

# Time for action on gun violence

Just three months ago, I wrote an editorial, “It’s time to talk about gun violence.” That column focused on the exceptional year for homicides in Baltimore City. Exceptional, but not in a good way. We ended with 343 murders, the deadliest year per capita in the city’s history.

Since that time, we celebrated a 12-day stretch with no homicides in the city. A new police commissioner has been named with the goal of reducing crime and violence more quickly.

Sadly, in the days since that editorial was published, we have seen another mass shooting. A 19-year-old former student admitted to killing 17 and injuring more than a dozen in a Feb. 14 terror spree at a high school in Parkland, Fla.

It would have been naïve to have expected a resolution to this ongoing crisis in just three months, but it is disappointing that no progress has been made.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church discusses human dignity and freedom: “Freedom characterizes properly human acts. It makes the human being responsible for acts of which he is the voluntary agent. His deliberate acts properly belong to him. The imputability or responsibility for an action can be diminished or nullified by ignorance, duress, fear, and other psychological or social factors” (CCC 1745-1746).

Those who act – whether for evil, by committing violent acts, or for good, by enacting laws or regulations that diminish violent acts – must be responsible for their own actions.

Ignorance can mitigate responsibility for action (or inaction), but the accused shooter was not ignorant of the results of his actions; he reportedly aspired to be “a professional school shooter.”

And our elected officials cannot claim ignorance. They see the same news reports we do about Parkland, and Sutherland Springs and Las Vegas. In fact, they have access to more information than we do from law enforcement and other agencies. But they don’t have access to good research about gun violence as a public health problem,

because in 1996, according to the Atlantic, “Congress passed an amendment to a spending bill that forbade the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from using money to ‘advocate or promote gun control.’”

The Atlantic also said, “The National Rifle Association had pushed for the amendment, after public-health researchers produced a spate of studies suggesting that, for example, having a gun in the house increased risk of homicide and suicide.”

Many suggestions are offered in the days following a major shooting. One of the most compelling I have seen likens the responsibility of gun ownership to that of owning and driving an automobile: In this scenario, gun owners would be required to have training, pass a certification test on a regular basis and would be required to have insurance governing the use of a gun, much the same as car owners do.

It’s an imperfect analogy, since the right to bear arms is enshrined in the Constitution, whereas the right to own and drive a car is not (it hadn’t been invented at the time). And even with such regulations, people violate traffic laws, or drive without a license or insurance. But training, licensing and insurance “make the human being responsible for acts of which he is the voluntary agent.” Why couldn’t that work for guns as well?

As Catholics, we know we can be part of a solution, but our civic leaders must take a leading role in making changes in legislation. “Thoughts and prayers” are an appropriate, initial, compassionate response to any tragedy, including the death of innocents at a concert, church or school. But a solution requires action. And the time for action is now.