Opinion
NCR Voices



New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan joins the assembly in reciting the Nicene Creed during an ecumenical prayer service for peace in the world in honor of Mary, Mother of God, at Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Cathedral in the Brooklyn Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, May 20, 2025. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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(NCR graphic/Angie Von Slaughter)

"This guy is a modern-day St. Paul," Cardinal Timothy Dolan said on cable news. "He was a missionary, he's an evangelist, he's a hero. He's one I think that knew what Jesus meant when he said, 'The truth will set you free.' "

Is that how the archbishop of New York referred to St. Carlo Acutis? The newly canonized millennial often referred to as God's influencer?

Nope.

That was the loquacious cardinal comparing the late Charlie Kirk to one of the greatest and most prolific Christians to have ever lived.

Dolan appeared on Friday (Sept. 19) on "Fox & Friends" and was quick to praise Kirk, who was shot and killed in cold blood last week. A suspect is in custody, his motive

still murky as details continue to emerge.

Though it has been said before, it should be said again: Catholics — and all people of good will — condemn Kirk's murder in the strongest possible terms. His death was an American tragedy. He was a husband, father and human being shot in the most gruesome way. His murder was an abhorrent crime against our shared human dignity and an act of evil. He did not deserve to die, and we should make it a point to pray for him, his family, and all those killed by acts of gun violence.

But that does not mean he was "a modern-day St. Paul."

That's false by any measure.

We don't know that Kirk was killed for his faith. The current evidence does not indicate that religious bigotry was a primary or even secondary motive. That could change as more evidence emerges.

Any reflection on the legacy of Kirk cannot gloss over the pain and suffering that Kirk inflicted on innumerable people through his harsh, divisive and combative rhetoric. We have published some of those perspectives in the National Catholic Reporter in recent days, but in any conversations about Kirk's legacy, we cannot ignore his racism, sexism and xenophobia.



Left: Charlie Kirk speaks at the 2025 Student Action Summit in Tampa, Florida (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore). Right: Bishop Robert Barron speaks at the USA National Jubilee Pilgrim Gathering at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome July 30, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

We also need to talk about Kirk's attitude towards Catholicism. Kirk was far from an admirer of Catholicism despite many apocryphal accounts of Kirk's alleged potential conversion to the faith. Kirk was a noted critic of Pope Francis, calling him a marxist, implying he was a heretic. Kirk repeatedly questioned the role of the pope as an institution and rejected the primacy of the papacy as recently as January 2025.

"I want a better Catholic Church. I personally would not be able to be part of an institution with the figurehead with a worldview that is so corrupted and opposite of what I think the Bible teaches. And I wouldn't give him the benefit of the doubt, I'd be like, 'No, I'm actually not part of this,' " said Kirk in the January interview with influencer Michael Knowles.

Such a laudatory comparison to St. Paul would be extraordinary if applied to even the holiest of individuals. Dolan knows this. His hyperbolic, Fox-friendly comments are just the latest in a series of attempts by conservative influencers (it is sad that both Dolan and Bishop Robert Barron unfortunately fall into this category now) to whitewash some of Kirk's more unsavory statements and opinions.

To prelates seeking the adulation of the MAGA faithful, it is not enough to condemn Kirk's murder; one must elevate him to martyrdom by celebrating all of his words and deeds. For the Catholic right, apparently, even that is not enough; Kirk must be canonized among the pantheon of Catholicism's greatest saints, and put into AI pictures next to Jesus and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dolan is not the only prelate to speak so highly of Kirk. Barron, bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, called Kirk an "apostle of civil discourse," and has posted several remembrances of Kirk on social media.

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And Catholic conservatives on social media are calling for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to make a statement about Kirk, despite the group being deeply divided these days among Trump sympathizers and progressives in the mode of Pope Francis. That idea should be a nonstarter.

The Catholic right's insatiable need to spiritually gaslight us into accepting Kirk as a model of perfect Christianity has destroyed our ability as a nation to look upon this tragedy with the nuance it deserves. Critical thinking and analysis be damned. Our discourse has been poisoned with a false dichotomy: You must endorse Kirk's cause for sainthood or you are fired from your job, silenced, and kicked out of civil society.

Why must it be all or nothing? Why can't we say that Kirk was a complicated man who held reprehensible views while condemning his brutal public execution? Why can't we say that his Christianity was clearly important to him — but that it was also profoundly flawed?

Kirk is not a modern-day St. Paul. The only thing that such myth-making achieves is fomenting resentment, curtailing dialogue, and stifling action to otherwise prevent this tragedy from happening again.

This story appears in the **Digital Dunces** and **Charlie Kirk murder news and commentary** feature series.

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