American Catholics—who have been pummeled by secularism and scandal in recent years—said they were both stunned and heartened by Pope Benedict XVI's decision to step down because of ill health, calling the action selfless and steeped in humility.

"It is showing that he thinks of himself as a servant of the church, not some kind of superstar who should dominate it," said Terrence W. Tilley, head of the theology department at Fordham University in New York. "The resignation itself is a real act of courage."

Benedict, a staid and intellectual leader, became pope in 2005 at age 78, following the wildly popular and charismatic John Paul II. He inherited a church that was still seeking sure footing following the liberalizing impact of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s and the clergy abuse scandal that erupted in Boston in 2002.

When he was elevated, "the church was in danger of being ripped apart by centrifugal force," said William Thorn, a professor at Marquette University and a Vatican consultant on public messaging. "He really put the brakes on that and concentrated on restoring the authority of the Vatican."

But in a country riven by a polarized politics and media, Pope Benedict's actions were received unevenly. Critics of the church—especially those inflamed by the clergy sexual-abuse scandal—said the shoring up of church authority was akin to stonewalling.

Joelle Casteix, a spokeswoman for SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said she regretted that church's many sex-abuse scandals in the U.S. didn't appear to have affected Pope Benedict XVI's legacy.

"It's bittersweet to see that he retires untarnished," said Ms. Casteix, 42 years old, who said she was abused for several years as a teen by a lay teacher at a Catholic high school in Santa Ana, Calif. Apart from issuing several apologies, Ms. Casteix said the pope "did little to nothing as far as definite action to protect kids" from abuse.

The pope has also been criticized by liberal Catholics for last year's crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an organization that represents the majority of American nuns and sisters. In April 2012, the Vatican issued the results of a four-year review of the women's group, saying it engaged in "radical feminism" and must submit to oversight from an officially appointed "delegate" from the church.
The move by the Vatican was seen by many, including the Franciscans in the U.S., a male religious order, as "excessive." The censure is framed in a larger question of women's role in the church, including whether or not they should be permitted to become deacons or priests. In 1994, John Paul II issued an apostolic letter affirming that the church cannot ordain women because Jesus didn't have female apostles. In a homily given last year on Holy Thursday, Benedict denounced "disobedience" in the church among priests pushing for the ordination of women.

"In '94 the church came out with a statement that is a definitive teaching of the church," said Susan Ross, head of the theology department at Loyola University Chicago. "For many of the faithful that's not accepted. The theology can't support it, what Jesus did is not quite so clear."

Thomas Wenski, 63, whom Benedict appointed to head the Miami archdiocese in 2010, said the pope's legacy far exceeded his handling of the priest sex-abuse scandal. Rather, he said it was marked with repeated speeches and writings challenging "the practical materialism of the West, the ascendant secularism" that the pope believed was leading people to think that they could have a fulfilling life without God. Archbishop Wenski said the pope's constant message, which he delivered "forcefully, clearly, courageously," was "a world without God is a world without hope."

Archbishop Wenski said that whoever becomes the next pope will focus attention on serving Hispanic parishioners, who have become a vitally important constituency across the world and in the U.S.

Nearly 40% of American Catholics are Hispanic, 30% of parishes celebrate at least one mass a month in a language other than English, and around a third of new priests in the country were born outside of the U.S. in countries such as Vietnam, Colombia, Mexico, Poland and the Philippines, according to data collated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"The future of the church in the United States will certainly depend on Hispanic Catholics," Archbishop Wenski said.

Peter Casarella, who heads DePaul University's Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, said the pope had sent a signal about the importance of Latinos in the church when he elevated the archbishop of Galveston-Houston, Daniel DiNardo, to the rank of cardinal in 2007, making him the first cardinal from the southern U.S. He said that move, as well as the pope's tapping six new cardinal-electors in November from the U.S., India, Nigeria, Colombia, the Philippines and Lebanon, had helped assuage early skepticism about Pope Benedict's inclusiveness of the church outside of Europe—doubts stemming from his criticisms in the 1980s of the Latin American liberation theology movement.

At St. Peter's in downtown Chicago, Brother Joe Middleton, a Franciscan friar draped in a brown robe, sat in front office with the organ music from an afternoon Mass floating through the air. He said he was very surprised to hear of Benedict's resignation Monday morning but empathized with the octogenarian's decision in the wake of his predecessor's public struggles with ill health late in his papacy.
"I think he looked at Pope John Paul and said, 'I don't want to go through that,' " Brother Joe said. "It was courageous and bold and made us love him more but I sure wouldn't want to do that."