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Media Relations

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Catholic Scholar Available to Discuss Resignation and Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI



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

Michele Dillon, a scholar of Catholicism and professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire, is available to discuss the resignation and legacy of Pope Benedict XVI.

Dillon can discuss Benedict's legacy, how he was thought of by the laity, Benedict's decision to resign, and key issues facing the Roman Catholic Church and the next pope. The last time a sitting pope resigned was Pope Gregory XII in 1415.

"This is highly unexpected news, although given Pope Benedict's age and his deteriorating health, it strikes me as a very moral, courageous, selfless, and responsible act on his part. The church and Catholics around the world are going through a lot of changes and challenges, and its leader really needs to be in the whole of his health. Pope John Paul II was admired by many for his tenaciousness in the face of illness, but given the extensive leadership duties of the pope and the mental and physical energy necessary, it makes a great deal of sense for Pope Benedict to resign," Dillon says.

Other than for his resignation, Pope Benedict will be remembered primarily for his intellectualism and his concern for the integrity of Catholic moral teaching, according to Dillon.

"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," she says.

"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,’ ” Dillon says.

Although Pope Benedict is not a charismatic person in the same cloth of Pope John Paul II, according to Dillon, he has traveled to several countries, including the United States, UK, and South America, and received a very warm welcome.

“His reception from the young people who attended the various World Youth Days over which he presided was also remarkably enthusiastic. The popularity of the pope, however, is not sufficient to change Catholic behavior. American Catholics today, just as during John Paul II’s tenure, continue to value Catholicism while they disagree with many of the strictures imposed by official church teaching, such as contraception, divorce, and same-sex behavior,” 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,” “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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