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Cardinal Dolan's Home Run at Al Smith Dinner

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Distinctly Catholic

The Al Smith Dinner last night was the capstone of a successful campaign this year: Cardinal Timothy Dolan is now universally acknowledged as the savviest politician in the U.S. of A. First, he was the only person on the dais last night to address both national conventions. Then, last night, he presided over the only one of the four face-to-face meetings of the two candidates at which no one will blame the moderator. (Rocco has the video here.)

Cardinal Dolan used the occasion, as it has been used in the past, to make jokes, to point out that even partisan opponents can put aside their differences on behalf of a common, worthy effort, in this case raising money for Catholic charities, to give an example of civility even in the midst of a tough campaign. Last night, as on previous occasions, there were no strong elbows thrown, just humor, no campaign donations solicited, only money raised for a good cause. Indeed, I thought Dolan defied the facile characterizations of either candidate that their opponent's campaign ads thrive on, when he noted that both candidates would probably prefer to be at home with their wives and families and that speaks volumes. Indeed it does and it is profoundly Catholic of Dolan to remark upon the fact.

Dolan, however, used the occasion for something else. He gave a forceful statement of the Church's concerns in the public square, speaking about "the un's" — the unemployed, the uninsured, the unwanted, the unwed mother, the innocent, fragile unborn baby in her womb, the undocumented, the un-housed, the unhealthy, the unfed, the undereducated. Government, Al Smith believed, should be on the side of these un's. I have used this phrasing myself to characterize the Church's stance in the world. I first heard it enunciated by John Carr, who recently stepped down as the bishops' principal advisor on government policy. I believe it captures the mission of the Church in the world because it speaks to what is at the heart of the Church, a commitment to Jesus who Himself stood with the un's of his day and who explained by word and example that He could always be found among the poor and the marginalized. You do not

honor God's word if you ever forget how the Christ (just as his prophets before him and his apostles after him) invariably took sides against those who were powerful and living in luxury, and for the suffering and oppressed," wrote the great Calvinist thinker and political activist Abraham Kuyper.

Kuyper also stood for another principle that Dolan addressed, the idea that liberalism's tendency to see man in an atomistic fashion, and the State as the sole agent of social regulation, is misguided, ignoring, even eliminating, the vital role played by organic social groups, most especially the family, but also churches and unions and communities. Kuyper, like his contemporary Pope Leo XIII, viewed society in more organic, less formal-contractual terms, that either the liberal State or the liberal economy permitted, and he was quick to criticize both an omnipotent State and an omnipotent market. Cardinal Dolan last night pointed out that it is not government's role to run roughshod over organizations like the Church and her ministries. He did not get specific: He did not need to. But, he made a point that was important for both candidates to hear, especially President Obama whose HHS mandate not only contradicts the Church's understanding of her role in society but contradicts the logic of Obama's own faith-based office and its efforts to enlist the aid of religious institutions in the effort to heal social ills, and does so while respecting the integrity and autonomy of those religious institutions.

Cardinal Dolan posted a blog item yesterday in which he answered critics who complained about his invitation to the candidates to attend the Al Smith dinner. Most of those critics objected to President Obama's presence. I hope Cardinal Dolan, and all the bishops, will take a moment and read the comments people posted. Such vitriol. Such hatred. One person calls Obama the "anti-Christ." His Eminence has returned to Rome for the Synod on the New Evangelization. I hope he will take a moment to ponder this question: Can such hate-filled people really be agents of evangelization? How have the bishops permitted, and in some cases encouraged, such vitriol within the Church? The archdiocese closed the comment section, but go and read some of the posts. And, I can only imagine what would have been posted today, after the pictures of Cardinal Dolan standing with both candidates dominated the airwaves.

Both candidates were pretty funny, by the way. Self-deprecation is a deeply humanizing thing to engage, and both engaged it pretty well, President Obama a bit more personally than Governor Romney. Obama made fun of his performance in the first debate while Romney made jokes about his not drinking. And, some \$5 million was raised for Catholic Charities. And, we learned that cardinal Dolan had access to Mark Zuckerberg's private jet! How did THAT happen? (Coincidentally, the movie "The Social Network" was playing at the same time as the dinner last night!)

Most importantly, the night made a profound point, one that Cardinal Dolan clearly understands. Simply put, there are things that transcend politics. One of those things is our shared commitment to the nation, a commitment that we argue about all the time precisely because it is shared and vital. The photo of Dolan arm-in-arm with the president clearly makes some people nuts, but that photo demonstrates something important to know about Cardinal Dolan: He never reduces other human beings to their political significance, he sees them as people, people with whom he may disagree and disagree profoundly, but people nonetheless. Is that not the moral intuition at the heart of the pro-life cause? Is that not the moral intuition at the heart of our Catholic commitment to social justice? For us, there are no "un's" and when our society considers some people "un's" we stand with them. It was a great moment for the Cardinal-Archbishop of New York and for the Catholic Church and for the country.

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