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Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey sits on steps of the Annunciation Church's school as police respond to a reported mass shooting, Wednesday, Aug. 27, 2025, in Minneapolis. (AP/Abbie Parr)

Peter Smith

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Tiffany Stanley

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Associated Press

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Thoughts and prayers.

The invocation appears like a litany after every mass shooting — and the backlash is just as inevitable.

As if the slaughter of children amid screams and shattered stained glass wasn't cause enough for grief, American opinion makers were convulsed once again this week in a debate over the role of prayer in the wake of a [mass shooting](#), this time at [Annunciation Catholic School](#) in Minneapolis.

Those who support some legal restrictions on guns, often Democrats, say that Republican politicians who appeal to prayer are trying to distract from their own inaction on such things as red flag laws or stricter background checks on gun purchases.

"Don't just say this is about thoughts and prayers right now. These kids were literally praying," Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey told a news conference after the shooting, in which an assailant killed two Annunciation students and wounded 18 other people attending Mass.

Critics, especially on the right, chided the Democratic mayor.

"It is shocking to me that so many left wing politicians attack the idea of prayer in response to a tragedy," Republican Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic, posted on X. "Literally no one thinks prayer is a substitute for action. We pray because our hearts are broken and we believe that God is listening."

The debate is not just about the power of prayer. In the United States — with both a large religious population and the most mass shootings in the world — it's also a polarized debate about gun control.

In other words, the episode set off rhetorical skirmishes along two of the biggest dividing lines in America's cultural and political wars: God and guns. (That doesn't even count the scrutiny over the motives and gender identity of the shooter, who

died by suicide after the attack.)

Prayers good but 'not enough'

Frey tapped into the principle of "Tikkun Olam," in his Jewish faith, which speaks about repairing the world.

"The meaning there is, prayers are good, but they are not enough," Frey said on CNN. "It's only adequate if you can attach an action to the work. And in this case, we know what the solutions are. They've been the same solutions three years ago, five years ago, 15 years ago."

He said if Vance would support legislation to curb gun violence, "maybe we're not really having an argument."

Fred Guttenberg, whose daughter was one of 17 murdered in the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, replied angrily to Vance's post on X.

"I am not a left wing politician. I am the father of Jaime who was murdered in the Parkland shooting," Guttenberg posted on X. "YOU ARE MISERABLE AND WRONG. It is shocking to me how politicians like you mock and use the idea of 'thoughts and prayers' to cover for your prior and future inaction and the reality that I visit my forever 14 daughter at the cemetery."

This has been a long-running debate. After a 2015 California mass shooting left 14 people dead, the New York Daily News ran a front-page headline, "GOD ISN'T FIXING THIS," surrounded by tweets from Republican politicians offering prayers in response. The newspaper opined that "cowards who could truly end gun scourge continue to hide behind meaningless platitudes."

Similar sentiments followed the latest Minneapolis shooting. "America prays but does not act. Gun worship is killing us," the Rev. Jacqui Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church in New York posted on X.

Republicans, in turn, have framed mass gun violence in terms of a mental health crisis or, in cases such as the Annunciation attack, hate crimes against religious groups, while emphasizing the constitutional right to "keep and bear arms."

The debate after the Minneapolis attack quickly and starkly turned political.

Current and former White House spokeswomen also got into the mix.

Jen Psaki, who was spokesperson for former President Joe Biden, stated on X: "Prayer is not freaking enough. ... Prayer does not bring these kids back."

Karoline Leavitt, spokesperson for President Donald Trump, retorted in a news conference: "In a time of mourning like this, when beautiful young children were killed while praying in a church, it's utterly disrespectful to deride the power of prayer in this country, and it's disrespectful to the millions of Americans of faith."

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Talking past each other

John Fea, a historian of American politics and religion, said politicians have long called for prayers in crises such as the American Revolution and the Civil War. Most religious traditions would say that "at least prayers are appropriate in a situation like this," he said.

But both sides talk past each other about next steps.

Everyone wanting stricter gun laws "sees the idea of thoughts and prayers as not accomplishing anything," said Fea, a fellow at the Lumen Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

And to be sure, "a significant number of those who offer thoughts and prayers at these moments also oppose gun control," he noted.

It's not that they don't want action, but they are "raising questions of spiritual problems in the culture or mental health issues that need to be addressed," Fea said. "Anything but gun legislation."

The two major parties have starkly different [religious constituencies](#), which reflects how they talk about prayer. Republicans have drawn [strong support](#) from conservative white and Latino evangelicals and other white Christians; Democrats have a more diverse coalition of minority racial and religious groups and secular voters.

Catholics across the divide

Pope Leo XIV focused on the spiritual in his response, sending "heartfelt condolences and the assurance of spiritual closeness to all those affected by this terrible tragedy, especially the families now grieving the loss of a child."

While the first American pope didn't address gun control this week, he appeared to do so when he was a lesser-known Bishop Robert Prevost in 2017, according to the Substack site Letters from Leo. After a mass shooting in Las Vegas, a Twitter account in Prevost's name retweeted a senator's post that castigated his colleagues for not approving more gun controls, saying their "cowardice to act cannot be whitewashed by thoughts and prayers."

Catholic bishops reflect the divide.

"While we join our prayers with others that those injured in body and spirit will heal and that the murdered children will be received into heaven, we must also cry out for action to prevent even one more such tragedy," said Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich.

In a statement, he called for "common sense" policies to limit guns' availability, lamenting that such ideas "have been largely rejected in the name of a freedom not found in our constitution." He also called for restoration in funding cuts to mental health.

Bishop Robert Barron called Mayor Frey's comment's "asinine," in a Fox News Digital interview that he reposted on his Facebook page, which has 3 million followers. Barron is bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, but has a wider reach with his Word on Fire Ministries.

"Friends, prayer doesn't magically protect us from suffering," Barron added in his post. "At its core, prayer is raising the mind and heart to God, which is absolutely appropriate in times of deep pain."

Saint Paul and Minneapolis Archbishop Bernard Hebda, whose flock includes those at Annunciation, emphasized both prayer and action.

"We need an end to gun violence," he said.

"Our community is rightfully outraged at such horrific acts of violence perpetrated against the vulnerable and innocent," he said. "They are far too commonplace. While

we need to commit to working to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies, we also need to remind ourselves that we have a God of peace and of love, and that it is his love that we will need most as we strive to embrace those who are hurting so deeply."

This story appears in the **Minneapolis church shooting** feature series. [View the full series.](#)