



Republican presidential nominee former President Donald Trump and former first lady Melania Trump arrive for the 79th annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner, Oct. 17 in New York. (AP photo/Julia Demaree Nikhinson)



by Camillo Barone

NCR staff reporter

[View Author Profile](#)

[cbarone@ncronline.org](mailto:cbarone@ncronline.org)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

New York — October 18, 2024

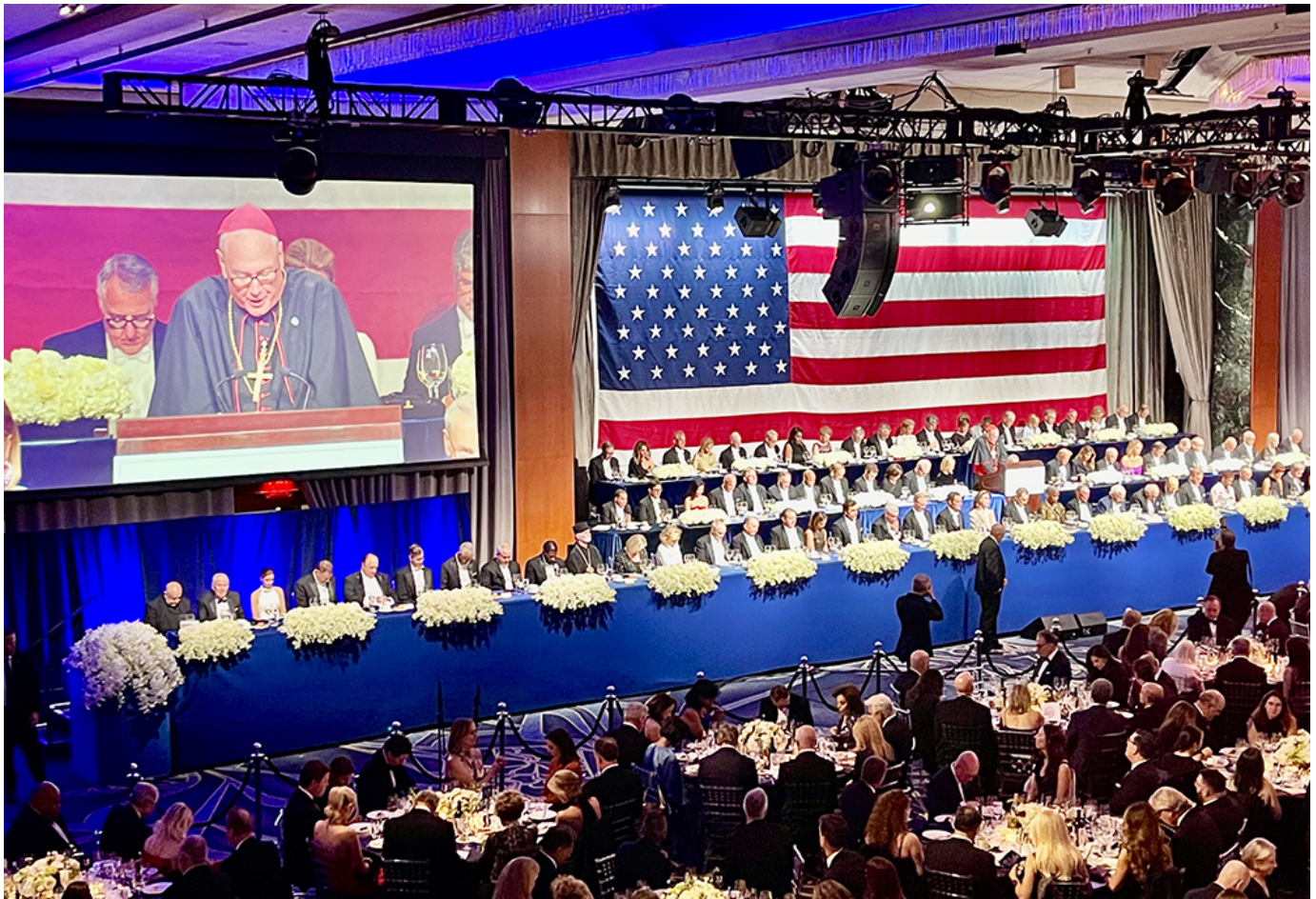
[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Former President Donald Trump delivered a sharp-tongued speech at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner on Thursday night (Oct. 17), aiming barbs at Democrats, particularly his rival and fundraiser no-show Vice President Kamala Harris.

"These days, it's really a pleasure [to go] anywhere in New York without a subpoena for my appearance," Trump began, drawing laughs. "I have to be careful, however, to understand that this will be the first time in the history of this event where jokes will be fact-checked."

Named for New York Gov. Al Smith, the first Catholic to run as a major-party candidate for U.S. president, the dinner traditionally has brought together the two presidential candidates for a night of what the New York Archdiocese described as "nonpartisan" and "self-deprecatory" good humor, while raising millions for Catholic Charities of New York.

