Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Leo XIV waves from the popemobile as he arrives near the Spanish Steps in the center of Rome to lead prayers to Mary Dec. 8, 2025, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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As 2025 started winding down, the editorial staff at National Catholic Reporter did what several publications do at year's end: consider who they think is the Newsmaker of the Year.

Since most of us work remotely, we put our heads together, almost literally, on one of our regular Zoom meetings to discuss our options.

Some of us came to this session with one seemingly obvious candidate in mind but when we opened the floor for discussion, it turned out that some had differing views and also suggested we shouldn't just go for the low-hanging fruit, as one reporter described it.

Related: Pope Leo XIV: NCR's Newsmaker of the Year, 2025

So yes, Pope Leo XIV was an obvious candidate. But just because he made news as the new pope (and the first from the United States!), that didn't automatically move him into the top Newsmaker slot for this crowd. In fact, someone mentioned that NCR didn't choose Pope Francis for this title back in 2013 because the editorial staff then basically felt he needed more time on the job to prove his track record.



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leaves his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 11, 2014. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Our editorial in 2014, when Pope Francis did get this publication's Person of the Year as it was then called, pointed out that although many embraced the new pope's message and apparent change in tone and direction, not everyone was fully convinced at the time about him:

"The refrain was, 'Yes, but what has he done? To what real change can we point?' And so NCR resisted naming Francis our person of the year for 2013."

Instead, that year, NCR chose Jennifer Haselberger, a church whistleblower on clergy sexual abuse. Haselberger, a canon lawyer and former chancellor of canonical affairs for the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, disclosed previously unreported allegations of clergy sex abuse and lapses in investigations in the Minnesota archdiocese she found while reviewing its records and archives.

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NCR has also not always given this yearly title to people who have done great work in the church but to those who have been significant newsmakers, for good or not. For example in 2018, the year news broke about allegations of sexual abuse against former cardinal, Theodore McCarrick, our publication named him Catholic Newsmaker of the Year.

Our editorial then on McCarrick, who died in 2025, said: "His fall from grace, deeply disturbing in its details, would have warranted special notice if only because he was the first U.S. cardinal so disciplined. But his story takes on a greater significance because it unmasks, in ways that previous cases of episcopal malfeasance have not, the secrecy, deceit and corruption of the clerical system. It illustrates the inability of two previous papacies to deal seriously with bishops and archbishops who were abusive themselves or complicit in covering up abuse by others."

In that same vein — looking at Catholics for what they reveal to the country, for good and ill in their public presence — the editorial staff this year also considered Catholic public officials such as Vice President JD Vance and White House border czar Tom Homan. But just briefly.

Stephen Colbert, who is Catholic and host of "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" on CBS, was also considered, particularly for this year's announcement that his show would be cancelled next year. Many have speculated that it had to do with Colbert's criticism of President Donald Trump and a recent Paramount-Skydance merger tied with government conditions.

So yes, these Catholics were in the news this year, but so too was our new pope from Chicago. Ultimately we determined that he had demonstrated, already, how he indeed is a vital voice of leadership in this current, challenging time.

As our editorial points out: Leo's "papacy is still evolving" but his example already makes him a sign "that the Gospel's moral clarity can still cut through the noise of a troubled world."

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