Opinion
Guest Voices
Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker, addressing the graduation class of 2023 at Georgia

Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker, addressing the graduation class of 2023 at Georgia Institute of Technology's commencement ceremonies, May 6, 2023. (OSV News/Courtesy of Georgia Institute of Technology)



by Heather Miller Rubens

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 29, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The May 11 commencement speech by Kansas City Chiefs kicker Harrison Butker ignited a fierce public debate. While proclaiming his "traditional" Catholic values, Butker sought to offer the students of Benedictine College his vision of American Catholic citizenship to explicitly counter President Joe Biden's example of American Catholic citizenship. In Butker's Catholic America, priests rule their parish, men rule their homes, and women should reject "the most diabolical lies" that they might find fulfillment and meaning in any work apart from being a wife and mother.

And — in a somewhat surprising passing comment — Catholics should proclaim that the Jews killed Jesus.

Despite all the media furor about Butker, most commentators did not engage this disturbing part of his speech. It was just one line, Butker made almost casually: "Congress just passed a bill where stating something as basic as the biblical

teaching of who killed Jesus could land you in jail," he said. We are left to guess the "who," but Butker's meaning is clear: he believes that a "real" American Catholic should say that Jews killed Jesus.

Butker's brief reference to the antisemitic charge of "deicide" (i.e. "God-murder") demands not only engagement, but response. The deicide charge is a dangerous Christian belief that has been used to persecute Jews for centuries and led to the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust. As Butker is putting his vision of what an "unapologetic" American Catholic should believe about the world, I offer two points.

> Butker's brief reference to the antisemitic charge of "deicide" (i.e. "God-murder") demands not only engagement, but response.

Tweet this

First, Congress passed no such law, and as an American, Butker's first amendment rights remain fully intact to make this biblical interpretation and to speak about it. Butker is most likely referring to the Antisemitism Awareness Act, a bill that passed only the U.S. House of Representatives and would adopt a specific definition of antisemitism from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

The bill would apply that definition to the Department of Education's efforts to restrict federal funding to colleges and universities that fail to address antisemitism on their campuses. The bill stands virtually no chance of passing in the Senate, and it says nothing about incarcerating anybody for asserting their free speech right to place blame for Jesus's death on whomever they wish.

Second, the Roman Catholic Church has issued a definitive, and clear rejection of Butker's "basic belief" about who is responsible for Jesus' death. If Butker wishes to be in alignment with church teachings, he needs to refute the toxic anti-Jewish theology he is holding, and not use his platforms to spread this pernicious lie.

Let me be perfectly clear on this point: The Catholic Church definitively rejected the deicide charge at the Second Vatican Council in 1965. For Butker's reference, in the groundbreaking document *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church clearly states:

> "...what happened in [Jesus Christ's] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ."

This teaching of the Catholic Church is definitive and authoritative, meaning it's not optional to believe or not, according to one's whims or ideological stances. Butker positions himself as a radical truth-teller who has been given a platform to share his Catholic beliefs. On the deicide charge, Butker is clearly getting his toxic theology from somewhere other than the Catholic Church.

Advertisement

For the past three decades, my organization, the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies, has been fostering dialogue between Baltimore's Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities. Part of that work involves studying our sacred scriptures to understand and wrestle with toxic scripture interpretations, including the charge of deicide, that persisted among far too many people. We strive to make more people aware of church teachings like *Nostra Aetate*, that offer a clear guide to interpreting sacred texts.

Perhaps we shouldn't be spending so much time focusing on the comments of a pro athlete on an interreligious subject in which he clearly has no expertise. But Butker is claiming that he is unafraid of sharing Catholic truth with a broader public, this inviting scrutiny of his claims. Even if I might disagree with him, Butker does have some grounding in Catholic tradition when sharing his opinions about family, vocation, and parish life.

However on the deicide charge, Butker is just wrong. Butker is entitled to his opinions about the world that have some legitimate grounding in Catholic tradition. He is not entitled to his own version of Catholicism on this point.