Opinion
Editorial

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, and Democratic presidential nominee and U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris are pictured in a combination photo. (OSV News/Bob Roller/Reuters/Brendan Mcdermid)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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One could almost imagine the tears welling up in his eyes as New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan lamented the rejection he received from Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate for president, of his invitation to the annual Al Smith charity dinner.

He said he was "doubly disappointed" at her refusal to attend. The cardinal has tried to convince the world that she is receiving bad advice. Others have tried to convince her that a change of mind would allow her to show civility, to elevate political discourse, to show she doesn't have anything against Catholics and so on.

Perhaps it would be best to stop here to collect our breath and spend a moment or two reflecting on just who should be placed on the spot for engaging in less-than-civil behavior, as well as contributing to the diminishment of Catholic identity and credibility in the public square.

Even in this era of the endless gush of stuff coming at us on every manner of device, it is possible to cull reality from it all. In the case of Trump, the material almost outruns social media's ability to keep up.

New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan waves to the audience after being introduced at the 78th annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City, on Oct. 19, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

But first, a quick look back at the cardinal's role in all of this, which extends to a well-reported recording of a phone call he made to Trump with other Catholic leaders in 2020. The two exhibited a kind of unctuous, ecclesial-political bromance, the former president declaring the cardinal a "great gentleman" and a "great friend of mine." He also gave a nod to an implicit quid pro quo to paying attention to what his eminence "asks for."

The cardinal, the first to speak on the call, said he was "honored to be the lead-off batter, and the feelings are mutual, sir." He also joked that he called the president so many times in the preceding months that his mother in Missouri voiced a bit of jealousy.

He also hailed the then-president for his support for Catholic schools, saying, "We need you more than ever." Trump, in turn, declared himself the "best [president] in the history of the Catholic Church."

Cringy as all of that may be, the reality is much worse. The record on Trump's part is extensive, but besmirched by actions such as inciting an insurrection, paying off a porn star for her silence and placing children in cages at the border and separating them from their parents.

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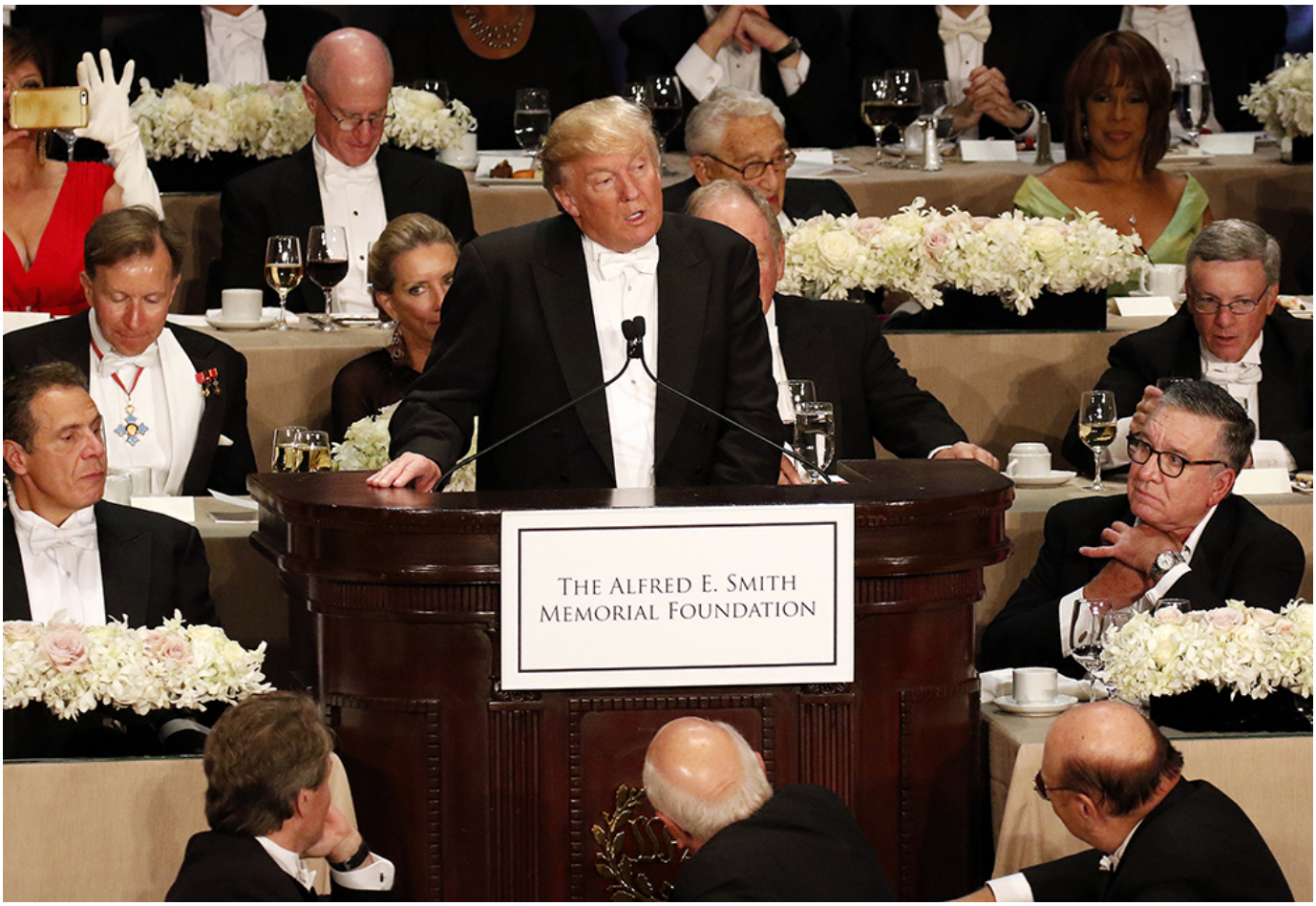
There's lots more, of course. It's all been out there for the public to view. But it seems we've become so numb to his destruction of norms that behavior that would have disqualified someone from running for dogcatcher in a previous era is now tolerated at the level of the presidency.

The mistake — and the cardinal is hardly the first or last to make it — is to judge the moment as if it were somehow still attached to a degree of normalcy, or what we've always known in presidential politics.

Yes, the Al Smith dinner was once a place where, even amid the sharp-elbow politics of a presidential campaign, normal humans could sit with each other, share a meal and some levity and walk away with dignity and reputation intact. Trump changed all that. And it is absurd at this point to act otherwise.



Then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump speaks during the 71st annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner Oct. 20, 2016, in New York City. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The sin here is not that Kamala Harris had the good sense to reply, "No thank you, I'm previously engaged." The real scandal is that the good Catholic cardinal of the great city of New York would not have the courage to say, this year, that the current Republican candidate is a walking example of so much the Catholic Church finds repugnant in today's politics that he would suspend the normal invitations.

The real controversy is that an event that touts its history of raising funds for society's most needy is going to host someone who is one of the culture's greatest

threats to that kind of caring. The real outrage is that Trump, given the public nature and extent of his repulsive record, should be invited to a fundraiser for an organization, Catholic Charities, that has long worked in the trenches to save and transform lives on society's farthest margins. It is tragic that the guest of honor this year will be someone whose personal example and policy wishes are in a collision course with the principles of Catholic social teaching.

We are triply disappointed, Cardinal Dolan, that in the name of the church and its witness to the wider culture, you did not suspend the norm this year and invite someone worthy of the event's cause. We are disappointed you didn't have the courage to stand up to Trump, a looming threat to the democratic ideals that allow the church to host such a high-profile public gathering.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.
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