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Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Stephen Colbert to star in Catholic comedy slam

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jul. 25, 2012

Cardinal Timothy Dolan, left, and Stephen Colbert (RNS photos)

NEW YORK -- So who is the funniest Catholic in the Western world: New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan or Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert?

It's a tough call for anyone who has followed either man's impressive record of rim shots, but we may finally get an answer to that question when the cardinal and the comedian team up for a panel on faith and humor this September at Fordham University in the Bronx, N.Y.

"I'm looking forward to a great conversation with a terrific theologian and a gifted comedian. They are both," quipped Jesuit Fr. James Martin, a popular author. Martin will be moderating the Sept. 14 event, "The Cardinal and Colbert: Humor, Joy, and the Spiritual Life."

Martin's recent book, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, explores the relationship between humor and faith, and the priest said the panel wouldn't be just a couple of Catholic tummlers yukking it up for the audience -- or distracting the public from the many controversial stories about the church.

"This is just what the Catholic church needs," said Martin, who has been on "The Colbert Report" so many times that he is called the official chaplain of the Emmy-winning news parody program. "Being joyful does not mean that you overlook suffering or pain or even scandal."

Martin noted that the Book of Ecclesiastes says there is a time to mourn and a time to laugh. "In the Catholic church, we tend to mourn more than we tend to laugh. This panel is trying to help restore the balance."

Colbert is a lifelong Catholic whose spirituality was shaped in part by the loss of his father and two of his brothers in a plane crash when he was 10. The comedian credits his mother with imbuing him with a deep faith

through all the trials.

"She taught me to be grateful for my life regardless of what that entailed, and that's directly related to the image of Christ on the cross and the example of sacrifice that he gave us," Colbert told *The New York Times* earlier this year.

"What she taught me is that the deliverance God offers you from pain is not no pain -- it's that the pain is actually a gift. What's the option? God doesn't really give you another choice."

Today, Colbert is a married father of three, a churchgoing Catholic who sometimes teaches Sunday school at his New Jersey parish, a far cry from the right-wing blunderbuss he portrays on his popular cable show.

But even his bloviating on-screen persona manages to work Catholic riffs into the program on a regular basis. In one episode after Easter Sunday, Colbert came on looking hungover and confessed to having just ended a "Catholic bender."

Dolan is certainly no slouch when it comes to faith, and he's also pretty good in the humor department -- especially when he is joking at his own expense, usually about his ample girth.

"As we pass Radio City and pass the Ed Sullivan Theater and pass Times Square, the greatest challenge is to pass the hot dog carts and not stop," Dolan said after his appointment to New York.

In a similar vein, he once said: "My first pastoral letter's going to be a condemnation of light beer and instant mashed potatoes -- I hate those two things."

And to "60 Minutes," there was this one: "They asked me when I got here, 'Are you Cardinals, Mets, Brewers or Yankees?' And I said, 'When it comes to baseball, I think I can be pro-choice.'?"

Dolan, who is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has also made it clear he thinks humor is integral to the church's future.

"What weighs on me the most, is the caricature of the Catholic church as crabby, nay-saying, down in the dumps, discouraging, on the run," he told *The New York Times* in January. "And I'm thinking if there is anything that should be upbeat, affirming, positive, joyful, it should be people of faith."

If there was a potential pitfall for the Dolan-Colbert panel, it might have been that Dolan's ally, William Donohue of the Catholic League, has for months been campaigning to force Comedy Central's "Daily Show" star, Jon Stewart, to apologize for a satiric segment last April on the contraception mandate controversy that featured a photo of a manger over a woman's crotch.

But Donohue, head of the New York-based league, said Stewart "is a different kettle of fish" from Colbert. He said he has been on Colbert's show twice "and both times we had some fun" -- and he told Dolan as much.

"So ... no, I don't see a problem. If anything, given the dust-up between Stewart and me, Colbert is not likely to cross the line."

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