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Pope Francis engages in a light-hearted moment with comedians Stephen Colbert, Chris Rock, Jimmy Fallon and other comedians after an audience at the Vatican June 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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As they waited for Pope Francis to arrive at the Clementine Hall in the Vatican Apostolic Palace for an early morning audience, late night comedy stars looked at each other and thought, "something's wrong."

"We're in this beautiful, beautiful space in the Vatican and for some reason they've let comedians in, which is always a mistake," comedian Conan O'Brien told reporters after meeting the pope June 14.

He was just one of 105 comedians from around the world who traveled to the Vatican for a papal audience and to "establish a link between the Catholic Church and comic artists," according to the Dicastery for Culture and Education, which organized the meeting.

Comedians from the United States included Stephen Colbert, Chris Rock, Jimmy Fallon, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Whoopi Goldberg, Jim Gaffigan and Mike Birbiglia among others.

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Before Francis entered the room, Fallon stood in front of the pope's chair and was cracking jokes to the entertainment of his peers. But once Francis entered, they all took to their feet to applaud. Several stars, accustomed to being in front of the cameras, held out their phones to record the pope walking steadily to his seat.

And immediately Francis cracked a joke, saying that since smiling is good for one's health, it would be better for him to just make a funny face for the crowd rather than to read his lengthy speech.

Yet he told the comedians that "in the midst of so much gloomy news, immersed as we are in many social and even personal emergencies, you have the power to spread peace and smiles."

"You are among the few who have the ability to speak to all types of people, from different generations and cultural backgrounds," he said.

The pope highlighted the unique role of laughter in bringing people together in the face of conflict, stressing that humor "is never against anyone, but is always inclusive, purposeful, eliciting openness, sympathy, empathy."

He also encouraged them to remember a prayer often attributed to St. Thomas More, which he said he prays every day: "Grant me, O Lord, a good sense of humor."



U.S. comedian and writer Stephen Colbert speaks with reporters in the Lapidary Gallery of the Apostolic Palace, part of the Vatican Museums, after meeting Pope

Francis during an audience June 14, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Louis-Dreyfus, the star of hit shows "Seinfeld" and "Veep," said after the meeting that Francis' words were "gorgeous," and praised the pope's message for highlighting that comedy "has a sacredness to it."

Each comedian was able to greet the pope individually at the end of the audience.

Colbert, a Catholic, said he told the pope in Italian that he gave his voice to produce the audiobook version of the pope's recently published autobiography. He later told reporters that after reading the book, he thought he would love to interview the pope on his late-night TV program, "but I really want to do a cooking segment with him, because he talked a lot about cooking: evidently he makes a great 'tortellini in brodo.' "

Jim Gaffigan, another Catholic comedian who speaks often about his faith life, brought his family with him to the Vatican to meet the pope. His son Michael got rosary beads blessed by the pope that he proudly touted around the Vatican hallway leading out of the meeting.

Gaffigan told reporters after the meeting that being Catholic and a comedian is "the most punk rock thing you can do," since believing in God in the comedy business is just "asking for trouble."

Although the group of comedians who came to the Vatican and met the pope was not composed solely of Catholics, the experience "was universal," Gaffigan said. "There is this warmth, this openness, even with the exceeding amounts of problems that have existed and will exist."

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>
> — Stephen Colbert
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The pope typically sits in front of the groups he meets with for a group photo before leaving his audiences, and participants often sit politely and clap as he walks away.

This time, Chris Rock, seated near the front row, jumped up behind Francis to put his face right by the pope's for the photo. Other comedians couldn't resist following suit and soon enough a group swarmed around the pope for the picture.

Francis encouraged the fun, chuckled and gave a wave as he walked out.