

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 29, 2012 at 3:52pm

Editorial: Dolan steps deeper into the fray

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial



Conventioneers pause in the prayer room during the second session of the 2012 Republican National Convention in Tampa, Fla., Aug. 28. (CNS/Reuters/Rick Wilking)

The news that Cardinal Timothy Dolan will offer the closing benediction at the Democratic National Convention is a welcome development, somewhat balancing the scales of Catholic participation in this year's versions of these quadrennial extravaganzas.

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Many would have preferred that the good cardinal simply tell suitors of each party to contact the local bishop if they desired a Catholic official as part of the convention set. That would have essentially nullified the political one-upmanship that motivated the invitation. Catholics are valuable swing voters, and presumably a sizeable number are still in play. The Republican organizers understand symbols, and the sometimes-jocular archbishop of New York, who has been in open battle with the Obama administration on several fronts, was a great catch.

Since Dolan assented to be at the Republicans' party, we're glad he'll be at the Democrats' bash as well. The symbol is somewhat neutralized.

Still, Dolan must realize this is all about politics, not prayer, and politics is still, as we asserted in an earlier editorial about his decision to take the Republican stage, a dangerous game.

Those who earlier were declaring the cleverness of Republicans for inviting Dolan -- and they included Mitt Romney and Barack Obama supporters -- were not referring to any opportunities to spread the Gospel or discuss Catholic doctrine or spirituality. They were assessing it as a politically smart move.

Some of those same voices now are saying Dolan's appearance before both conventions is evidence that he stands as a lone priest, above the fray, making his appearances only to pray. Right, just as a K Street lobbyist intends only the best for the democratic process.

To the contrary: By accepting the Democrats' invitation, Dolan steps deeper into the fray. And he steps into it as a Catholic leader, a cardinal heading one of the most powerful sees outside of Rome, and as president of one of the most influential national conferences of Catholic bishops on the planet.

He is, by symbol and reality, making both sides admit that Catholics are essential to winning a national election in the United States and that the church, for all of its internal conflicts and scandals, remains a player. But his appearances also further expose the fact that at this moment of great division within the culture, the church is hardly a place of unanimity, and Catholics no longer have a natural political home.

It is noteworthy, too, that the Democrats have offered a speaking spot to Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, head of NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby. Campbell, a lawyer by training, is a powerful advocate for society's poor and marginalized. Her view of government's responsibility for apportioning resources would seem far more in line with a century and a half of Catholic social teaching than would Republican vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan's budget proposals, which have been critiqued as morally deficient by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

If only politics and religion separated out so neatly. One need only look in on the recent discussion, moderated by public television's Bill Moyers, between Campbell and conservative scholar and writer Robert Royal of the Faith and Reason Institute to see the church at its best and the problems at their most complex.

While we have on these pages consistently advocated for a more involved and compassionate government than Royal proposes, the discussion between him and Campbell -- civil, constructive, well-informed, refreshingly temperate and intelligent -- demonstrated there is more than one way that well-intentioned people would apply papal teaching to the era's economic problems. The discussion was a glimpse at what compromises and mix of public and private initiatives might lead to solutions beyond the current legislative and ideological gridlock.

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Such discussion is rare, however, in the public square.

Religion's relationship to politics is never static and will always be subject to tensions. One inhabits a realm of never-ending conversion; the other, a world of deals and compromise. As the Catholic church knows, the relationship is essential to its work. The enormous effect the church's charitable outreach has

on the culture is due, in no small part, to federal funds.

In recent years, the bishops have been especially inept at the politics part of the equation. If Dolan intends to act on the symbol he establishes at the conventions -- an important national leader of Catholics and bishops alike -- he has set himself an enormous task. He will have to set an example of civility in matters political, defining the boundaries of political involvement for the bishops' conference, and reining in the most imprudent and outlandish hot actors in the conference, especially those who, as one bishop put it, have a "visceral" dislike for Obama. Dolan has taken a big step in the right direction by inviting both presidential candidates to the traditional Al Smith Dinner in New York. He's taken a great deal of heat for doing so, the most vicious from the right wing of church and politics, but that's part of a price he'll pay in establishing a new way of doing business.

Developing consensus among the bishops might be his greatest challenge. He can't have bishops elsewhere declaring, for instance, that infringement of the right to property is an intrinsic evil. As John Gehring of Faith in Public Life recently pointed out, the Vatican's Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states, quoting Pope John Paul II: "Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute and untouchable. 'On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone.' "

Every time a bishop calls socialism an "intrinsic evil" (certainly to the surprise of, say, our British, French or German friends), compares the president to Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, or makes exaggerated claims about religious freedom being in jeopardy, Dolan and the rest of the conference become easier to dismiss as serious moral arbiters in the culture. It is one thing to be part of the scenery on a convention stage every four years. Quite another to be a responsible and respected participant in the nation's ongoing political conversation.

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