

New transformational Roman Catholic pontiff voted winner in survey of Top 10 Religion News Stories of the Year

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Columbia (MO): The selection of a reform-minded Argentinian as the new leader of the world's largest religious institution was voted the Top Religion Story of the Year by the nation's religion journalists.

Members of Religion Newswriters Association chose as the No. 1 Religion Story of the Year the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who took the name Pope Francis. Pope Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, was in the No. 2 spot because of his historic resignation.

Pope Francis also was named Religion Newsmaker of the Year, beating out Pope Benedict XVI and Billy Graham, who turned 95 this year.

The online ballot was conducted Friday, Dec. 12 through Sunday, Dec. 15. Only RNA members were eligible to vote.

The ballot items are listed here, in order. All 20 news items on the ballot are ranked.

1. Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina is a surprise choice to succeed Benedict, becoming the first Latin American and first Jesuit pope, and the first to take the name of Francis. He immediately launches a series of stunning and generally popular forays—meeting with the poor in Brazil, embracing the ill, issuing conciliatory words toward gays and calling for a poorer and more pastoral church.
2. Pope Benedict XVI, citing age and strength issues, becomes first pope to resign in almost 600 years.
3. The U.S. Supreme Court, in 5-4 votes, clears the way for gay marriage in California and voids the ban on federal benefits to same-sex couples. Gay marriage continues to make inroads within the states, with Illinois and Hawaii becoming the 15th and 16th states to approve same-sex marriage.
4. The Obama administration makes concessions to faith-based groups and businesses opposed to the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate, but not enough to satisfy many of them. The disagreement continues as the U.S. Supreme Court accepts a case brought by Hobby Lobby challenging the mandate, although faith-based and private employers had mixed results in the lower-courts.
5. Islam plays a central role in the post-Arab Spring Middle East as the Egyptian military ousts the elected, Muslim Brotherhood-led government and violently cracks down on its supporters; meanwhile, Sunni Islamist fighters increase their role in Syria's opposition.
6. Icon of reconciliation and nonviolence Nelson Mandela dies at age 95 and is remembered as a modern-day Moses who led his people out of racial captivity.
7. Religious-inspired attacks claim scores of lives, with extremist Buddhist monks fomenting attacks on Muslims in Myanmar and Muslim extremists targeting Christians at churches in Egypt, an upscale mall in Nairobi, Kenya, and a church in Peshawar, Pakistan. Moderate religious leaders condemn the attacks, and a Somali Muslim emerges as a hero for rescuing a young American girl in the Nairobi mall.
8. More than 1 in 5 Jews in America now report having no religion, according to a landmark survey from the Pew Research Center. The number of professing Jewish adults is now less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, although Jewish identity remains strong.

9. The Boy Scouts of America, after much debate, votes to accept openly gay Scouts but not Scoutmasters. Several Catholic leaders endorse the move; some evangelical leaders oppose it.

10. Muslims join those across the country who condemn a devastating bombing at the Boston Marathon by two young Muslim men who attended college in the area. People of many faiths were among the many who showed an outpouring of support for the bombing victims.

The rest of the list follows, in ranked order. Note the list includes two ties.

11. Faith-based groups seeking immigration reform, especially Nuns on the Bus, rejoice when a comprehensive bill passes the Senate. But immigration reform languishes in the House.

12. The 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is marked by sermons, speeches and articles noting how far we have come in race relations—yet, how far we still have to go.

(Three-way tie for 13th place):

13. The Kumbh Mela, a Hindu religious festival that occurs every 12 years and is believed to be the largest religious gathering on earth, began in January 2013 in Allahabad, India, at the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and the mythic Saraswati rivers. It lasted 55 days and drew approximately 80 million pilgrims.

13. The number of professing Christians in England and Wales drops by more than four million in 10 years, to 33 million; atheists total 6 million, Muslims 2.7 million. Meanwhile, Canadians of no religion are up to 25 percent, from 16.5 a decade ago.

13. The son of megachurch pastor and best-selling author Rick Warren commits suicide at age 27 after living with depression. Matthew Warren's death prompts a national conversation about mental health faith leaders.

(Two-way tie for 14th place):

14. The ELCA leadership Changes. Elizabeth Eaton, bishop of Northeast Ohio, becomes the first female head bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America after defeating the incumbent by 2-1. Earlier, Guy Erwin of the Southwest California Synod became the first openly gay ELCA bishop.¹¹

14. Presbyterian Church (USA) follows a trend among Mainline Protestant churches of losing members to conservative groups. In 2012, 110 churches left the denomination—more than five times the number that left in 2011.

15. Exodus International, a Florida-based agency that tried to change the sexual orientation of gays and lesbians, closes down after leaders admitted the tactic was impractical and apologized to the LGBT community.

16. Thanksgiving and the first day of Hanukkah coincided in what was dubbed "Thanksgivukkah," an event that had not occurred since the 1800s and won't happen again for an estimated more than 75,000 years.

17. A frail, 95-year-old Billy Graham urges repentance and faith in Jesus, via "My Hope America," a widely circulated half-hour TV show. Earlier, his long-time song leader, George Beverly Shea, dies at 104.

Results are based on an online survey of more than 300 journalists with a response rate over 30 percent. The Religion Newswriters Association is the world's premier association dedicated to helping journalists write about religion with balance, accuracy and insight. Founded in 1949, the association is headquartered at the Missouri School of Journalism. The association has conducted its Top 10 Religion News Stories of the Year for more than 30 years.