firearms, force, and self-defense, see Marvin Lim, "The Church Has a Stance on War, but Needs a Stance on Guns," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 1, 2016, www.ncronline.org/church-has-stance-war-needs-stance-guns. See also Tobias Winright, "What Does Catholic Teaching Say about Using Guns for Defense?," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 2, 2023, www.ncronline.org/opinion/guest-voices/what-does-catholic-teaching-say-about-using-guns-defense.

²⁴ Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, CSsR, "Rejoice in the Lord," May 26, 2023, rcan.org/pray-end-all-instances-violence/.

this is because these Christian-protectors are evangelical Protestants, rather than Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants for whom just war theory has been articulated and taught (even if many members are unfamiliar with it in these traditions, too). Although Grigoni claims that Paul Ramsey's ethic of just war and self-defense has a connection with the Christian ethic of protection espoused by his interlocutors from his ethnographic study, Ramsey does not limit this ethic to personal, familial, and ecclesial bodies. For Ramsey, the same mode of moral reasoning applies to all uses of force, including policing and, as Grigoni rightly notes, sit-ins and civil disobedience.²⁵ To illustrate "the *logic*, the heart and soul, of such protective love," Ramsey asked what would Jesus have had the good Samaritan do had he "come upon the scene while the robbers were still at their fell work?"²⁶ For Ramsey, whenever a choice must be made between an attacker and an innocent victim, circumstances dictate that the latter is to be preferred—a sort of preferential option for the victim, one might say—so that armed force may be justifiably used against the former, though such force will be employed in accordance with rules formulated to govern it out of respect for the enemy. As Grigoni correctly notes, Ramsey—in contrast to Augustine—permits the use of lethal force for personal self-defense, too. Accordingly, Christian-protectors should be able to assume the responsibility to protect anyone anywhere as citizen-protectors (if no police are present or able to respond in time), and their use of armed force should still be moderate and limited.

Similarly, while I recognize the parallels between Grigoni's Christian-protector interlocutors and the Black tradition of armed defense exhibited by the Deacons for Defense and Justice (DDJ), I am still not persuaded that either of these—descriptively or normatively—fully subscribe or adhere to Ramsey's (or most Roman Catholic and mainline accounts of) just war. Grigoni's account teasing out the differences between his Christian-protector interlocutors and the DDJ seems more on target, especially with regard to how African

²⁵ Other theologians and ethicists have written about how the moral reasoning is similar in just war, just policing, and legitimate defense—whether armed or unarmed. See Tobias Winright, *Serve and Protect: Selected Essays on Just Policing* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020); and "A Just Mining Framework for the Ethics of Extraction of Natural Resources and Integral Peace," in *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining: Integral Peace, Development, and Ecology*, ed. Gerard F. Powers and Caesar A. Montevecchio (London: Routledge, 2022), 95–116. Grigoni notes, too, Paul Ramsey's *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (New York: Association Press, 1961).

²⁶ Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 142–43. See also Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1950, 1993), 165, 169–71; and *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), xvi–xvii.

Americans have had to respond to the “original wound” of slavery and racism, and the violent threats to their lives that are “exponentially more dangerous.” I agree with Grigoni that the just war theory “cannot close the gap between description and norm regarding the place of guns in the United States,” but I would insert the word “alone” at the beginning of that observation. With Grigoni, I recommend more ethnographic and historical research here, as well as engagement with recent scholarship on just war, just revolution, just policing, and just peacemaking/peacebuilding.²⁷

In my view, “Christian Arguments for Gun Violence Prevention: Reflections on Moral Claims in the Context of Advocacy,” by Ellen Ott Marshall, a United Methodist theological ethicist, does us service by providing a critical survey of the Christian moral arguments that arise in gun violence prevention advocacy (“the Presser” and “the PDF”), the main arguments found in Christian activism (sanctity of life, sin of idolatry, a call to nonviolence), and the place of the vigil. At the summit in St. Louis, I witnessed everything she examines and, for my part, I tried (having read her essay, which offers an important corrective on this) to avoid any confusion over vulnerability. To do so, while I highlighted the same three arguments, I added attention to the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, trying “to center those most vulnerable to gun violence in moral reflection,” as Ott Marshall urges. I also made sure I focused on gun violence prevention and reduction—as she recommends, gun reform rather than gun control. I appreciate how Ott Marshall, a pacifist, acknowledges the confusion and reservations Christians, especially people on the margins and truly at risk in US society, may have about nonviolence and vulnerability. I, too, believe that the vigil centers on those actually vulnerable to gun violence, focusing on actual persons and their story. Such vigils are powerful and empowering experiences.

