

AROUND THE ARCHDIOCESE

Church and community groups must infuse love into a culture of gun violence, say panelists

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WASHINGTON • During a January 29 plenary session at the 2023 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, MSpS, of San Antonio made an impassioned plea to treat all people with dignity, calling gun violence a pro-life issue.

"It's hard to reconcile life with guns," said Archbishop Gustavo, amid clapping from the attendees. "Only love saves. Only love protects. No guns. Those weapons that we use in war. We are killing each other for no reason!"

During the plenary, titled "Nurturing Tomorrow's Hope and Building Peace by Healing Today's Pain," long-standing partners COPS/Metro and the Archdiocese of San Antonio were held up as examples of how community organizations and local dioceses can work together, highlighting their response to the tragedy of May 24, 2022, when a mass shooter killed 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde.

The archbishop recalled how he went to the hospital in Uvalde and then to a civic center, where parents were waiting for news of their children. "People didn't know if their child was alive or not," Archbishop Gustavo said. "There was a pain in everybody. It was a very dark, dark pain."

"People needed a space to try and make sense of it," said Josephine Lopez Paul, COPS/Metro lead organizer. Lopez Paul and other members of COPS/Metro, an affiliate organization of the Industrial Areas Foundation located about an hour away from Uvalde, headed there and started doing spontaneous house meetings and holding conversations in the streets.

Archbishop Gustavo met a man whose wife had been killed at the elementary school. Some days later, he learned the man had died from a heart attack. He contacted the family and talked to the couple's four children. He asked them if they had talked about what had happened. They had not. So, he asked the older sibling to share what was in his heart and mind with his siblings. "I was there in silence for an hour and a half, and the four of them were talking about their parents' dreams for them."

With raw emotion, Archbishop Gustavo decried an increasing "environment of death in our society."

"If we don't find ways to infuse love, care and compassion, then of course, in a culture of death, a

NOTES: For information on the USCCB's stance on gun violence, go to <https://www.usccb.org/resources/backgrounder-gun-violence-mercy-and-peacebuilding-approach-gun-violence-january-2020>
For more information on CCHD, go to usccb.org/cchd

gun (can be seen as) a solution," he said. "You feel safe with your gun. Instead of knowing that you are safe because you are a person of integrity and have a right to live."

Archbishop Gustavo stressed that gun violence is a pro-life issue. "Every person has the right to life from beginning to end. And to live with dignity."

Lopez Paul said that the response to Uvalde is an example of why people need church and community organizations' collaboration. "The church became a place for people to come together, to be present with one another through the Eucharist, which was vital in those days," she said.

Yet, she added, prayers and conversations need to lead to action. "The Holy Father also says that hope has to be organized," she said, referencing a recent visit COPS/Metro had with Pope Francis. "We need the church; we also need political action that can resolve this situation. So, it's both-and."

Archbishop Gustavo added that when he spent Thanksgiving Day visiting the community of Uvalde, there was great sadness and isolation because there was no leadership organization. "They didn't know what to do. They know they have a place for the prayer, but they needed to be organized," he said. "They need help to start putting the dots together themselves. It has to come from them, but with support."

As people begin processing the pain, Lopez Paul explained, they need institutions to help them. She previously provided aid as an organizer after a shooting in Dallas and after another mass shooting in El Paso, where 23 people were killed at a Walmart in 2019.

"What I've learned is that people need public institutions to be able to work together and share with one another their pains, their hopes, their angers. And then that freedom of imagination and the Holy Spirit will move them to figure out what it is that they do next," she said. "And the leaders in Uvalde and in any given community, they have the



Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, MSpS, and Josephine Lopez Paul, COPS/Metro lead organizer, speak at the recent Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington.

answer to their own situation."

Since it started its work in 1973 with a papal blessing by Pope St. Paul VI, COPS/Metro (formerly Communities Organized for Public Service, or COPS, and the Metro Alliance) has organized within the Archdiocese of San Antonio to empower people to address pressing issues in their communities, such as infrastructure needs, job training, housing, immigration and gun violence.

During the plenary – which was sponsored by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. bishops' domestic anti-poverty initiative – Archbishop Gustavo said that these relationships start with a foundation of "humility to accept the expertise and the knowledge of organizations that know how to mobilize people; how to work with the people in our communities."

Lopez Paul said that through the years of committed service of COPS/Metro, an organization funded by a CCHD grant, community members in San Antonio know they have the agency to make a difference. She added that the relationship of trust built with the archdiocese and CCHD have been crucial to shape transformative work in the community.

After Uvalde, COPS/Metro met with local officials to learn the plan in case another tragedy occurred. "We have to have those relationships. We can't wait until a shooting happens," she said.

COPS/Metro also has met with judges and is working with officials to "get guns out of the hands of domestic violence offenders" and get sensible gun laws passed.

"We're getting organized around it, at the local and state levels," said Lopez Paul. "But it takes, again, both of us, the church and the community organizations, working together to create the world we want our kids to inherit."

Lopez Paul encouraged "every community, large, small, urban, rural" to organize themselves so that they make significant change.

Archbishop Gustavo also talked about the importance of showing up for matters that concern the community. "It is what Jesus invited us to do. No one should be forgotten, discarded, or broken," he said. "Everyone is precious."