Harris' absence [generated a lot of political debate](#) regarding [the wisdom of the decision](#), with New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan suggesting that it would have ramifications among Catholic voters. Both the [Trump](#) and [Harris](#) campaigns have launched efforts to woo the [so-called Catholic vote](#).



New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan leads a prayer at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner Oct. 17, the fundraiser for Catholic charities in New York at the New York Hilton Midtown. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

It marked the first time in nearly four decades that a major-party presidential candidate has not attended the high-profile event. In 1984, Democratic nominee Walter Mondale skipped the dinner during his campaign against then-President Ronald Reagan.

The Democratic nominee instead appeared in a prerecorded video with comedian Molly Shannon, who reprised her "Saturday Night Live" role as geeky Catholic student Mary Katherine Gallagher. In the playful exchange, Shannon's character advised Harris to avoid lying, citing the commandment against bearing false witness.

"Indeed," Harris quipped, "especially thy neighbor's election results." The dialogue blended humor with religious references, culminating in a light-hearted discussion



about forgiveness and the resilience of Catholic values.

In his monologue, Trump adopted a stand-up comedy approach, sparing little in his attacks. His jabs at Harris and Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, her running mate, were pointed and sometimes harsh. "This guy is calling us weird," Trump said of Walz, adding, "but this was weird that the Democrat candidate is not here with us tonight."

Trump continued, "She's in Michigan receiving Communion from [Michigan Governor] Gretchen Whitmer," mocking Harris' efforts to rally support in a key battleground state.

"Right now," Trump continued, "we have someone in the White House who can barely talk, barely put together two coherent sentences, who seems to have mental faculties of a child. There's a person that has nothing going. No intelligence whatsoever. But enough about Kamala Harris."

Some remarks were met with groans from the audience, reminiscent of the 2016 dinner when Trump's jokes about Hillary Clinton were poorly received. He added a joke aimed at the demographics of Harris' supporters: "There's a group called 'White Dudes for Harris' ... but I'm not worried about them at all because their wives and their wives' lovers are all voting for me."

## Advertisement

Shannon told the vice president that fact-checking would be done by Jesus.

After the gag with Shannon, Harris took a more serious tone at the end of her recorded message, addressing the audience about the importance of setting aside political differences to support the charitable efforts of the Catholic Church. She highlighted the church's work in providing education, health care, and disaster relief, while calling on attendees to "recommit to reaching across divides" in pursuit of common ground.

Following Trump's speech, Ammar Moussa, the Harris-Walz 2024 rapid response director, blasted Trump's performance. Moussa said that Trump "struggled to read scripted notes written by his handlers" and complained about the absence of a teleprompter. He further accused the former president of stumbling over his words and becoming frustrated when his jokes did not resonate with the audience.

About 1,500 guests from the business, political, social and religious highest spheres — who paid \$5,000 per table seat, as well as donations — took part in this year's edition at the New York Hilton Midtown. The dinner raised more than \$10 million, said Mary Erdoes, vice chair of the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation and CEO of the asset and wealth management division of J.P. Morgan.

In her opening speech, Erdoes also hinted at a potential Trump's electoral victory, saying directly while looking at him and making the sign of the cross, "This is the third time the 45th president of the United States has been at the Al Smith dinner. And they say the third time is a charm, and so we're hoping it's a charm. And we're really hoping for that. You never disappoint. Your wit is absolutely fabulous, and all of us together are going to hope for the best."

In addition to former president Trump, former first lady Melania Trump and the prerecorded video of Vice President Kamala Harris, among those in attendance were House Speaker Mike Johnson, former independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr., New York Democratic Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, and CEOs, presidents and board members of the largest American banks, investment funds and multinational companies.



Comedian Jim Gaffigan, master of ceremonies at the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner Oct. 17, addresses the crowd at the fundraiser for Catholic charities in New York at the New York Hilton Midtown. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Comedian Jim Gaffigan was the dinner's master of ceremonies. He began his speech with a jab at the socioeconomic makeup of the attendees, saying, "You're all thinking about it. Let me just cut to the point and point out who's not here. And of course, I'm talking about the middle class, that filthy group of people."

He also poked fun at former first lady Melania Trump, referencing a biblical teaching: "Jesus taught us to forgive seven times, not seven times, but 70 times seven. And Melania, you may be the first person to actually reach that. Congratulations."

Gaffigan addressed the nation's political divisions. "I think we'd all agree that we live in divided times, and whoever is elected in November, I hope they establish an initiative to heal the divide that exists in this country," Gaffigan said. "And I have a great name for this. It could be called Project 2025."

During a Friday morning appearance on "Fox & Friends," Trump revealed that "a couple of people from Fox [News]" helped him write his jokes for the dinner. When host Steve Doocy said that "a lot of Democrats" often turn to "Saturday Night Live" and "The Tonight Show" staffers for assistance in writing their speeches for comical events like the Al Smith or White House Correspondents' Dinner and asked Trump where he got his jokes, Trump responded, "Well, I've had a lot of people helping, a lot of people. A couple of people from Fox, actually — I shouldn't say that, but they wrote some jokes, and for the most part, I didn't like any of them, right?"

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)