

Quiet faith lies behind satirist's blowhard facade

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue

When comedian Stephen Colbert brought his act to Capitol Hill in September and stole the spotlight with his satirical shtick, no one was more surprised than lawmakers. "You run your show," scolded House Judiciary Committee chairman John Conyers, "we run the committee."

When Colbert finally let his well-coiffed hair down and got serious about the "really, really hard work" done by migrant farmworkers, even more people were surprised when the funnyman gave a glimpse of his private faith.

"And, you know, 'whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers,' and these seem like the least of our brothers right now," Colbert said, quoting Jesus. "Migrant workers suffer and have no rights."

It was a different kind of religious message than Colbert typically delivers on Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, where he often pokes fun at religion—even his own Catholic Church—in pursuit of a laugh. Yet it was the kind of serious faith that some of his fellow Catholics say makes him a serious, covert and potent evangelist for their faith.

"Anytime you talk about Jesus or Christianity respectfully the way he does, it is evangelization," said Jim Martin, associate editor of the Jesuit magazine *America*, who has appeared on Colbert's show four times. "He is preaching the gospel, but I think he is doing it in a very postmodern way."

It's a contrast

to Glenn Beck, the kind of right-wing media icon Colbert loves to skewer. While Beck's recent Restoring Honor rally in Washington was headed by a conservative broadcaster who embraces a mix of theological patriotism, Colbert's March to Keep Fear Alive on October 30 was planned by a man of more private faith who leaves his God-and-country religion in the television studio.

Colbert has said that he

attends church, observes Lent and teaches Sunday school. "I love my church, and I'm a Catholic who was raised by intellectuals, who were very devout," he told *Time Out* magazine. "I was raised to believe that you could question the church and still be a Catholic."

His

on-air persona is a bloviating holier-than-thou conservative whose orthodox Catholicism is part of what makes him funny. On air, Colbert has chided the pope as an "ecu-menace" for his outreach to other faiths, referred to non-Catholics as "heathens and the excommunicated" and called those who believe in evolution "monkey men."

Writer-editor

Diane Houdek has tracked Colbert's on-air references to Catholicism on her blog, Catholic Colbert. When he recites the Nicene Creed or Bible verses from memory, as he did in 2006, it shows how foundational his faith is, she said.

"He is moving in an extremely secular world—it is hard to get a lot more secular than Comedy Central," Houdek said. "Yet I feel he is able to witness to his faith in a very subtle way, a very quiet way to an audience that has maybe never encountered this before."

It's particularly powerful to Catholics, Houdek

said, when the lines blur between Colbert's personal faith and that of his on-air alter ego. She pointed to a 2007 segment in which his character reveled in Pope Benedict XVI's statement that non-Catholic faiths were "defective." "Catholicism is clearly superior," Colbert

crowded beside a picture of the pope. "Don't believe me? Name one Protestant denomination that can afford a \$660 million sexual abuse settlement." It wasn't just funny, but "powerful," Houdek said. "He really made a strong criticism of the church."

Colbert's personal opinions about Catholicism are not usually so clearly displayed, and his variety of guests offers little clues. His Catholic guests have ranged from the theological left—openly gay Catholic writer Andrew Sullivan—to the far right—Catholic League president William Donohue.

Houdek said she regularly fields comments from readers who believe they've found a fellow traveler in Colbert. "You can't pin him down," Houdek said. "He becomes kind of a Rorschach test for what the viewer's beliefs are."

Colbert's show also tackles the difficult questions that Catholicism and other religions try to answer. With Martin as a guest, he has wrestled with poverty, the value of suffering and the role of doubt in faith. "He manages to raise the big questions very deftly," Martin said. "I think that is a great catechesis for many people because he might be reaching Catholics who never go to church, and he is speaking to them in language they can understand."

Kurt C. Wiesner, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Littleton, New Hampshire, writes a blog about religion and popular culture. Watching Colbert's congressional testimony, he saw something that reaches beyond Catholicism.

"He offered a human witness, without a doubt," Wiesner said. "He gave witness to what Christians are often called to do, but the message isn't be a Christian like him. It is that one's faith calls us to be engaged with our fellow human beings." —RNS