

Religion writers agree: Pope Francis is no. 1 newsmaker

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(RNS) He's Time magazine's Person of the Year, the most talked about topic on Facebook and the most popular baby namesake in Italy. No surprise, Pope Francis is also the top Religion Story of the Year and the Religion Newsmaker of the Year, according to a poll of Religion Newswriters members.

Francis beat out his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who was the No. 2 story, and evangelist Billy Graham — who recently turned 95 and is reportedly ailing — for the newsmaker designation. Benedict made news when he became the first pope to resign in almost six centuries.

The rankings were based on results of an online ballot conducted between Friday (Dec. 13) and Monday. Only Religion Newswriters Association members were eligible to vote.

Coming in third among the top religion stories was the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision permitting gay marriage in California and ending the ban on federal employee benefits for same-sex couples. Within months of the June decision, the total number of states permitting same-sex marriage rose to 16, including Illinois and Hawaii.

Fourth on the list were the Obama administration's concessions to faith-based groups and businesses that objected to the contraception mandate in the Affordable Care Act. While opponents have reaped mixed results in lower courts, the Supreme Court has agreed to take Hobby Lobby's challenge.

And the fifth religion story of the year was the central role Islam has played in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The Egyptian military ousted the Muslim

Brotherhood-led government and cracked down on its supporters while Sunni Islamist fighters increased their role in Syria's opposition.

Here are the other stories that rounded out the Top 10:

6. The death of Nelson Mandela, icon of reconciliation and nonviolence, at the age of 95. He was remembered as a modern-day Moses who led his people out of racial bondage.

7. Religious-inspired attacks killed scores of people, with extremist Buddhist monks inciting attacks on Muslims in Myanmar and Muslim extremists targeting Christians in Egypt, Kenya and Pakistan.

8. More than one in five U.S. Jews now report having no religion, according to a landmark survey from the Pew Research Center.

9. The Boy Scouts of America, after much debate, voted to accept Scouts — but not scoutmasters — who are openly gay. Some evangelical leaders opposed the move while several Catholic leaders endorsed it.

10. Muslims joined other Americans in condemning a devastating bombing at the Boston Marathon by two young Muslim brothers.

More than 300 journalists were surveyed and more than 30 percent responded. The Religion Newswriters Association is dedicated to helping journalists write about religion with accuracy, insight and balance. Founded in 1949 and headquartered at the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, the association has conducted the Top 10 Religion News Stories of the Year survey for more than three decades.