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New pope likely wouldn't change role of women in church

by Pam Hackenmiller

NCR Today

Benedict Resigns

NCR columnist Phyllis Zagano, a senior research associate at Hofstra University and author of books on women in the Catholic church, answered a couple of questions on Pope Benedict XVI's resignation.

What does the pope's resignation mean for the church at large?

Well, it's been 600 years since a pope resigned, so that in and of itself is very big news. But the intriguing part of the event is how modern it is. The pope cited his health. Did he receive a terminal diagnosis of an existing or new ailment? Or does he simply believe that while he has the competence to do so, it is time to go? If news reports are to be believed, he has held the reigns of the Vatican quite loosely in recent months. He has also "promoted" many of his closest aides and allies. So it seems he has been planning this for some time.

Will anything change?

Do you mean with a new pope? Probably not. Benedict XVI, and John Paul II before him, had ample time to put their personal and very conservative stamp on the Curia (the staff advisory body for the pope) and on the College of Cardinals, which now has 118 voting members under the age of 80.

So who will be elected?

I doubt it will be an American. The United States is already too powerful in the eyes of many in the church. More likely it will be another European -- surely the Italians would want an Italian pope -- but

we'll just have to see.

Will the new pope change things regarding women?

I doubt right away, if ever. There are certain traditions he could return -- such as the ordination of women as deacons -- that fell away almost 800 years ago in the Western church, even as it is retained to this day in pockets of orthodoxy. If he does take that step, it would make a big difference in his "new evangelization" efforts because the church would be saying that women, like men, are made in the image and likeness of God (Christ is God -- women can image Christ) and he can do this without troubling the longstanding ban on women as priests.

The church has a huge problem regarding women -- remember, half of its 1.1 billion members are female -- and women do not see themselves as well-regarded, no matter what the official church says. That means Catholic mothers do not insist their children remain Catholic or that their husbands go to church. Nor do they encourage their sons to become part of what many regard as an oppressive system (to women). I truly believe that by restoring the ancient tradition of ordaining women as deacons, it would go a long way to arguing that all persons -- male and female -- are made in the image and likeness of God. And that is the basis for all Catholic teachings -- on birth control and on abortion, certainly, but on many other teachings as well.

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