

Jesuit priest: Dolan tries to be the Catholic Billy Graham

Brian Roewe | Aug. 29, 2012



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

Cardinal Timothy Dolan's appearance at both the Republican and Democratic conventions is a sign Catholics have an important place in the U.S. political process and shows Dolan can raise above partisan politics, according to a professor at a Catholic university.

"I think this is just a terrific sign about the importance of Catholics in American public life these days," said Stephen Schenk, a professor at The Catholic University of America and a national co-chair of "Catholics for Obama."

On Tuesday, Dolan accepted an invitation from the Democratic National Convention, which runs Sept. 4-6, to give the final benediction in Charlotte, N.C., after President Barack Obama accepts his party's nomination.

The cardinal is also scheduled to pray at the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Fla., on Thursday after Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney accepts his party's nomination.

While tradition suggests a local bishop, priest or religious would represent Catholicism at each party's convention, Dolan's decision to go to Tampa and Charlotte reinforces the notion of him as the face of Catholicism in America, said Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University.

"Clearly, Cardinal Dolan is seen by the bishops as the spokesman for the U.S. bishops in this country. In a sense, he's trying to be the Catholic Billy Graham," he said.

Reese told *NCR* that Dolan's praying with both parties projects the same "being above partisan politics" image Graham has broadcast for decades.

Dolan's appearances at the conventions are only part of his increasing presence in the political scene. He has been outspoken against a mandate from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services requiring employer health insurance plans to provide contraceptive coverage, going as far as suing the administration over the mandate.

But in recent weeks, he also gained national attention for inviting both the president and Romney to the annual Al Smith Dinner, a major fundraising event for Catholic Charities of New York, [against objections](#) [1] from anti-Obama Catholics.

The cardinal has also sent letters to both candidates and their running mates, asking all to sign the ["Civility in America"](#) [2] pledge created by Carl Anderson, head of the Knights of Columbus, and focus on the issues in their campaigns.

Dolan seemed to hint toward his growing role in the political conversation [in a blog post](#) [3] highlighting a speech from Anderson at the annual Knights convention, where Anderson reminded all Catholics "not to be shy about bringing the values of faith into the public square," Dolan wrote.

Reese said the bishops and Dolan have positioned Dolan as the public voice of Catholicism to enter into the political sphere and public debate.

"[Dolan] clearly enjoys this. He's clearly good at it," Reese said.

The "above partisanship" image of Dolan wasn't lost on others in the wake of his acceptance of the invitation from the Democratic convention.

"What this shows is that Cardinal Dolan is able to rise above the politics of the moment. But to those who view the world exclusively through the lens of power, this is completely unintelligible," said William Donohue of the Catholic League.

Donohue, who [told the New York Post](#) [4] on Friday that the GOP was smart to ask Dolan and the Democrats stupid not to, said Tuesday those who accused Dolan of supporting Republicans now look foolish for their concerns.

New York *Times* columnist Ross Douthat [told the National Catholic Register](#) [5] that Dolan was right in placing himself and the Catholic church in the political discussion.

"Navigating American life has always been a big challenge for Catholic leaders," he wrote. "We are in a 'betwixt and between' period. Catholics do not face the level of public hostility they faced in the 19th century. But the Church is more divided than it was, and its public reputation is much worse because of the sex-abuse scandal."

Douthat continued: "The choices [Dolan] has made have been generally right ... he was also right to invite President Obama to [the Al Smith] dinner, because, whatever disagreements there have been between the church and the White House, Obama is not Henry VIII. We are still a free society, and the Church should be in dialogue."

Other conservative observers cast the Democrats' inclusion of Dolan at their convention as reversing course, fearful of losing the Catholic vote.

Joshua Mercer of Catholicvote.org, which has endorsed Romney and his running mate, Rep. Paul Ryan, said the "Democratic party, sensing that they are alienating the Catholic vote, quickly scrambled" to invite Dolan.

In announcing Dolan's acceptance of the GOP invitation, New York archdiocesan spokesman Joseph Zwilling said Dolan would accept an invite from the Democrats, too.

Schenk said inviting Dolan was always on the table for Democrats, who needed time to work on the details before finalizing.

"This is a clear sign that the Catholic church in the United States transcends partisan politics, and I look forward to welcoming Cardinal Dolan's appearance in Charlotte," he said.

But not all will be welcoming. Steven Krueger, president of Catholic Democrats, called Dolan's offer to pray with the Democrats brilliant politically but divisive pastorally.

"It takes some pastoral hubris, if there can be such a thing, to publicly position yourself for an on stage invitation to the DNC even though you are suing the Administration, have overseen a call for civil disobedience in opposition to the HHS contraception regulations and have misrepresented the regulations as including coverage for abortifacients," Krueger wrote [in a column](#) [6] on The Huffington Post.

That Dolan and other bishops have spoken so strongly against Obama and the HHS mandate and less so on Ryan's budget proposal and economic philosophies has fed the discussion of Dolan's and the bishops' support of the Republicans.

"Some people are very critical of [Dolan] because he's talked about how wonderful a man, how wonderful a Catholic Paul Ryan is, but has not criticized Ryan's embrace of Ayn Rand, nor criticized his budget, which guts programs for the poor," Reese said.

"Ayn Rand's economic philosophy, her stress on selfishness -- I mean, this is something the bishops should talk about. ... This isn't public policy, this is philosophy and theology and principles, not prudential judgment," he said.

What Dolan will talk about in both Tampa and Charlotte remains unclear, however.

"Now, I think we have to wait and see what he prays," Reese said.

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