Opinion



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Catholic Newsmaker of the Year?

That’s the question we attempted to answer at a year-end NCR writers' staff meeting, which linked our correspondents together using a video conference from our mother ship in Kansas City, to Chicago, New York City, Connecticut, Maryland and Rome.

2019 has been a rough year, from all accounts, and our selection process reflected that difficulty. First, we needed to define the category. By its very nature, the Catholic Newsmaker of the Year is often the pope, and Francis this year did not disappoint. There were his ongoing conflicts with traditionalist Catholics attempting to subvert his papacy and the convening of the landmark Amazon synod, so he offered a strong case.

But that, we decided, would be too easy.

We agreed that NCR’s Catholic Newsmaker of the Year, which last year was named as former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, does not mean “Our favorite Catholic.” Some suggested that U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, for his insistent attacks on Francis, or some other leader of the resistance to the pope, might be a good choice.

Stephen Colbert, the comedian who spent this year continuing launching a sizzling late night joke-fest at President Donald Trump, emerged as a serious candidate. We remembered his moving interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper, during which he offered an evangelizing vision of Catholicism borne through family suffering.

We also gave serious thought to St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean, who has transformed the way the church and American culture looks at the death penalty.

And then, correspondent Heidi Schlumpf suggested Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and that name garnered widespread support. Pelosi was seen as bringing her faith to the sensitive task of corralling this most ungodly of presidents. When, days after our conference, Pelosi sparked a national discussion with her almost catechetical and Catholic-school-like defense of why she prays for Trump, we felt the choice became even clearer.

The consensus emerged that Pelosi offered an example of someone's being a lay Catholic in the world, navigating with skill the responsibility inherent in wielding the speaker's gavel in this volatile political year.

We asked our members for their picks. They responded with support for Pelosi and for others who have appeared as writers in our pages, particularly Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister and Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr. Another popular Catholic writer, Jesuit Fr. James Martin, attracted a following, and votes were also cast for Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate activist, Francis, and the Pachamama icon representing Amazon native spirituality that was thrown into the Tiber River by protesting traditionalist activists.

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