

Religion Newswriters Association press releases

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Cardinal Bernard Law named RNA top religion newsmaker for 2002

By **Richard Dujardin**

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Cardinal Bernard Law, who turned in his resignation as Boston's Roman Catholic archbishop of Boston after nearly a year of controversy over clergy sexual abuse, has been named by the Religion Newswriters Association as the top religion newsmaker for 2002.

Law was the overwhelming choice among the participants of the RNA's annual year-end poll, made up almost entirely of journalists in the print and broadcast media who regularly report on religion in the secular media.

To no one's real surprise, the membership chose the clergy sexual abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic Church as the No. 1 news story of the year. The winner of the RNA's "Into the Darkness Award," a dubious honor given from time to time to individuals or organizations that attempt to hide information from the public and the media, went this year to the American Catholic hierarchy.

In the choice of Law as the top religion newsmaker, one member noted that he was at the "center of the storm" in the one major news story that dominated the world of religion for nearly the entire year. Said another writer: "He is now a household name even among non-Catholics. His face, his court appearances and his handling of the abuse situation in Boston have been played prominently on the front page of most newspapers, including my own."

Though just half of the writers chose someone for an Into the Darkness Award, a majority of those that cited the Catholic bishops or their dioceses. Some said they did so because of the tendency of many U.S. dioceses to keep sexual abuse cases secret for decades, and to be less than open about sexual abuse settlements that had been reached over the years with some abuse victims.

Here is a list of the top 10 religion news stories, as selected by RNA members in a poll conducted electronically from Dec. 11-16, 2002:

1. Clergy sexual abuse scandal rocks the Catholic Church, amid new disclosures that many bishops moved priests alleged to have abused minors from parish to parish without warning parishioners or notifying authorities. In some instances, bishops are said to have entered the into secret settlements to keep the allegations from being made public.
2. Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston resigns after protests mount over his handling of his abusive priests. As the number of lawsuits against the archdiocese climb to more than 400, it considers bankruptcy. Some dioceses, including Boston, offer millions of dollars in cash settlements to those who have sued.
3. Controversy erupts over growing criticism of Islam by some evangelicals. Franklin Graham calls Islam "an evil and wicked" religion, and Jerry Vine of the Southern Baptist Convention refers to the Prophet Muhammad as a "demon possessed pedophile." The Bush administration attempts to

distance itself from such remarks.

4. At their meeting in Dallas, Catholics bishops listen to the stories of some abuse victims and adopt a ``one strike and you're out policy'' to permanently remove any priest who has abused a child from any public ministry. Five months later, at Vatican insistence, they approve creation of tribunals to consider cases of priests who proclaim their innocence. The church's religious order superiors criticize some aspects of the policy, saying the norms were adopted without their consultation.

5. The clergy sexual abuse scandal gives rise to new groups seeking a greater role of the laity in Catholic Church decision-making. The new lay group Voice of the Faithful draws 5,000 people to a convention in Boston. Although Cardinal Law meets with Voice leaders several months later, he does not immediately list his ban on the group meeting on church property in his archdiocese. With the new attention from the media, victims advocacy groups also experience a resurgence.

6. The U.S. Supreme Court upholds the constitutionality of the use of school vouchers for children attending religious schools.

7. A Circuit Court of Appeals judge in San Francisco rules that the words ``under God'' in the Pledge of Allegiance are unconstitutional. But the judge in the case stays his own ruling to allow for an appeal.

8. The National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ and other religious bodies express their opposition to a possible U.S. invasion of Iraq. America's Catholic bishops raise concerns as well, questioning whether a preemptive strike can be morally legitimate under the traditional just war theory.

9. Palestinian gunmen take refuge in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, setting the stage for a 39-day siege by the Israeli military. Suicide bombings, killings and violence continue to spread fear throughout Israel and the occupied West Bank.

10. Scholars announce they have discovered a 2,000-year-old burial box that bears the words, ``James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.'' While hailed as a great archaeological find, some others say they can not rule out the possibility that the inscription is a hoax.

This year's RNA ballot was compiled by *Providence Journal* religion writer Richard Dujardin. Seventy-one religion writers participated in the poll. The poll was distributed to 243 journalists.

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