

What next? El Paso faith community shares stories of fear and anger in shooting aftermath

By J.D. Long-García August 06, 2019

The Rev. Pablo Matta was one of a number of priests who visited El Paso hospitals in the hours after a gunman with a high-powered rifle opened fire Aug. 3 in a Walmart massacre that took 22 lives. Investigators believe the assailant was motivated by anti-immigrant sentiments, the Associated Press [reports](#).

“I saw a lot of the people that died,” Father Matta said. There was a lot of security at the hospital, he said, and people were in a state of shock. Father Matta met a woman at one hospital who was there with her husband, who had been shot. Her son had also been shot but was at a different hospital.

“You could see it on her face that things weren’t registering,” Father Matta said. “She was torn. She didn’t know where to go.” Her husband died, but Father Matta said he was conscious when he was given last rites.

The priest also visited a 90-year-old woman whose 90-year-old husband was killed. “I’m to pray with you,” he said to her as she woke up.

“My husband is dead!” she cried to him in Spanish. “I saw him get shot.”

“Why would anyone want to shoot a 90-year-old couple?” Father Matta said.

This question and countless others haunt the mourning community of El Paso, Tex.

“Why is this happening?” Dolores DeAvila said of the shooting. “We’re a largely Hispanic community, but all of us—Anglo, Hispanic, Black—we all get along. We have been known as [one of the safest cities in the nation](#).”

The Sunday after the shooting, Mass at St. John Paul II Church began with candles representing the victims, Ms. DeAvila said. Instead of saying good morning, parishioners were encouraged to give each other hugs.

“There’s a lot of grief,” she said. Ms. DeAvila, a leader with El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization/Border Interfaith, has spoken with many who lost loved ones in the shooting or were in



the vicinity. She described the panic that ensued in nearby restaurants, including one where people hid in a walk-in cooler. “We say we’re prepared [for a mass shooting], but we’re not,” she said.

[EPISO/Border Interfaith](#) is organizing a community event on Aug. 8 at St. Paul Church, where Father Matta is pastor. In addition to fear, Ms. DeAvila said there is a lot of anger around assault weapons.

“This is a community that was attacked and they understand that,” Joe Rubio, director of the West/Southwest Industrial Area Foundation, a network of community organizations, said of the attack.

“There is incredible grief, and it’s starting to turn into anger. People are starting to look for someone to blame for this,” Mr. Rubio said. “The church can take part in helping to shape people’s reaction to this. Not just by having a vigil, but in a way people can create public accountability for who bears responsibility for unleashing this kind of destruction and hate.”

Mr. Rubio believes there should be an organized response supporting restrictions on assault rifles and background checks for individuals seeking to purchase firearms. “There’s a prophetic role for the church to play in this conversation,” he said. “We’re going to either proactively save people or they’re going to pay with their lives.”

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, agreed that steps need to be taken to address gun control, but he said the focus needs to be on racism. “Latinos in this community have a target on their backs,” he said.

On the day of the shooting, where children were in Walmart for back-to-school shopping, Mr. Corbett said his children, who identify as Latinos, were doing the same thing at a different store.

Mr. Corbett said he did not know what to make of President Trump’s scheduled visit to El Paso this week. “I cannot imagine how he would consider that appropriate right now,” he said. “We need a leader that brings people together. We don’t have that.”

The shootings are “the fruit of those seeds of hatred” that have been a part of Mr. Trump’s rhetoric surrounding immigration, he said. “This was a human sacrifice to the god of xenophobia.”

Michael Okińczyc-Cruz, executive director of [the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership](#), said the shootings require the nation to admit it “has never truly healed from the evil of racism.”

“The racially motivated murder of Mexican Americans and several Mexican nationals this past weekend in El Paso is another visceral and devastating example of the perpetual power and force of the ideology of white supremacy that continues to warp the minds, spirits and hearts of many white young men,” he said in an email to **America**.

Mr. Okińczyc-Cruz, who works through racial tensions in the Chicago area, said Christians are called to “love our enemies” and resist a debate that pits one side against the other. “True love demands courage, solidarity, honesty and risk,” he said. “It also requires us to face the demons of our nation’s past and present, to call forth the depths of courage and moral strength within each of us, to work together for a fundamental moral reform that our nation urgently requires, to face our enemies even during the most terrorizing of times and to seek the conversion of their hearts and spirits.”