

Archbishop offers prayers in wake of Nova Scotia killing rampage

With the death toll at 19 and climbing from the largest mass shooting in Canadian history, Halifax-Yarmouth Archbishop Anthony Mancini has offered condolences to the families of those killed in a weekend rampage, particularly the family of RCMP Constable Heidi Stevenson.

"Her death in the line of duty indicates the highest sacrifice that one can make on behalf of the citizens she served," Mancini said in a letter issued April 20 after the killings in Nova Scotia.

"Our prayers go out to all the members of her family, particularly her children, and to the fellow officers of her RCMP family, who mourn the loss of her life."

✘ Stevenson was the first victim of the weekend shooting identified by the RCMP. She was a 23-year veteran of policing with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the mother of two and wife of teacher Dean Stevenson.

The archbishop sought to extend a word of hope to all Nova Scotians.

"Such a tragic event, involving the meaningless death of so many of our fellow citizens, has shocked us all," he said. "Adding more collective suffering to an already tragic time in our province, our country and our personal lives.

"I offer my deepest sympathies to the families and friends of all the victims and pray that they find some consolation in the expressions of love and caring being shown them in their time of sadness and grief."

Recalling that Easter is still upon us, Mancini urged Nova Scotians to remember "that life carries on beyond death."

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith, who was born and raised in Halifax, also offered his condolences.

"Like everyone else, I was stunned to hear the news of this unspeakable tragedy," Archbishop Smith said in a statement. "My heart breaks for the families who had their loved ones taken from them. My prayers are with them, as well as for the law enforcement officials who now have to probe into this terrible incident even as they mourn the loss of one of their colleagues. Mass will be offered for the repose of the souls of those who were killed."

Canada's deadliest-ever mass shooting began in the beachside village of

Portapique, Nova Scotia, about an hour-and-a-half north of Halifax and an hour south of Sackville, N.B. The suspect in the shootings owned two properties there.

Police received calls about shots fired about 10 p.m. April 18. Witnesses said the gunman set fire to his house and several buildings on the property. Apparently dressed as an RCMP officer and driving a car painted to look like an RCMP cruiser, the shooter began seeking victims among his acquaintances in the area.

By 9 a.m. April 19 the RCMP had identified their suspect publicly, posted his picture on social media and warned people to stay in their homes with the doors locked. At some point that morning the man abandoned his fake police car and began driving a silver Chevrolet Tracker SUV.

The burned out remains of the fake cop car were found in Shubenacadie, N.S.

Police exchanged fire with the suspect at an Irving Big Stop gas station in Enfield, an hour south of Portapique on Highway 102. They said the suspect died. He had shot people in several locations in Nova Scotia, the RCMP told a briefing. There were 16 crime scenes identified.

The death count rose to 19 on April 20, with warnings that the total was still not definitive.

RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki said there was no indication at this time that the killings were terrorism-related. Police said there was no apparent link between the gunman and at least some of his victims. They said they had no idea what his motivation might have been.

Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil decried what he called senseless act of violence.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his government would help Nova Scotians "as they heal from this tragedy."

-With files from Grandin Media