

Obama, McCain to address Al Smith dinner in New York Oct. 16

NEW YORK - The Democratic and Republican presidential nominees both have agreed to be guest speakers at the Al Smith dinner Oct. 16 in New York, the Archdiocese of New York announced Sept. 17.

The archdiocese said Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain would “share nonpartisan good humor before an audience of civic, business and social leaders.”

The joint appearance three weeks before the Nov. 4 election would continue a longtime tradition of presidential candidates addressing the annual fundraising dinner - a tradition that has been followed off and on in recent years.

The last pair of candidates to appear together in a presidential election year were Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore in 2000. But in 2004, Bush and his Democratic challenger for the presidency, Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts, a Catholic who supports legalized abortion, were not invited to speak.

Dinner organizers instead invited former Republican President George H.W. Bush and former New York Gov. Hugh Carey, a Democrat.

In 1996, when Cardinal John J. O'Connor was reportedly upset with President Bill Clinton because of his veto of the partial-birth abortion ban, the board of the Alfred Emanuel Smith Memorial Foundation invited the vice-presidential candidates - Vice President Gore and Republican Jack Kemp.

Cardinal Edward M. Egan of New York, who will preside at the dinner, called the dinner “a splendid opportunity to recall the spirit of ‘the happy warrior,’ Gov. Al Smith.”

“It is my fervent hope that his example will continue to inspire those who hold elected office to provide compassionate care for our less fortunate brothers and sisters in the Lord,” the cardinal said in a statement.

The late Gov. Smith was the first Catholic to be nominated for the presidency by a major political party when he ran unsuccessfully against Republican Herbert Hoover in 1928. He is credited by historians with paving the way for the candidacy of President John F. Kennedy, the only Catholic elected U.S. president.

The annual dinner - now in its 63rd year - and the Smith foundation have raised millions to provide support for the sick, poor and underprivileged in the New York area.

In statements released by the New York Archdiocese, both Sens. McCain and Obama said they looked forward to the event.

"The most important lesson I have learned is that to sustain my self-respect for a lifetime, it would be necessary for me to have the honor of serving something greater than my self-interest," said Sen. McCain.

"The work of the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation serves as a reminder that the only way to truly know happiness is through dedicated service, and I am appreciative of the work the foundation does on behalf of Americans in need," he added.

Sen. Obama said he looked forward "to speaking before an organization with such a remarkable history of compassion and commitment to helping those in need."

"As a community organizer and civil rights lawyer I fought for justice and equality for the poor and underprivileged, and I'm in this race to continue that fight and restore the American dream," he added.

Sen. McCain also addressed the Al Smith dinner in 2005.