

# Pax Christi Little Rock serves ‘saints on the border’

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Seven members of Pax Christi in Little Rock recently traveled to El Paso to participate in a six-day border immersion program called The Encuentro Project.

Dr. Sherry Simon, a parishioner of Christ the King Church in Little Rock and chairwoman of Pax Christi USA, said the group spent the trip speaking with individuals at the border, participating in educational training seminars and serving the most vulnerable populations.

“We went to four different seminars every day,” Simon said. “One of the days, we went to Juarez (Mexico), and while we were there, we visited one of the churches that was just on the other side of the border. We heard a lot from the priest there ... as well as a woman who lived there, about the experience of the refugees — the brutality of the police, the poverty, everything. The Catholic Church has really done a beautiful job of working so hard over there to support the refugees who ... are just waiting there to come to the country...”

After several days of educational seminars and hearing the stories of refugees at the border, Pax Christi also had an opportunity to put their newfound skills to use and serve those in need.

“The last two days we spent working in a refugee center in El Paso called Casa Papa Francisco, and that was very educational. The task they put before us ... was to shop for the food, cook the food and serve the food for Casa Papa Francisco refugees. ... That was eye-opening.”

In the summer of 2023, Pax Christi members took their first mission trip to the border with the focus of volunteering every day. Simon said this year's trip was "much more intensive."

"We just got so much education," she said. "This Encuentro Project is an incredible group that was started by Sacred Heart Church in El Paso ... on this particular trip, I met saints at the border. The saints who are helping, as well as the people who are coming over, because we had a lot more opportunity to talk with the refugees themselves as well as the Catholic sisters. Their presence made a huge difference to us this time."

Pax Christi Little Rock president Mary Hunt, a member of Christ the King Church in Little Rock, said the Oct. 22-27 trip was "emotional and educational."

"I am filled with admiration for the amazing angels and saints on this earth who serve the needs of immigrants," she said. "We also met refugees and heard their firsthand stories of the horrendous situations that they are escaping. My heart hurts for them and from learning just how much our U.S. government laws and procedures are creating unnecessary blocks to welcoming these talented, hardworking and loving people."

"It upsets me when I hear the lies about how the majority of immigrants are dangerous. El Paso, with their high level of immigrants, is the fifth safest big city in the U.S. The border is not open — in fact, there are so few immigrants crossing this year that the shelter at Sacred Heart Catholic Church was able to close."

Pax Christi members joining the trip to the border were other Christ the King parishioners, Dr. George Simon, husband of Dr. Sherry Simon, Jan Pipkin and Isabel Adam as well as Phyllis Baltz, a member of St. Mary Church in Hot Springs, and Ann Lassiter, a member of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Raleigh, N.C., formerly of Little Rock.

The Pax Christi members spoke with many individuals, not just those in need of help, but those serving others, so they would be better equipped to carry on their mission as an organization, even after returning home.

"Our goal in going wasn't just to grow ourselves, but our goal is to take this information back to folks here," Sherry said. "We're making a PowerPoint, and we already have a plan to share it with all of the Pax Christi chapters in the state of Texas on Nov. 20, and we're going to share it with our own people."

Hunt said the trip allowed her to learn more about Catholic Social Teaching and about how "we as Catholics can be part of the solution in welcoming our neighbors in need."

"Hopefully, spreading our first-hand knowledge will help counteract the paranoia spread by some information channels," Hunt said.

Simon said she was moved by the number of individuals willing to help those who had little to nothing, and that the experience moved many people to have a change of heart.

"... That's what we found throughout our visit — people coming together, definitely Catholics, but everyone — coming together to help these migrants who have no support..." Simon said. "The majority of folks coming over are families who are fleeing terrible situations, economic situations, situations of violence and persecution and disaster ... who are trying to find a place to raise their children. ... I'll tell you what happens when you go over there. You change. What

we found was when we walk with these folks at the border, when we walk with our neighbors, our hearts change and we realize the importance of helping one another, not turning people away. ”

For more information on Pax Christi Little Rock, visit [paxchristilittlerock.org/](http://paxchristilittlerock.org/). For more information on the Encuentro Project, visit [encuentroproject.org](http://encuentroproject.org).

**CORRECTION:** *The original publication of this article stated 11 Arkansas Catholics were working on this project. This online version has been corrected.*

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## Gun violence through pro-life, moral lens

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |





When Jesus was arrested, Peter took action. In a show of force, he drew his sword and cut off the high priest's slave's ear. Instead of instructing his other disciples to do the same, Jesus rebuked Peter: "Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?" (John 18:10-11)

This moment was a lesson in nonviolence before Jesus' brutal death. As early Christian author Tertullian said, "In disarming Peter, Christ disarms all Christians."

This, and all of Jesus' teachings of nonviolence, provide a roadmap for the faithful to behave responsibly in the face of an aggressor and with weapons.

So far this year, the United States has experienced more than 385 mass shootings — defined as four or more people shot during a single incident — and at least 11,598 people have died from gun violence, according to a Sept. 5 *ABC News* article.

Gun violence is the leading cause of death in the country for children and youth, with two-thirds of those deaths resulting from suicide, making it one of the most relevant pro-life issues today.

For Catholics, looking at the issue of guns and gun violence through a moral lens versus a solely political one can provide a clear vision for a consistent ethic of life.

