Opinion
Guest Voices



Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker addresses the 2023 graduating class at Georgia Institute of Technology's commencement ceremonies. He delivered the 2024 commencement address at Benedictine College, a Catholic school in Atchison, Kansas, on May 11. (OSV News/Courtesy Georgia Institute of Technology)



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Harrison Butker, outspoken Catholic and kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs, has built an online community of hundreds of thousands of followers. His Instagram feed is a catalog of designer suits captioned with Scripture verses. This platform has made him a sought-after commencement speaker, addressing alma mater Georgia Tech last year and Benedictine College May 11.

One of Butker's favorite phrases is "stay in your lane." It was a recurring theme of his now-viral speech, at the Catholic college in Atchison, Kansas, and it produces an intense irony.

The Kansas City, Missouri, football player opens his address with firm condemnation of "bad leaders who don't stay in their lane." His criticism quickly extends from President Joe Biden — whom he does not name but calls "delusional" — into a dressing down of all church leadership, particularly the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

His concern with America's political leaders is their "bad policy." He explicitly names abortion, surrogacy, IVF and euthanasia as issues of note. He refers more generally to the notion of "degenerate" values propagated by "the media." His use of the phrase "pervasiveness of disorder" is a clear nod to the catechism's use of the word "disordered" in a section on homosexuality. He mentions "dangerous gender ideology" as well.

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However, Butker sees the government's response to COVID-19 as the most obvious overlap between secular and religious leadership failings. He repeatedly alludes to the refusal of many U.S. bishops to continue in-person Masses during the pandemic.

According to Butker, this communicates weakness and that "the sacraments don't matter." As such, he suggests, clergy generally lack public authority because they are too afraid and too content. The average clergyman, according to Butker, is too reliant upon lay leadership while pridefully pursuing "adulation." Don't they know that's what social media influencers are for?

Butker's address holds within it a tension around the public and private natures of spirituality. He argues that both clergy and laypeople must be bolder and more public. Yet, he also asserts that praying and fasting in secret reap far greater rewards than any public platform. His repeated digs at the LGBTQ+ community and DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) initiatives raise the question: Who is allowed to be public? Who and what are expected to stay private?

Related: Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker rails against Pride month, Biden in speech at Catholic college

We hold these questions in mind as Butker transitions to a discussion of gender. It is these comments that have launched his speech into the internet spotlight. He insists that women have been lied to, and that while many of the female graduates are likely thinking about jobs and promotions, those things are far inferior to the call of "homemaker." The most important thing a woman does, according to Butker, is to support her husband in his professional pursuits and remind him of the importance of family. At no point does he say women should not work, only that their work should be subordinate to their marital responsibilities.

While the tonal incongruence of devaluing women's professional pursuits at their own college graduation is aptly attended to in the video's virality, this is not a new belief. More and more, "tradwife" values are being spread by Catholic influencers. What most astonishes me about this speech is the utter hypocrisy of insisting upon a traditional Catholicism while undermining the authority of clerical leadership. He goes so far as to say the average American bishop leads an "inconsequential existence." Setting this disregard of intrinsic human dignity aside, would not a traditional Catholic perspective be to submit to your bishop's catechetical authority?

Butker himself says "it is not prudent for the laity to consume ourselves with becoming amateur theologians" unless — unlike Butker who studied industrial engineering — you have studied theology at a Catholic institution. Does he not then disqualify himself from his very endeavor? Are we to believe there was not a single qualified bishop or theologian available to give this speech instead?

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Butker is right about the lack of attention given to a bishop's duty to form the congregants in his geography. I laughed aloud when he said that nobody reads anything the USCCB puts out. But the reason for this absence of respect is the very nature of Butker's own platform: The average Catholic is far more likely to listen to those whose qualifications come from online followership than those who are expressly trained to accompany others and communicate theology effectively. Expertise is the key.

In a church hierarchy where clergy's voices are inconsistently formed but still naturally amplified, social media can showcase other experts, like women and laypeople. But the devaluing of trained expertise in influencer culture also leads to things like falsely equating the sin of pride with being proud of yourself (as seen in Pride Month debates), or assuming that there is one unanimous "biblical teaching" on any given complex topic.

Mr. Butker, the call is coming from inside the house.

Butker has made it his business to encourage listeners to focus on their own vocations and stay in their own lanes. Isn't his own lane … football? Butker prefaces his speech with the statement that "being Catholic alone won't cut it." Perhaps the board of Benedictine College might heed Mr. Butker when selecting next year's commencement speaker.