

# Though There's Pressure from Church Groups Handgun Control Lacks Government Action

By Religious News Service

"We Americans are, in many respects, an unusually civilized people," says a recent editorial in U.S. Catholic magazine. "But we will never be able to celebrate our emergence from barbarism until we learn to control guns and our far too pervasive love of them."

The editorial in the magazine published by the Claretian Fathers in Chicago reflects generally the attitude of most religious groups.

There are over 150 million guns, maybe as many as 200 million in half the households of America, according to David J. Steinberg, founder and executive director of the National Council for a Responsible Firearms Policy.

Fifty million of these weapons are handguns, with 2.5 million more pouring into society yearly.

"Yet," says Steinberg, "there is no national policy setting minimum standards of personal qualifications for legally possessing this most destructive of personal weapons."

Every year, 250,000 people in the U.S. face a loaded handgun. For over 9,000 it is the last moment of their lives.

Hundreds of thousands of other victims of gun-related violence — deliberate, impulsive, or accidental — are yearly left blinded, deafened, paralyzed, dismembered, or otherwise disabled.

"But these are statistics," says Dr. Richard Duncan, a United Presbyterian minister. "And statistics can become meaningless in discussions of human beings. More to the point are stories of the people who make up the numbers."

Dr. Duncan, who is also executive director of Greater Birmingham (Ala.) Ministries, reported in The Christian Century magazine on a series of cases from the files of the Birmingham police department, cases, he says, that "could come from anyone's

community."

• A six-year-old boy was playing on the front porch of his home. An argument broke out between two men on the street. The subject of the argument was a clothesline pole that had been knocked down. Both men had guns, and they began firing at each other. The little boy tried to get out of the way, but he was too late; he was dead on arrival at University Hospital.

• Charles was arguing with his wife, Pearl. The argument got rather loud. Another man, Harold, heard them and went to help. Harold saw Charles become abusive with Pearl, so he told Charles to stop. Charles went for his .22 caliber pistol. Harold reached for his .32. Harold was faster on the draw. Charles died.

• Two friends, Albert and Gary, both drinking, got into a hassle over Albert's "looking at" Gary's wife. Both men had guns. Gary reached for his .22 caliber stack-barrel pistol. Albert was first with his .38 revolver — duly registered and permit issued. Gary was wounded in the head and died shortly thereafter.

• A man bought himself a .44 caliber pistol as "protection" for his home. That evening while he was loading it, the gun accidentally went off, killing his six-year-old son.

Handguns bought for protection, the record shows, are four times more likely to wind up killing a family member or a close friend than to scare off, wound, or kill an intruder. Only 1 to 2 percent of burglars are ever shot by gun-owning household residents.

The overwhelming number of gun murders, Dr. Duncan points out, are "committed every year by law-abiding citizens who might have continued to be law abiding had they not possessed firearms."

What can be done? Various proposals have been made to get a handle on the problem by homing in on "concealable

death weapons," handguns.

"Handguns used by convicted felons, mentally deranged persons, drug users, and mindless youth out for 'kicks' have power of life and death over all innocent bystanders," says Robert Stuart, a member and former president of the Chicago Crime Commission.

"These are handguns that are easily obtained and for which no one is responsible or accountable," he adds. "This madness is unique to America. The 'body count' averages 24 per day. Not accidents. But murders."

Harris and Gallup polls taken during the past decade have consistently shown that a strong majority — 70 to 80 percent — of Americans favor stricter firearms control, especially handguns. A 60 percent majority also favors strict firearms registration, provided it doesn't include confiscation of their firearms.

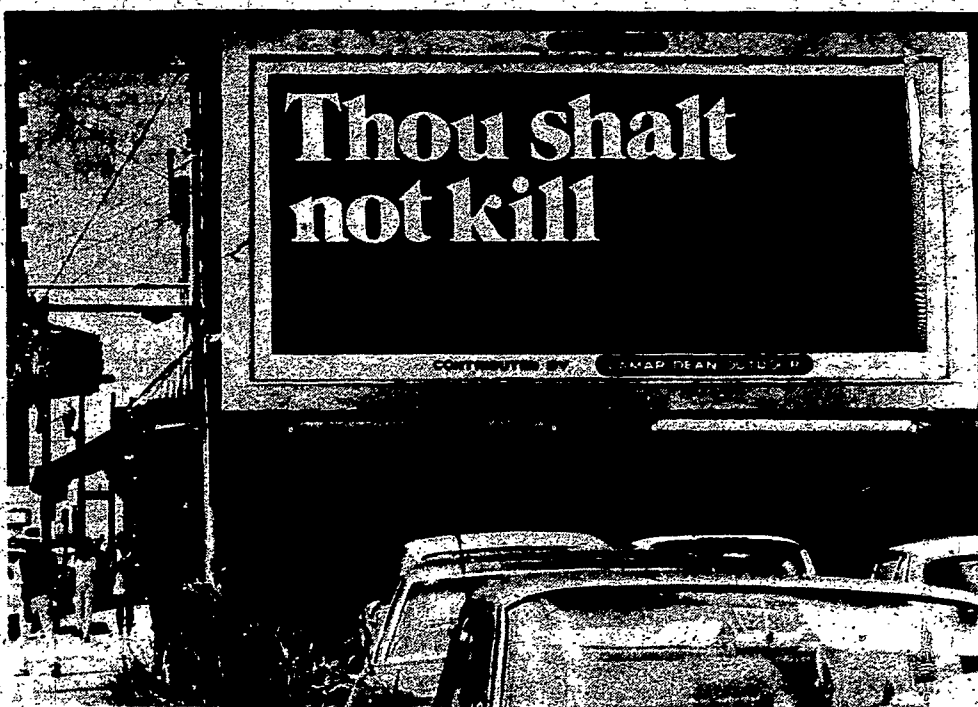
Nevertheless, The Institute for Legislative Action, lobbying arm of the National Rifle Association, claims credit for blocking passage of scores of what the NRA calls "restrictive or prohibitive handgun control bills."

