

Religion Newswriters Association press releases

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John Paul II's death overshadows other religious events in 2005

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Religious disagreements over the end of life, intelligent design and fights over ordaining gay clergy were among the Top 10 religion stories of the year, according to a poll of religion writers released Dec. 13, 2005.

But the overwhelming first and second choice for top stories were Pope John Paul II's death and the election of his successor, Pope Benedict XVI.

Members of the Religion Newswriters Association, who are journalists writing about faith and values in the mainstream press, ranked the top 10 stories in an online survey Dec. 7-12. The 28 religious events in the poll were ranked by 100 RNA members, or just over one-third of the membership.

In addition to ranking the Top 10 stories, 68 percent of the survey respondents voted the former pope as the top religion newsmaker of the year. The new pope was named top newsmaker by 21 percent of those voting.

The top stories, in order, are:

1. The world mourns the death of Pope John Paul II after his eventful reign of 26 1/2 years. His attitude toward death inspires many. The movement begins for his canonization, and major biographies reach TV screens.
2. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, top aide to John Paul II, is elected by the cardinals to succeed him as Benedict XVI as the world looks on. Vatican watchers see conflicting signs as to what his papacy will bring.
3. Terri Schiavo dies in a Florida nursing home after her feeding tube is finally removed. Many demonstrators stage high-visibility protests for weeks before her death, as Congress and the Legislature join faith-based groups in the debate over the right to die.
4. Churches and faith-based agencies respond to Hurricane Katrina disaster in Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as damage from lesser hurricanes. Earlier they had responded to the tsunami in Southeast Asia, and later to the earthquake in Pakistan. The hurricanes also spur discussions about the roles of God and of environmental shortcomings in such disasters.
5. Debate over homosexuality continues to roil mainline denominations. Episcopal Church and Canadian Anglicans officially absent themselves from Anglican Consultative Council, as exodus of some Episcopal churches continues. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America defeats recommendation for ordination of gays. United Methodist Supreme Court reaffirms the defrocking of a lesbian pastor, and reinstates a pastor removed for barring a gay from membership. Pacific Southwest churches take first steps toward leaving American Baptist Churches.
6. Debate on evolution vs. intelligent design heats up, especially in Kansas and Dover, Pa. Decision is awaited in Dover case, but the school board that favored ID inclusion is voted out. In Kansas, the board of education approves standards that cast doubt on evolution.

7. U.S. Supreme Court approves posting of Ten Commandments outside state capitol in Texas and disapproves their posting inside courthouses in Kentucky, both by 5-4. The high court also upholds the rights of prisoners to practice their religion and municipalities to take private property for public benefit. The court hears arguments on two abortion cases and Oregon euthanasia law. Meanwhile, a federal judge reinstates ban on "under God" in Pledge of Allegiance in three California school districts; case is expected to return to the Supreme Court.
8. Faith-based groups speak out on Bush's three nominees to the Supreme Court; evangelicals help to derail Harriet Miers. Earlier they weighed in on both sides of the question of filibustering judicial appointments; a compromise was eventually reached.
9. Vatican releases long-awaited statement on homosexuality, the first major instruction issued by Benedict XVI. It bars from seminaries those who are actively homosexual, have deeply rooted tendencies toward it or support gay subculture. Reaction is predictably mixed.
10. Billy Graham holds his farewell evangelistic campaign in New York City.
11. Withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza strip is hailed by varied faith-based groups as a major step toward peace in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Jews and conservative Christians criticize the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Church of Christ for seeking divestment of companies said to be contributing to Israeli acts against Palestinians.
12. Some church leaders raise their voices with those calling for immediate withdrawal from Iraq, where suicide bombers, partially motivated by their religion, are on the increase. Report of Quaran-trashing by U.S. troops, later found inaccurate, spurs riots in Afghanistan. Hate crimes rise dramatically in Britain after terrorist bombings in London.
13. Canada approves same-sex marriages. Move continues to insert bans on such marriages into state constitutions, and governor vetoes bill to approve them in California. Meanwhile, movement to ban them in Massachusetts fails; Connecticut okays civil unions.
14. California Megachurch pastor Rick Warren takes spotlight with the continued appeal of his "The Purpose Driven Life," his attempts to combat the AIDS epidemic in Africa, and the use of his book by Ashley Smith to help her escape from an accused quadruple-killer in Atlanta.
15. Catholic dioceses continue to struggle with child-abuse payments. John Jay report indicates 5,000 priests abused nearly 12,000 minors, with the estimated costs topping \$1 billion. Portland (the first to declare bankruptcy) releases its reorganization plan; Spokane appeals a ruling about its assets.
16. Debate on stem-cell research continues in Congress and two-thirds of the state legislatures. Conservative Christians criticize change of policy by Bill Frist, Senate majority leader. Reports from Korea on such research amaze and alarm.
17. The Air Force develops new guidelines on religious activity after complaints about evangelization at the academy. Responses of Christian groups are varied.
18. Brother Roger, 90, founder of the Taize community in France, is knifed to death by a woman during an evening prayer service.
19. Democrats, looking to 2008, hold conferences on rethinking how to reach out to people of faith.

20. Interest in C.S. Lewis' life and thought rises with the release of the major film "The Chronicles of Narnia." Several other Hollywood films this year possessed religious overtones.

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