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Theologian: Benedict's move makes pope office, not person

by Joshua J. McElwee

NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

Pope Benedict's decision to resign the papacy at the end of February marks a significant shift in Catholics' understanding of the role of the pope, one prominent theologian who studies church authority has said.

For Catholics used to identifying the pope as a specific person, Benedict's move shows that the pope is also an *office*, states Brian Flanagan, a professor at Marymount University in Arlington, Va., who also serves as an officer for the College Theology Society.

"The best thing about Benedict's announced resignation is that it helps restore our understanding of the papacy to that of an office rather than a personal possession," states Flanagan, who is an ecclesiologist, or a theologian who studies the shape and structure of the church through the ages.

"The pope exercises his authority as the bishop of Rome and, because of that, the universal pastor, as the head of a local church, not because of a permanent change in his personal status," Flanagan continues.

"The papacy can now be clearly seen as a crucial office of the universal church, but one in which the pope remains an officeholder, rather than an irreplaceable, magical figure. I'd bet €20, if the Vatican could accept credit cards, that Benedict is doing this with a great deal of conscious awareness of the ecclesiological, and not just the practical, implications for future papacies. The precedent may well be his greatest gift to the church."

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