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UNH Media Relations

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Media Relations

February 27, 2013

Catholic Scholar Available to Discuss Papacy and American Catholics



Michele Dillon, a scholar of Catholicism and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire.

DURHAM, N.H. – Michele Dillon, a scholar of Catholicism and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, is available to comment on the election of the new pope, key issues facing the Roman Catholic Church and the next pope, and how American Catholics view the papacy. She also can discuss Pope Benedict's legacy and how he was thought of by the laity.

Dillon provides the following commentary.

American Catholics and the Papacy

American Catholics appreciate the symbolic and historical significance of the papacy as part of the Catholic tradition. But they – including the rapidly growing number of Hispanic Catholics – do not have a great deal of regard in general for the teaching authority claimed by the Vatican. Today, just over a quarter of non-Hispanic Catholics and just over a third of Hispanic Catholics regard the Vatican's teaching important as an element of Catholicism that is personally important to them.

Additional information:

"What is core to American Catholics in 2011," Michele Dillon, National Catholic Reporter, <http://ncronline.org/news/catholics-america/what-core-american-catholics-2011>.

"American Catholics in the 21st Century," Michele Dillon, Walter H. Capps Center Series, University of California at Santa Barbara, <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/American-Catholics-in-the-Twenty-First-Century-23428>

American Catholic Commitment to the Church

Despite recent declines in American denominational attachments and church attendance, the trends in Catholics' commitment are relatively stable, with one in five Catholics highly committed to the church.

Additional information:

“Trends in Catholic commitment stable over time,” Michele Dillon, National Catholic Reporter, <http://ncronline.org/news/catholics-america/trends-catholic-commitment-stable-over-time>.

Hispanic Catholics

As Hispanic Catholics in the U.S. achieve upward mobility, they may become a little more conservative on social justice/concern for the poor, but currently many of the issues that are especially important to Catholics in Latin America are also very important to Hispanic Catholics in the United States. The election of a new pope always provides hope that certain adjustments will be made in what the Vatican makes as its priorities; the Catholic tradition has many strands, and even a pope made of the same cloth as Benedict, can nonetheless choose to give greater visibility and attention to the church’s concern for the poor and immigrants.

Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI

As head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger for 24 years prior to being elected pope, Pope Benedict was responsible for articulating and enforcing official church teaching on highly contested issues, including homosexuality and women’s ordination. As pope, he emphasized time and again the threat against the church and faith in general posed by the forces of secularism, especially in Europe where he witnessed historically Catholic countries embracing legislation extending on divorce, abortion, and gay rights. But he also spoke out against economic inequality and emphasized the responsibility of highly developed countries toward disadvantaged economies and societies.

Pope Benedict also will be remembered for his embroilment in the sex abuse crisis that is still roiling the church in several countries, and for what some observers will assess as a hesitant response on his part as pope in publicly acknowledging and appreciating its depth though he eventually conceded that it was ‘the sin within the church.’”

About Michele Dillon

Michele 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,” “In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice, and Change,” and the forthcoming book “American Catholics in Transition.”

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PHOTO

Michele Dillon, a scholar of Catholicism and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire.

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

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