

UNH Catholicism Expert to Comment on Funeral and Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI

Tuesday, January 3, 2023



DURHAM, N.H.—The funeral of Pope Benedict XVI will be a unique and unprecedented ceremony—reshaping traditional papal burials.

Benedict resigned in 2013, surprisingly announcing that he would continue to live within the Vatican and be the first to take the title of Pope Emeritus. Michele Dillion, a professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire and an expert in Catholicism, can talk about the historical significance of Benedict’s resignation, how it changes the funeral ceremony and the troubled legacy he leaves behind.

Dillon can be reached directly at michele.dillon@unh.edu or 781-915-7360.

“Benedict’s legacy will always be overshadowed by his role as the



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moral enforcer of the Church's opposition to gay rights, women's ordination, contraception and abortion," said Dillon. "While his focus during his tenor as Pope was on the principles of love, social justice and the common good—his personal reserve hindered his ability to connect with ordinary Catholics. He was considered aloof regarding the everyday realities of Catholics, including sex abuse victims. This will forever detract from his legacy and the recognition that he was the first pope to actually formally apologize to Catholics for the sex abuse of priests and bishops—as he did in a letter he wrote to Irish Catholics in March 2010."

Dillon said that Benedict's resignation was hugely impactful—"both for its unprecedented nature in the history of the modern papacy, and ironically, given Benedict's consistently strong emphasis on the significance of tradition."

Dillon specializes in religion and culture, with particular interest in autonomy and authority in the Catholic Church, and the moral politics surrounding abortion and gay marriage. She has written extensively on Catholicism 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. Some of her books include "Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal", "American Catholics in Transition", "In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice and Change" and "Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power".

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Media Contact

[Robbin Ray '82](#) | Communications and Public Affairs |

robbin.ray@unh.edu | 603-862-4864



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