Stuart, who says he thinks "the public demand for handgun control should be converted into an action program," had suggested application of businesslike procedures to the manufacture, sale, and transfer of these "concealable death weapons."

"Industry," he says, "has learned to account for potentially dangerous products in the public interest, and in its own interests. For example, auto manufacturers keep records of customers in case modification or recall is required. And the law requires legal transfer of ownership. Why not equally sensible rules for handguns?"

Federal legislation enacted in 1968 outlawed the importation of the cheap handguns known as "Saturday Night Specials."

Church is that none of us come to the Lord worthy because we have led a good life. Our relationship to Him is not based upon worthiness but upon His love freely given to sinners. The question is not whether we are sinners in ministry but the question is whether or not we are deliberately alienated from Jesus and still assume the ministry. The latter is incompatible with truth while the former is simply a fact of life that we all share. It was a sinful woman whom Jesus allowed to exercise the ministry and ritual of washing His feet and He did not reject her because she was a sinner. Therefore it would have to be an extreme case for you to be involved in any way since this kind of judgment is not ordinarily valid for even those in authority. If Jesus would allow His feet to be washed by a sinful woman, your great reverence and respect for the Holy Eucharist does not preclude the possibility and or the probability of a sinner being a lay distributor. In fact if we had to get all non-sinners as lay distributors we wouldn't have any lay distributors, nor would we have any bishops, priests, lectors or any ministers at all. Liturgy would be impossible.



A billboard dramatizes the need for gun control.

but failed to restrict the flow of gun parts, that has allowed imported pistol parts to be easily assembled and sold.

Calling for a total ban on Saturday Night Specials, Stuart described the banning on importation of the pistols but not their parts "foolishness."

"It makes no difference to the victim of a 'Saturday Night Special' if it is assembled abroad or here," he observes.

Other recommendations for the control of handguns have been offered.

New York's Governor Hugh Carey, citing recent "intolerable assaults on law enforcement officers," has called for gun control laws that would impose for the first time in the state mandatory prison sentences for the possession or sale of unregistered handguns.

In the first two months of the year, six New York City police officers were shot, two of them fatally.

Since 1978 in New York City, 14 police officers have been killed and 53 others wounded by gunfire; there have been more than 150 further incidents in which policemen were fired upon but not hit.

One-year mandatory minimum sentences for carrying a gun without a license outside of home or place of business have been a feature of Massachusetts law since 1975. The incidence of gun-related felonies has

markedly declined in the Bay State.

"Gun control, however," says National Council for a Responsible Firearms Policy director David Steinberg, "isn't the only answer to deliberate crime with guns, or to crimes of passion, or tragic accidents. But it is indispensable to the answers

that urgently need to be found.

"Maybe we can't prevent impulsive killings or accidental ones, or other kinds of gun violence that have become so common.

"But we can minimize this man-made plague. We sure better try."

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Fr. Louis J. Hohman



The Open Window

## Sinful Ministers

Dear Father Hohman,

"Judge not that ye may be judged" and "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" notwithstanding, I have lately been troubled by something which I would like to present to you for comment.

I have always had a great reverence and respect for the Holy Eucharist. Since lay distributors have come into being, I have noted that most of these people are of good faith and share this reverence and respect. However, on a few occasions I have known of people of questionable background being given this great honor, but this was only hearsay on my part.

It has come to my attention that a person whom I know to

be of unstable psychological and moral values has recently become a lay distributor.

In your opinion, Father, what, if any, is my obligation in this matter?

(Signed) M.T.

Dear M.T.,

Your obligation in the matter is nothing at all unless the following are verifiable: 1. You know for an absolute fact that the person has disqualified himself-herself by behavior which places that person in alienation with the teachings and the person of Jesus Christ. 2. You are reasonably certain that the people who appointed this person to the ministry have this knowledge hidden from them. If either one of these facts is not verifiable then you have no obligation whatsoever.

One of the most difficult things we have to teach in the

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