**2021, November Reflections Vol 44 No 2**

**Gun Violence: Spiritual Perspectives**

**James J. Bacik**

 Gun violence in the United States continues to be a confounding, distinctly American problem, with social, cultural, moral and spiritual ramifications. In 2020 more than 19,000 Americans died from firearms, the highest number in decades, and 2021 is on pace to be even worse. Experts attribute this upsurge to a number of factors, including a large increase in gun sales and ownership and frayed relationships between police and the neighborhoods they serve.

The pandemic has intensified common problems: for example, economic, health, and education inequality; family tensions; interpersonal disputes; and mental health issues. The Covid crisis forced some cities to suspend programs that provided young people with recreational activities, job training and healthy personal interactions.

 Underneath these psychological and sociological problems, we can detect a set of spiritual issues. In broad secular terms, “spirituality” points to the human quest for meaning in the midst of absurdity; for purpose in an often aimless world; for personal identity in a fragmented culture; for justice in an unjust society; and for hope in a life threatened by limited options, constant stress and general anxiety. Individuals who lack meaning, purpose, identify, equity and especially hope are much more prone to violence than others blessed with these gifts.

Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who has worked with gang members in East Los Angeles since 1986, put in a lot of effort getting to know gang leaders and forging truces between rival gangs, which worked for a time but often fell apart. Over time, he came to identify a deeper problem affecting gang members, which he called a “lethal absence of hope,” an inability to imagine a better future for themselves. This insight led him to create a program, *Jobs for a Future*, facilitating employment for gang members who wanted jobs. When potential employers proved reluctant to hire felons, the organization purchased a run-down warehouse across the street from the parish and turned it into the Homeboy Bakery, which provided jobs for gang members in the hope they would learn job skills preparing them for permanent employment. This humble beginning evolved into Homeboy Industries, that eventually included a Café and Catering service, a Farmer’s Market, a Diner at City Hall, a Silkscreen operation and a Tattoo Removal business. The motto for Homeboy Industries is “the best defense against a bullet is a job,” prominently displayed on their garb.

 Today Homeboy Industries describes itself as “the largest gang rehabilitation and reentry program in the world.” They support previously incarcerated men and women, helping them become contributing members of society. They provide many services: individual therapy with licensed professionals; anger management seminars; legal advice; classes for young parents; classes for earning a GED and preparing for college; twelve step programs for various addictions. During an average month, Homeboy Industries serves around 1,000 former gang members and inmates. Through their various programs, they have helped thousands of young people rise above their circumstances, gain self-confidence, get jobs and become productive citizens.

 The notion that “absence of hope” is lethal points to a deep truth about human nature and a root cause of gun violence. Young men who join gangs typically think they will either die violently on the street or will end up in prison. The human capacity to envision a better future is threatened by a whole list of persistent evils: wars, human trafficking, torture, sexism, racism, addictions, and well-publicized gun violence. Individuals express their feelings of hopelessness in various ways: I feel trapped, boxed in with no way out; I feel helpless; my problems are too big to handle; my enemies are too powerful; my struggles are endless; my anxiety is deep but hard to identify; I have no more energy for the fight and feel like giving up; I am confused, unable to make sense of life. The experience of hopelessness takes many forms, but all can be lethal.

 About 60% of gun deaths in the U.S. are suicides. Psychologists distinguish three different causes: biological factors, including physical and mental illness; social factors, such as economic hardships and work stress; and psychological factors, especially hopelessness. Over half of all suicide deaths involve a firearm. Most suicide attempts are impulsive efforts to deal with panic or depression, and the ready availability of guns means attempts are more likely to be lethal.

 Homicides account for about one-third of all gun deaths, and nearly three-fourths of all homicides are committed with firearms. Individuals who get involved in gun violence typically have personally suffered abuse in their youth and have been traumatized by living in violent environments. These factors make it hard to develop the fundamental trust needed to maintain hope.

 Modern psychology provides us with helpful resources for understanding and developing hope. For example, the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (1902-1994) emphasized the importance of achieving fundamental trust as a basis for healthy growth and a hopeful outlook that our deepest desires are attainable. The psychologist Karl Menninger (1893-1990) thought hope was a necessity for normal life and the major weapon against the suicide impulse. In his 1968 book *The Crime of* *Punishment*, he argued that psychotherapy could help prevent crimes and could rehabilitate criminals. The American psychologist Charles (CR) Snyder (1944-2006), who taught at the University of Kansas, pioneered the field known as “positive psychology,” and helped popularize “hope theory,” especially through his influential book, *The Psychology of Hope:* *You Can Get There from Here.* Hopeful persons have the ability to envision concrete goals; they have the energy and motivation to pursue them; and they find effective pathways to achieve them. Hope can be diminished or destroyed by neglect, abuse, unrealistic expectations, and inconsistent parenting. Snyder contends that it is possible to help troubled individuals envision goals, find energy to pursue them and develop strategies to achieve them. Some of his followers have added the importance of supportive communities in actually following this three-fold path to genuine human hope.

 Rollo May (1909-1994), commonly known as an existential or humanistic psychologist emphasized the importance of imagining a better future in overcoming hopelessness. His book *Love and Will* is especially helpful in developing a hopeful approach to life.

 The world religions have been a major source of the hope that has inspired and sustained human beings throughout recorded history. Christianity, for example, views the Bible not only as a series of revelatory manifestations of God, as we commonly do, but also as a story of hope based on God’s fidelity to the divine promises. The Hebrew scriptures portray God making specific promises to significant persons: Noah, I will not destroy the earth by flood; Abraham, I will make your descendants a great nation; Moses, I will remain forever faithful to my covenant with Israel; Isaiah, I will send a Messiah to save my people. Israel saw time and history as a linear process guided by God moving toward a final fulfillment, a source of ultimate hope.

 The New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the divine promises made in the Old or First Testament. He is the new Moses who gives us the new law uniting love of God and love of neighbor, the new David who reigns forever, the promised Messiah who saves all people. For Christians, the resurrection of the crucified Christ is the fulfillment of all the previous divine promises and the pledge of the final victory of God’s grace over all the evil forces. Our hope that Christ will one day complete his saving work at the end time grounds our ability to see hopeful signs of his presence in our everyday lives. In turn, when life is depressing, thoughts of a final fulfillment can help us to persevere in the journey. The Christian faith is a powerful corrective to the “lethal absence of hope” behind so much gun violence.

 We are all called to do our part to help reduce gun violence: for example, being attentive to relatives and friends who are troubled and might be suicidal; supporting reasonable gun control laws, such as background checks and banning the sale of high-capacity magazines; urging legislators to engage in civil discourse on this divisive issue; encouraging parishes to do more to welcome troubled individuals and to promote equity and justice for marginalized groups; and praying for both victims and perpetrators.