

Media Relations

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Catholic Scholar Available to Comment on Pope Francis's First Year



Michele Dillon is 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 Pope Francis's first year as pope, including his style and tone, reactions from lay Catholics, his popularity and whether this has translated into an increase in Mass attendance, and issues such as economic inequality and the sexual abuse scandal. The pope was elected March 13, 2013.

Dillon provides the following commentary.

A New Style and Tone

From the first days of his papacy, Francis quickly demarcated a new style and tone for the church. His friendly, humble, and warm demeanor, the simplicity of his household arrangements, his preference for community and collegiality over pomp and ceremony, his outreach to ordinary people, and his emphasis on pastoral care are all very significant gestures and ones widely appreciated by Catholic laity.

Francis's denunciations of the grandiosity and narcissism of church officials, his criticisms of a power-suffused Vatican culture, and his radical acknowledgement of the church's obsession with sexuality and abortion have injected amazement and wonderment among

Catholics that any senior church official, never mind a pope, is saying these things – even as what he is saying is, in the long-held views of many Catholics, pointing out the obvious.

Lay Reactions

Most American Catholics are moderate or liberal Catholics, and Francis's papacy reaffirms for them their commitment to the church principles of Vatican II – greater respect for lay expertise and everyday lived experience, greater collegiality in institutional decision-making, and recognition, as Francis has stated, that contemporary culture and society is not God-less.

Conservative Catholics, understandably, have been taken aback by some of Francis's statements – none more so than his remarks about the church's obsession with abortion. Since *Roe v Wade* legalized abortion in 1973, and especially during and since John Paul II's papacy, Catholic bishops and activists have made abortion restrictions their consistent core priority, surpassing all other moral questions. Thus when Francis said that it was not necessary to talk about abortion (and sexual issues) "all the time," and that the church needs to find a new balance in its moral edifice, that was in a sense a reprimand to church leaders and others who are so dedicated to the anti-abortion cause..

A Popular Pope, But No Increase in Mass Attendance

The consistently favorable publicity that Francis has garnered across a wide range of diverse audiences – for

example, being selected as Time's Person of the Year, and on the cover of Rolling Stone and The New Yorker – and his popularity among Catholics and non-Catholics alike is significant.

Nonetheless, while many Catholics appreciate Francis's remarkable pastoral openness on issues such as, for example, gay rights, divorce/remarriage, and cohabiting, this does not necessarily translate into a renewed or increased commitment among American Catholics to the church. As Pew survey data indicates, there is no apparent increase in Catholics' self-reported Mass attendance in the past year. And even though increased numbers of American and non-American Catholics might flock to Rome to see the pope, this does not mean that they are going to change their minds about the permissive latitude they see in what it means to be "a good Catholic."

Issues: Economic Inequality, Sexual Abuse Scandal

Francis's frequent comments on economic inequality have received a lot of media and political attention. The surprise is not that he has spoken so forcefully about economic issues – similar arguments were made by Benedict and are part of well over one hundred years of Catholic social justice teaching. But, in part, due to his style and gentle forcefulness, and in part due to the increased national and global evidence of economic polarization, more people seem to be listening.

Finally, many are surprised that Pope Francis has been relatively reticent on the church's sex abuse scandal and has not met with victims of priests' sex abuse (unlike his predecessor). His paucity of attention to this issue is all the more noteworthy given his strong emphasis on his and the church's obligation to heal the wounded.

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 disagree with aspects of Catholic teaching to remain loyal to Catholicism. She is co-author of the recently published "American Catholics in Transition," and 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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