"I think so many things in our world are polarizing today. I think that people falsely think that we need to divide ourselves into the camps of Republican, Democrat, liberal, conservative. I don't think we do. We're Catholic first. That's not to say we can't be politically active, but I think our political climate has a lot to do with why so many things are polarizing," said Catherine Phillips, respect life director of the Diocese of Little Rock. "Something that kills is a pro-life issue, whether it's abortion or euthanasia or often when we talk about gun violence, we're talking about murder. Sometimes it's war on a broader scale. But more than that, it is an issue of human dignity. When it's mental health issues, poverty, issues of community instability, forced migration, we're talking about times when people are often marginalized and then we talk about people being wounded or killed by guns."

## **Church teaching**

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, references to violence are listed under the fifth commandment, "You shall not kill," including the production and sale of arms and self-defense.

In January 2020, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a document, "Backgrounder on Gun Violence: A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence," which stated in part, "The Church has been a consistent voice for the promotion of peace at home and around the world, and a strong advocate for the reasonable regulation of firearms."

The USCCB's advocacy for gun policy includes:

- A total ban on assault weapons
- Universal background checks and increased regulations and limitations for gun purchases
- Limits on civilian access to high-capacity weapons and ammunitions

- Supporting a federal law for criminalizing gun trafficking
- Improving access and more resources for mental health care and early interventions
- Steps to make guns safer, including locks preventing children and anyone other than the owner from using a gun without permission or supervision
- Assessing the toll that violent images and experiences on people, specifically youth.

Father Stephen Gadberry, pastor of St. Theresa Church in Little Rock, said the Church's stance has never been about stripping away guns from responsible owners.

"As with all things that we've been entrusted and given stewardship of, we have a responsibility to be educated in its proper use. Whenever we're not properly educated and prepared to use it for its proper end, people suffer," he said. "That could be weapons, that could be medicine that's manipulated. That could be sex that's used for the wrong reasons. So anything that God has given us and that humans have developed that's not used to its proper end goes against God's plan."

Growing up in Wynne, Father Gadberry first shot a gun around 7 years old.

"From the very beginning, I was told there was a proper time and place to use them, and only with adults around, and only with the proper permissions," he said.

He served in the U.S. Air Force from 2005 to 2007. For almost a decade, he's hunted whitetail deer, elk and bear, most often with archery, but he also owns hunting rifles.

"Weapons and firearms are a part of this whole world we live in. In themselves, they're not morally evil. Their improper use can be evil," he said.

As a priest, veteran and hunter, he explained common sense gun legislation goes back to promoting better education around proper gun use.

"I am in favor of some more laws when it comes to acquiring guns, not to make it so much more difficult for law-abiding citizens, but to have systems in place to better know who's getting weapons," Father Gadberry said.

### **A pro-life issue**

In 2023, there were 46,728 gun-related deaths, the third highest ever recorded in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The statistics include murders, suicides, accidental deaths and law enforcement-related deaths.

The Church promotes a consistent ethic of life, which means protecting life from the womb to the tomb, including speaking out against abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty and gun violence. However, abortion often eclipses other pro-life issues. Phillips explained it is not an "either-or" conversation but a "both-and" for the faithful.

"Murder of a human is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person (catechism, no. 2320). When we're talking about pro-life, it's important not merely to be anti-abortion. ... If we stop recognizing human dignity in one instance, we're on the slippery slope," she said. "Lives lost to gun violence are just as precious as lives lost in the womb."

Dr. Sherry Simon, founder and past president of the Catholic peace and social justice nonprofit Pax Christi Little Rock, serves as chair of the Pax Christi USA National Council and co-founded the Pax Christi USA gun violence prevention working group about a year and a half ago. They promote local gun violence prevention work and provide education and webinars.

In Arkansas, Pax Christi Little Rock hosted Anna Morshedi, who leads the Little Rock chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.

Simon said there's been a plague of false propaganda messaging from gun lobbies.

"Most folks are looking for common sense gun laws, just like we have to have a license to drive a car and have to learn to drive a car. Five percent of the world's population is in this country, but we own half of the world's guns.

"As you know, we have the most deaths from guns by many times (the gun homicide rate is 26 times higher than other high-income countries in the world). That correlates," Simon said, adding, "The more you get to know the nonviolent Jesus, the promotion of no regulations of gun use and the amount of gun violence in our country is not a pro-life consistent ethic of life."

Simon said Catholics can help change the trajectory of gun violence in the U.S.

"There's a lot of silence from the pulpit," she said, adding, "If I were a priest, I wouldn't want to make a lot of my congregation unhappy. But I do think, number one, the education needs to come not only from the pulpit, but there can be committees in different parishes on gun violence."

## **Resources for Catholics**

There are many resources for Catholics to look to when it comes to understanding guns, gun violence and our responsibility as a society. Father Stephen Gadberrry, Catherine Phillips and Sherry Simon shared notable resources for the faithful to learn more.

- Biblical references: Genesis 1 and 2 about the stewardship of creation; the Psalms
- USCCB's "Backgrounder on Gun Violence: A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence."
- Pax Christi USA gun violence prevention: [paxchristiusa.org/gun-violence-prevention](https://paxchristiusa.org/gun-violence-prevention)
- Michigan Catholic Conference "Focus" article, "Responding to Gun Safety Reform Objections" [micatholic.org/advocacy/news-room/focus/2023/a-catholic-response-to-gun-violence/responding-to-gun-safety-reform-objections/](https://micatholic.org/advocacy/news-room/focus/2023/a-catholic-response-to-gun-violence/responding-to-gun-safety-reform-objections/)
- Book, "Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence," by Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin
- Nonprofit, Every Town for Gun Safety, [everytown.org](https://everytown.org)
- Pax Christi Little Rock presentation on Moms Demand Action "How to End Gun Violence in America" [youtube.com/watch?v=46dsAMNL4es](https://youtube.com/watch?v=46dsAMNL4es)