

Cardinal Timothy Dolan asks candidates to sign civility pledge

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Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York (RNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

NEW YORK -- Cardinal Timothy Dolan, who sparked controversy by agreeing to deliver the closing blessing at the Republican convention in Tampa, Fla., this week, on Monday drew further attention to his political role by asking both Mitt Romney and Barack Obama to sign a civility pledge promoted by a leading conservative Catholic activist.

The archbishop of New York wrote to Romney and Obama and their running mates, Paul Ryan and Joe Biden, asking them to sign the "Civility in America" pledge developed by Carl Anderson, head of the powerful Knights of Columbus and a man with long-standing ties to the Republican Party.

Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the most prominent Catholic churchman in America, said he wanted the candidates to forgo personal attacks and "remain focused on the critical issues facing our nation."

Neither Dolan nor the Knights of Columbus pledge specifies which issues they meant. But Anderson, supreme knight of the organization, has been a vocal supporter of the bishops' campaign against the administration's controversial birth control health insurance mandate. The Knights have also donated millions of dollars to efforts against legalizing same-sex marriage.

For years, Anderson has blasted Obama and Biden, who is Catholic, for their support for abortion rights. Just last week in the conservative journal *National Review*, Anderson penned a blistering critique of Obama for what he said was the president's decision "to make unrestricted access to abortion a key component of his campaign."

Anderson is a veteran GOP operative. He spent several years working for Jesse Helms, the late North Carolina senator and ardent culture warrior, before going to work in the Reagan White House. Anderson has influential allies among conservatives in the Vatican and the hierarchy, and the Knights of Columbus can deploy huge sums for -- or against -- causes they support or oppose.

In closing his letter to the candidates, Dolan promises that if the candidates sign he will "be most happy to be able to convey to Carl Anderson and to the 1.8 million members of the Knights of Columbus, that you have chosen to support this valuable effort."

Dolan has become increasingly active and visible as the presidential campaign gears up. His decision to deliver the benediction at the GOP convention Thursday night immediately following Romney's official nomination was met with sharp rebukes from many who say his appearance will formalize what was seen as the hierarchy's growing embrace of the Republican ticket.

Whether either of the candidates will sign Anderson's pledge is unclear. Dolan's plea comes after a prominent evangelical, Rick Warren, canceled plans for a "civil forum" appearance at his Southern California church by both presidential candidates, saying the nasty political atmosphere had ruined the opportunity.

Sources in both the Romney and Obama campaigns said that in fact neither candidate was planning to attend Warren's forum. Both campaigns are targeting Catholics in the November election.

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