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Jim Gaffigan attends the MusiCares Person of the Year Gala in Los Angeles Feb. 2, 2024. (OSV News/Mario Anzuoni, Reuters)



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The next time former President Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris face off before a huge audience, New York Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan likely will sit between them as host and Catholic comic Jim Gaffigan will serve as master of ceremonies.

The four are expected to share a multi-tiered dais with political, business, social and church luminaries at the 79th Dinner of the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation. The Oct. 17 event is already fully subscribed and will draw 1,500 generous guests to the grand ballroom of the New York Hilton Midtown. At \$5,000 a plate, the soiree will raise millions of dollars for charitable organizations associated with the Archdiocese of New York.

As of Sept. 17, neither presidential candidate has confirmed his or her participation at the gala.

By tradition, the speakers poke gentle fun at themselves and others while honoring the memory of former four-term New York Democratic Gov. Al Smith, a legendary champion of the downtrodden and the first Catholic to be nominated for president of the United States by a major party.

The annual event is always popular on the New York autumn social calendar, but in presidential election years, when the candidates are invited to speak at the dinner, it's a must-attend, see-and-be-seen event for many.

In 2023, centenarian statesman Henry A. Kissinger, in one of his last public appearances, held the rapt attention of 900 dinner guests as he delivered a compelling message of warning and hope.

Gaffigan announced his selection as Master of Ceremonies in a Sept. 6 post to his X (formerly Twitter) account, which featured a copy of the formal dais invitation naming the featured speakers.

"I'm so honored to be MC-ing this year's Al Smith Memorial Dinner on October 17th. Too bad I don't recognize those two names in the middle of the invitation. Anyone ever heard of them?" Gaffigan posted, dryly referencing the two presidential candidates.

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Gaffigan is an Illinois-born stand-up comedian, actor, writer and producer. His material is self-deprecating and built around observations about parenthood, eating, laziness and religion. He is a 1988 graduate of Georgetown University. Gaffigan, his wife Jeannie and their five children are parishioners of the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral in Lower Manhattan.

"Jim Gaffigan is one of the funniest comedians in the business and was a terrific emcee for our dinner in 2018. We're thrilled to have him back to serve in that role in 2024," said Joseph Zwilling, the New York Archdiocese's communications director.

The headliner at the 2018 dinner was Ambassador Nikki R. Haley, the U.S. envoy to the United Nations at the time.

At the 2018 event, Gaffigan quipped, "Unlike many Catholics in America who were raised Catholic, I am still Catholic and I still go to church every Sunday. Mostly, I'm afraid to tell my wife I don't want to go."

Gaffigan riffed on his wife's large family and said a movie outing one Christmas included 30 people. "That's not a group, it's a flash mob. People thought we were from a church. To put it in perspective, Jesus only walked around with 12," he said.

According to a news release, the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation in 2023 awarded grants of \$5 million to organizations dedicated to bringing hope to the poor, sick, and underprivileged within the Archdiocese of New York regardless of race, creed, or color. In 2024, the foundation will distribute a record \$7.3 million raised in 2023.

One of the featured grantees is the Elizabeth Seton Children's Center in Yonkers, New York. It is the region's largest, specialty, long-term care center for children with complex medical needs and those who are ventilator-dependent. It is sponsored by the Sisters of Charity Ministry Network.

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