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Editorial: Dolan is playing a dangerous game

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 24, 2012

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York addresses the 130th Supreme Convention of the Knights of Columbus during the organization's States Dinner in Anaheim, Calif., Aug. 7. (CNS/Tim Rue)

The notion that Catholic bishops in the United States have not been involved in politics historically or should not be involved in politics is, in the first instance, a fiction, and in the second instance, absurd.
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With no insult intended to the peaceful sect, Catholics are not Amish, about whom there is much to admire and who, in the long run, might be the better representatives of the peaceable kingdom. But Amish are relatively self-contained. They seek more to escape from than engage in the dominant culture; they don't aspire to great institutions, nor do they lay claim to traditions of art and intellectual endeavor that influenced civilizations over millennia.

The extremes of examples serve only to illustrate that the Catholic church aspires to be a robust presence in the culture, to influence systemic change, to argue and persuade toward what it considers the most loving and just options for human society. In short, it's a player -- always has been and presumably always will be.

In that context, the appearance at the Republican National Convention by Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is one in a long tradition. As was reported on this website [1], Catholics of every level -- from cardinal archbishops on down -- have been asked to pray at conventions of both parties. Dolan claims he is attending just to pray, that this is not an endorsement of Romney, not a partisan gesture. More on that later. But the same claim was made by 86-year-old Sr. Catherine Pinkerton, who gave the benediction at the close of the Democratic convention four years ago, the one that nominated Barack Obama. Pinkerton was, at the time, a lobbyist for Washington-based NETWORK, a group that, while representing the interests of the poor and not millionaire bankers, nevertheless stood to benefit by such close association to power in case Obama won. The fact that Pinkerton was a leader of the Catholic National Advisory Council to Obama's presidential campaign did not stop her from claiming that her appearance at the convention to pray was nonpartisan.

OK, so the cardinal archbishop of New York has a higher profile and a bit more influence than an 86-year-old sister-lobbyist for the poor and disenfranchised. The point is that the church at many levels has interests to protect, and Catholics understand that. The church, for instance, can rightly claim to be the major deliverer of social services in the country only because it does so with millions and millions of dollars of federal aid, certainly a fact of which Rep. Paul Ryan is aware.

Cardinal Francis Spellman, a predecessor of Dolan in New York, had ready access to the White House of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Cardinal John Krol of Philadelphia knew how to smoothly signal his support for a favored politician. Check out the front pages of the now-defunct archdiocesan newspaper during the campaign seasons of his tenure.

However, who gave what invocation and where was, in the past, of only momentary interest. And it would probably be so this year -- political parties can always find a suitable Catholic of some significance and the proper persuasion to adorn the convention set -- were it not for some unusual circumstances. If Dolan didn't want the church to be perceived as partisan, he would have simply said that if the Republicans wanted a Catholic bishop, they should ask the bishop of that area, Robert Lynch. There's lots of precedent for that, and no one would have made much of it. Dolan's spokesman said the cardinal accepted the invitation only after contacting Lynch. The suggestion is that if Lynch objected, he would have told the cardinal archbishop of New York and president of the bishops' national conference to stay out of his diocese. Nonsense. It was Dolan's initiative to take. He took the big stage instead.

Dolan, a student of history, has to understand that the polarization in both church and civic culture has reached levels that approach unique, at least in the last 100 years. The complexities of those situations are compounded, of course, with the unprecedented intertwining of religion in our politics.

So it is no longer of just momentary notice that the Catholic cardinal archbishop of New York makes an appearance at the Republican convention.

Dolan will appear on the night of Mitt Romney's nomination, the apex of a gathering so tightly scripted and choreographed that nothing on the main stage will be left to chance or to the possibility of neutral meaning. For all of Dolan's goodwill and best intentions -- and we take him at his word that he perceives this as simply a priest at prayer -- the rest of the world knows he is being used. That's simply part of playing in the political spotlight, and to pretend otherwise is naive. There are reasons aplenty why the Republican Party did not seek out a gay Unitarian minister or a female bishop of the Episcopal church.

There's more than a prayer at stake.

His appearance also occurs against the backdrop of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' strong opposition, on what turns out to be false premises, to Obama's signature piece of legislation, the Affordable Care Act.

It occurs, too, against the backdrop of a breathless and essentially ineffective campaign charging that the Obama administration has put religious liberty at risk. Dolan, as head of the conference, did nothing to tamp down the rather imprudent rants (and comic appearance on Capitol Hill) of Bishop William Lori of Baltimore.

Even worse, Dolan left unchallenged the unhinged ravings of Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill., who compared Obama to Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

Dolan heads a diocese that has initiated a lawsuit joined by other Catholic institutions against the administration regarding its health care mandate, which narrows the definition of what makes a religious entity and requires all other institutions provide contraceptive services under the health care law.

Finally, Dolan knows both he and Bishop Robert Morlino have lavished praise on GOP vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. They're all friends, and while Dolan has observed that it is wonderful to have two Catholics on the tickets -- Vice President Joe Biden and Ryan -- Morlino's gush in a column aimed at his diocese is tantamount to an endorsement of the Republican candidate.

Given all of that, it would be difficult for anyone to construe his appearance as anything but an endorsement.

To be fair, the administration has been clumsy and even duplicitous in dealing with Dolan over the health care mandate. Several attempts have been made to compromise over the issue, but the administration apparently has decided that any agreement wouldn't be enough to satisfy all of the bishops. The political calculation was made that since the administration would probably face episcopal wrath no matter what it did, the best strategy would be to settle the matter in court sometime after the election.

Dolan said he's offered to pray at the Democrats' convention, but hasn't heard from them. Maybe he'll be a surprise visitor.

The more likely scenario is that the public will continue to perceive his attendance at the Republican convention as an endorsement. And it isn't only those who oppose the visit who are drawing that conclusion. William Donohue of The Catholic League, admittedly one of the crudest Catholic voices in the public square, told the *New York Post* [2], "The Republicans are smart enough to get the 'pope of America,' and the Democrats are stupid enough not to invite him."

Donohue, of course, does Dolan no favors. He is a partisan who quickly painted the cardinal into a partisan corner.

Former New York Mayor Ed Koch, who favors Obama, told the *Post*, "The Republicans are very smart to ask him."

Sometimes the political calculations work. The bishops got the candidates they wanted for the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Sometimes they backfire. During those same 12 years, the bishops got none of the promise-the-moon initiatives on abortion made during the campaigns. They also got little but reversal on their social agenda and nothing, despite campaign promises, to bolster Catholic education.

During those 12 years -- and since -- surveys consistently show the bishops have achieved little in moving the needle of public opinion on the matter of abortion, either in the larger culture or within the church.

Dolan is playing an old game, but an increasingly dangerous one, as well. Conventions have nothing to do with religion, which normally takes the stage to fill a minor obligation, and everything to do with politics. In accepting the invitation to this year's Republican convention, where religion has been elevated to a major supporting role, Dolan is dragging the church and its invaluable swing voters into the midst of the fray, simultaneously allowing religion to be used as a tool of division. His protests that his appearance is nonpartisan and that he is merely a priest at prayer have already been swamped by the partisan cheering.

And Dolan has to know it.

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