



Catholic Scholar Available To Comment On Pope's First Visit To America

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DURHAM, N.H. - Michele Dillon, a Catholic scholar and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, is available to discuss the significance of and response by U.S. Catholics to Pope Benedict XVI's first visit to the United States.

Dillon can be reached for interviews at michele.dillon@unh.edu or 781-239-3552 (home).

Pope Benedict will visit the United States April 15-20, 2008. The pope's first visit to the United States is significant for both pastoral and political reasons, according to Dillon.

From a pastoral standpoint, it is important for Pope Benedict to connect with and speak directly to U.S. Catholics in their country, as it helps give Rome and the Vatican a human face. It also may help U.S. Catholics rethink their initial impressions of Pope Benedict and his papacy -- especially given his previous role in charge of the most important office within the church, The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith -- and his close association, as Cardinal Ratzinger, with the reaffirmation of conservative tenets on sexuality and other contested issues.

Politically, Pope Benedict will be speaking to and being heard by all Americans, which is very important to the Catholic Church.

"The Catholic Church has long considered non-Catholics a significant audience. Given the political, economic and cultural dominance of the U.S. in global matters, Pope Benedict will especially want to underscore certain ethical tenets of human and civic society, and perhaps challenge the United States to take a stronger global leadership role in creating a more just world society," Dillon says.

"The opportunity to speak at the United Nations will likely see Pope Benedict elaborate on the church's teachings concerning the moral obligations of wealth, economic redistribution, human trafficking, abortion and population issues, curbing materialism and consumerism, and the stewardship of the physical environment too," she says.

On the third anniversary of his election as pope, Pope Benedict will address the United Nations in New York City. He also will hold Masses at Nationals Stadium in Washington, D.C., and Yankee Stadium in New York City, and an inter-religious event at the John Paul II Cultural Center.

"Every Catholic will be listening for some reference to their favorite issue and for affirmation of their viewpoint. Obviously not all will be satisfied. In general, we should expect Pope Benedict to cover the core life issues from stem cells and abortion to the death penalty,"

Dillon says. "And New England Catholics will additionally be listening for acknowledgement of the church's failures regarding the sexual abuse of children by priests."

Although Pope Benedict does not have the appeal to youth as the charismatic Pope John Paul II, Dillon believes there is a core group of young people, such as those who have traveled to Europe for international Catholic youth events, who will want to see him.

"Many young American Catholics today share the Vatican's views, such as on abortion -- though not so much on gay rights -- and many will be attracted to seeing and hearing Pope Benedict, not because of his personality but because he is the head of the Catholic Church," she says.

Dillon has written extensively on Catholicism in the United States and elsewhere, and has been especially interested in the institutional and cultural processes that enable Catholics who selectively disagree with aspects of Catholic teaching to remain loyal to Catholicism. She also has examined the political engagement of the Catholic Church, and of other churches and activist organizations in public moral debates in different western countries. She is the author of "Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power."

Links of Interest

Photo of Michele Dillon:

<http://www.unh.edu/news/img/liberalarts/micheledillon.jpg>.

Audio comments from Michele Dillon:

<http://www.prnewswire.com/mnr/unh/32655/>

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