Finally, in “Gun Culture, Free Riding, and Nothing Short of Conversion,” Gerald W. Schlabbach attempts to take “defensive gun culture” and its reasons justifying gun ownership seriously even as he notes how gun ownership tends to do exactly the opposite of what they claim (e.g., instead of protecting family, gun owners are putting their

²⁷ Some that I recommend: Ryan P. Cumming, *The African American Challenge to Just War Theory: A Christian Approach* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013); Therese Feiler, *Logics of War: The Use of Force and the Problem of Mediation* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2020), especially the chapter on Paul Ramsey, 117–149; Anna Floerke Scheid, *Just Revolution: A Christian Ethic of Political Resistance and Social Transformation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015); Gerald W. Schlabbach, ed., *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007); and Eli Sasaran McCarthy, *Becoming Nonviolent Peacemakers: A Virtue Ethic for Catholic Social Teaching and US Policy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012).

families in greater danger of accidental death or suicide; instead of stopping a threat, guns escalate it and intensify the violence). He recognizes that some will nevertheless consider themselves to be exceptions, “whatever the overall statistics regarding the dangers of gun ownership,” what Schlabach calls “the free-rider problem.” This rings true to my experience, including for myself (although at least I had much more training, while in law enforcement, with firearms than most citizens—but police sometimes err, too, of course). Likewise, Schlabach’s recognition that there is “a certain rationality,” albeit “very visceral” regarding supposed threats, seems right to me. Like Ott Marshall he focuses on mitigation rather than elimination of gun violence. Also similar to her, when she emphasizes the formative role of local vigils, he highlights local mobilization efforts to address “the collective-action problem.” Like Ott Marshall and Grigoni, Schlabach concludes by recommending nonviolence and a just peace approach, the latter of which possibly is moving toward a synthesis of the best practices and principles of the pacifist and just war traditions—what I have called an “integral peace” approach.²⁸ At the end of the day, with Schlabach, I worry that “the free-rider problem will persist.” I know that, as a Christian, I should have the virtue of hope, including for the conversion that Schlabach rightly encourages (starting with Christians), but I confess I wrestle with despair about reducing gun violence in the United States, which is one of the reasons why my family and I decided to move to Ireland, where such madness (even if there is a rationality to it) is much less likely to occur.

Before concluding, I wish again to express my gratitude to these contributors. Their articles will inform any further work of mine on this urgent moral problem, and I hope theological ethicists and other scholars find them stimulating and useful. That these articles are available online makes it easier for our peers to gain access to them, which is a good thing.

However, availability and accessibility are not necessarily the same thing when it comes to usefulness for other audiences. In saying this, I have in mind what James F. Keenan, SJ, has referred to as “more public, less academic audiences” in his plenary address on “Impasse and Solidarity in Theological Ethics” at the 2009 annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America in Halifax, Nova

²⁸ Tobias Winright, “Ukraine and the Ethics of War: The Possibility of a Just War,” *Commonweal* 150, no. 5 (May 2023): 24–28. I have suggested this in a number of places in recent years, first doing so in Tobias Winright, “Your ‘Just Peace’ Reading List,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 21, 2016, www.ncronline.org/books/2022/10/your-just-peace-reading-list.

Scotia.²⁹ Especially concerning urgent issues having to do with injustice and the need for solidarity, Keenan counsels theological ethicists “to expand our circle of readers” and “move other audiences to understand within our societies and within our churches the need for an affective solidarity that leads to practices of justice.”³⁰ While acknowledging that doing so may be difficult “when we do not resonate with the public audience” (he notes, e.g., immigration reform and similar issues; obviously, we can add gun violence reduction to the list), he suggests we “develop more embodied, relational, practical, and narrative-based arguments to offer effective ways of addressing impasse in the world, the church, and the academy today.”³¹ Keenan even recommends that “we could learn to write more appealingly not only for others, but even for one another.”³² *At times*—and this may be attributable to my own lack of intellect—*some* of these otherwise fine essays, or portions within them, seemed more abstruse than necessary, at least for me. On this life-and-death matter, accessibility is vital.

The issue of gun violence divides citizens, including Christians, in the United States, and the need for what Keenan encourages of us is great. I urge the contributors here and their professional peers who read these articles to write more about this issue, not only for our discipline, but for undergraduates and seminarians, pastors and politicians, the person in the pew and the person on the street, all the while keeping in view those most vulnerable and thus most in need of gun reform and gun violence reduction. 

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²⁹ James F. Keenan, SJ, “Impasse and Solidarity in Theological Ethics,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 64 (2009): 53, ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/4925.

³⁰ Keenan, “Impasse and Solidarity,” 53.

³¹ Keenan, “Impasse and Solidarity,” 54–55.

³² Keenan, “Impasse and Solidarity,” 55.