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Keeping with tradition, Colbert lobs good-natured barbs at Smith dinner

by Beth Griffin by Catholic News Service

New York — Laughingly describing himself as America's most famous Catholic who as an 11-year-old altar boy put in his time "with the upp'in' and the downin', the crissin' and the crossin'," Stephen Colbert headlined the 68th annual dinner of the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation held Thursday at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

Colbert, host of "The Colbert Report" on Comedy Central, followed the tradition of the charity event by lobbing good-natured barbs at Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York and other religious, political and philanthropic leaders who shared the three-tiered dais at the charity event.

Addressing 1,000 guests in formal wear, Colbert said it "looked like we all showed up at the same Halloween party dressed as the Monopoly guy."

"I have great respect for Cardinal Dolan, though I do have to say, sir, it's not easy when you're wearing that outfit. In that cape and red sash, you look like a matador who's really let himself go."

Dolan responded with a huge grin.

The Al Smith dinner honors the memory of the former governor of New York, who was raised in poverty and was the first Catholic nominated by a major political party to run for president of the United States. Proceeds from the \$1,500-a-plate event help needy children in Greater New York. The foundation distributed \$1.8 million in grants after last year's dinner, including \$800,000 to organizations aiding victims of Hurricane Sandy.

Colbert said the robust Dolan came "this close" to being selected pope but he "blew it in the swimsuit

competition." He claimed Dolan was the first runner-up in the election and should be "warming up his blessing arm in the papal bullpen" in the event of a steroid issue with the winner.

Colbert pointed to the contrast between the elegant dinner in the grand ballroom of New York's most famous hotel and the low-key style of Pope Francis. "If Pope Francis was here, we probably wouldn't know it, because His Humbleness would be out washing the feet of the coat check guy."

"It's not just his humble lifestyle that gets my chasuble in a bunch," Colbert joked. The pope's focus away from hierarchical concerns and toward inclusion and redemption, even for atheists, "is off-message, which forces me to ask the eternal question, 'Is the Pope Catholic?' and, if not, where are bears going to the bathroom?"

Alfred E. Smith IV, Al Smith's great-grandson was the event's master of ceremonies. He said Colbert is "a man who is serious about both his craft and his Catholic faith."

Colbert, the youngest of 11 children, acknowledged "my parents' passionate obedience to *Humanae Vitae*," the 1968 encyclical that taught artificial birth control was morally wrong.

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Elaborating on the Catholic credentials, he said, "At this point in my life, I'm one-third buttermilk," because of years of church pancake breakfasts and Lenten pancake dinners at home.

Colbert said his late-night show is "the only one with a chaplain, (Jesuit) Father Jim Martin."

Al Smith "first shattered the stained-glass ceiling," he said. Even though John F. Kennedy was the country's only Catholic president, "we got close-ish in 2004 with John Kerry, who is deeply Catholic, in that listening to him talk was like attending a Latin Mass," Colbert said.

Turning almost serious for a moment, Colbert acknowledged that the evening generated millions of dollars to feed and house "the littlest among us." He then asked Dolan for a plenary indulgence.

Al Smith IV said the foundation raised \$3 million at the dinner, a record for a year in which presidential candidates did not attend. He said his great-grandfather's legacy still inspired leaders. "He knew he was never fighting against some Americans, but was fighting for all Americans."

The emcee quoted the speech Al Smith made when he accepted the 1928 Democratic presidential nomination, "Government should be constructive, not destructive; progressive, not reactionary. I am entirely unwilling to accept the old order of things as the best unless and until I become convinced that it cannot be made better."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt called Al Smith "the Happy Warrior." At the dinner, the foundation presented its first Happy Warrior Award to Brian T. Moynihan, CEO of Bank of America.

In closing remarks before offering the benediction, Dolan said the guests would "leave laughing" and "our joy is high as we realize our laughter will bring smiles to children in need and their mothers."

The invocation was delivered by Cardinal Edward Egan, retired archbishop of New York, who called Gov. Al Smith "one of New York's authentic heroes."

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