

Deaths, slow or massive, were the news in 2005: The year in review

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It is said that death waits for no one and makes no appointments. That was the case for the 1,000 people killed by Hurricane Katrina, the 70,000 dead in the Pakistan earthquake, and the 181,000 lives claimed by the Asian tsunami that hit in late 2004, overshadowing the dawn of 2005.

For the year's biggest religion newsmaker, Pope John Paul II, death seemed to hover at a distance. It was almost a final touch of grace, allowing the charismatic former playwright one final moment of drama before he slipped away on April 2 at age 84.

As the frail and failing pontiff struggled with a host of ailments and hospital visits, the world was moved by John Paul's personal suffering during Holy Week and the frustrated, voiceless final blessing from the window on Easter Sunday. People strained to hear the final "amen" on his lips as he died.

The death of John Paul—and the election of his successor, Benedict XVI—easily ranked as the biggest religion story of the year. John Paul's death capped a remarkable papacy that spanned 26 years, five months and 17 days.

Barely two weeks later, white smoke swirled from a chimney above the Sistine Chapel to announce that a new pope had been elected—Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a shy but forceful Bavarian theologian who had policed Catholic doctrine for 24 years and was one of John Paul's closest aides.

On April 19, Ratzinger emerged on the balcony above St. Peter's as Pope Benedict XVI, the 265th pope and a self-described "simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord."

For years, Ratzinger had been known as "God's Rottweiler" for his enforcement of church doctrine, and some U.S. Catholics were wary of a conservative crackdown. A November 29 directive that banned most gay applicants from Catholic seminaries, and the removal of an outspoken editor of a U.S. Jesuit magazine, confirmed many of their fears.

A week before John Paul died, another high-profile death dominated headlines in the U.S. as conservatives fought to keep the courts from removing life support for Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged Florida woman. Congress passed—and President Bush signed—a bill to keep her alive, but local courts allowed the feeding tube to be removed. Schiavo died on Good Friday.

Conservatives used the Schiavo case as a proxy for their battle against "activist" judges, who they said were imposing a liberal agenda on the nation. Another death—that of Chief Justice William Rehnquist—reopened the battle over the judiciary and galvanized religious conservatives when John Roberts, Harriet Miers (briefly) and later Samuel Alito were nominated for the Supreme Court.

Before Rehnquist died, the high court ruled that Ten Commandments displays were unconstitutional if intended as a religious message, but could be allowed in historical displays. The ruling, not surprisingly, left both sides unsatisfied.

In June, evangelist Billy Graham, slowed by age and infirmity, returned to New York for what he called his last crusade. More than 230,000 people turned out to see the 87-year-old preacher in the city where he first became a household name almost 50 years ago.

Homosexuality continued to divide denominations. In the U.S. signs of a fissure appeared in the American Baptist Churches USA. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejected a proposal that would have kept a ban on gay ministers but allowed churches to violate it without penalty.

In the United Methodist Church, Irene “Beth” Stroud, a lesbian pastor in Philadelphia, lost her bid to be reinstated after she was found guilty of violating a ban against “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy. The same church court also ruled that pastors may deny membership to gays—a stance vigorously opposed by many UMC bishops and seminary teachers.

A debate about life—this time over its beginnings, not its end—flared across the country as supporters of “intelligent design” reopened a simmering battle against evolution. The idea that the natural world is so complex that its origins must have been overseen by a creator found supporters in the board of education in Kansas. But in November a Pennsylvania school board that supported intelligent design was voted out of office.

When Hurricane Katrina tore into the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans, some saw it as God’s punishment for a host of sins. Others said God must have been looking the other way. An October earthquake in remote parts of Pakistan made some Muslims ruminate over religious causes.

Those who have worked in tsunami, earthquake and hurricane relief say it’s best not to ask where God was during natural disasters, but to search for God in the calm after the storm.

“For me, I do not look at [disasters] as signs or messages, because my reading of scripture is that bad things happen, but not everything that happens comes from God,” said Gary Harbaugh, a Lutheran theologian who is active in relief efforts. “I don’t look to God to explain why bad things happen. I look to God to help me to know how, when bad things happen, to embody his care and compassion in the world.”