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Cardinal Tagle

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle waves as he delivers the homily July 21, 2024, during the final Mass of the National Eucharistic Congress at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis. Tagle, considered a contender to be elected pope, has faced online attacks questioning his behavior and adherence to Catholic teaching. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Conservatives on social media spent nearly 12 years savaging Pope Francis. They called him an antipope and a heretic and rebelled against his teachings.

So it should come as no surprise that those attacks accelerated in crass, petty and tasteless social media posts after the pope's death and during his funeral and burial. And it was predictable that the reactionary fusillade has ramped up, aimed at potential successors to Francis' legacy.

The proliferation of social media use since the last conclave in 2013 has plunged the Catholic Church into dark, uncharted territory. While Generation Z creates generally positive and humorous memes about the upcoming election, conservative Catholic social media users have taken another approach — actively campaigning for one

cardinal and slandering another.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, on the National Catholic Reporter's list of top contenders to succeed Pope Francis, has been the subject of a digital smear campaign developed in conservative social media circles. The scurrilous campaign began after LifeSiteNews posted a video of the 67-year-old cardinal from the Philippines singing John Lennon's "Imagine" on its X account.

The clip, which has more than 1 million views, is cut from a longer video on YouTube which features Tagle's full performance. The incendiary X message calls the performance "shocking" and suggests it is "a betrayal of Catholic teaching."

The post says: "A stunning moment as Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle performs "Imagine"—the atheist anthem rejecting religion, heaven, and Christ's Kingship."

There's one big problem. The allegation is false.

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Although the song's lyrics do feature themes that contradict Catholic teaching, the cardinal sang a modified version of the song that was shortened to not include those lines. In truth, the LifeSite News post has been fact-checked, with a Community Note that says the same.

Despite LifeSite's misleading post, the video was shared widely, including by Catholic University of America professor and social media personality Chad Pecknold, who said on X: "Cardinal Tagle’s performance of John Lennon's infernal song "Imagine’ comes not, I think, from a future successor of Saint Peter, but from a world which is passing away."

Others on social media are sharing clips of Tagle dancing or engaging with young people in an apparent attempt to shame the prelate for his conduct. Others have posted that a "Tagle papacy would lead to open rebellion" or "major schism." Still others have outrageously questioned the sexuality of the cardinal, who of course has taken a vow of celibacy.

It appears, however, that the smear campaign has backfired.

Since the video was posted on April 24, thousands of social media users have come to Tagle's defense.

"The smear campaign against Cardinal Tagle by MAGA zealots and rigid traditionalists is honestly wild. It's clear you are terrified that he'll carry on Pope Francis' mission to bring the Church closer to the people. You'll never make me hate this humble man," said one user on X in a post that had more than 500,000 views.

Fr. Chris Vorderbruggen wrote on X, "People are mocking the video of Cardinal Tagle singing. That's not strange—it's Filipino. From the barefoot poor to the rich to Church leaders, karaoke is everywhere. That song is a staple. The problem is how centered we are on ourselves."

Sharing a clip of the video, one user on X commented: "Cardinal Tagle singing imagine…may god grant us a pope who sings." That post had more than 600,000 views.

Many of the Cardinal Tagle posts come from conservative users voicing their support for ultratraditionalist Cardinal Robert Sarah, of Guinea. Social media, particularly X, has been inundated with conservative accounts openly campaigning for Sarah's election.

Sarah is known for his strong endorsement of traditional styles of Catholic liturgy. He resisted a 2016 papal instruction that changed church law to allow women to be among those whose feet are washed at Holy Thursday services.

One user shared a video of Cardinal Sarah and notorious Pope Francis critic Cardinal Raymond Burke arriving at the Vatican the day after the Holy Father's death saying that Sarah's "aura is immense."

"Catholics worldwide want Cardinal Robert Sarah to be the next Pope," tweeted the account African Hub.

To be clear, Sarah is a viable candidate only if the conclave were held exclusively on

X. Yet posts promoting Cardinal Sarah have received millions of views. The posts are being circulated amongst a loud minority of users critical of Francis' papacy.

Others, including some conservatives, aren't buying the hullabaloo about Sarah.

"Technically even I am 'in running' to be the next Pope and I might actually have as good a chance as Cardinal Sarah, too," said one user on X.

Another X user even questioned Cardinal Sarah's conservatism. " 'Cardinal' Sarah is a heretic and even more dangerous than liberal heretics, because he misleads people by presenting himself as a conservative," the post read.

With the conclave set to start May 7, there is no doubt that social media speculation will continue to rage. Buckle your digital seat belts. Until then, we can only anticipate the moment when the next pope steps out onto the balcony over St. Peter's Square — and into a maelstrom of social media vitriol.

This story appears in the **Digital Dunces** and **Who will be the next pope?** feature series.