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Cardinal Timothy Dolan defends Obama invitation to Al Smith Dinner

Chris Lisee | Aug. 15, 2012

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan defended his invitation of President Barack Obama to the annual Al Smith Dinner in October, saying he is trying to encourage civility and dialogue amid a bitter battle with the White House over abortion rights and access to contraception.

Dolan has received "stacks of mail protesting the invitation to President Obama," he wrote in a Tuesday blog post. At issue are Obama's new health care regulations, which require employers to provide insurance plans that cover contraceptive services for women.

Conservatives and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops -- of which Dolan is president -- have criticized the regulations, which they say abridge the religious freedom and conscience rights of faith-based employers.

But the nonpartisan charity dinner is a time for civility, engagement, and dialogue, Dolan wrote.

"Those who started the dinner 67 years ago believed that you can accomplish a lot more by inviting folks of different political loyalties to an uplifting evening, rather than in closing the door to them," Dolan wrote.

The Al Smith Dinner is a lighthearted ritual of American politics held late in the campaign. The white-tie affair offers a rare glimpse of candidates exchanging jokes instead of barbs.

Invitations are traditionally extended to both presidential candidates during election years. Obama and presumed GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney have both agreed to speak at the dinner.

Dolan said the dinner exemplifies the American value of free religious exercise, and called it an opportunity for civility and dialogue. He responded to critics by portraying Obama's invitation as the lesser of two evils.

"Some have told me the invitation is a scandal," Dolan wrote. "That charge weighs on me, as it would on any person of faith, but especially a pastor, who longs to give good example, never bad. So, I apologize if I have given such scandal. I suppose it's a case of prudential judgment: would I give more scandal by inviting the two candidates, or by not inviting them?"

Dolan argued his approach took the moral high road by accepting and encouraging dialogue among those with different opinions.

"In the end, I'm encouraged by the example of Jesus, who was blistered by his critics for dining with those some considered sinners; and by the recognition that, if I only sat down with people who agreed with me, and I with them, or with those who were saints, I'd be taking all my meals alone," he wrote.

The Al Smith Dinner, hosted by the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation as a tribute to the former New York governor who in 1928 became the first Catholic to win a major party's presidential nomination, will take place

Oct. 18 at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City. The foundation provides support for needy children in the Archdiocese of New York.

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