News



Newly elected Pope Leo XIV appears at the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, May 8, 2025. (AP/Markus Schreiber)



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The story that dominated the Catholic news headlines in 2025 was, of course, the death of Pope Francis and the conclave that elected Pope Leo XIV.

At National Catholic Reporter, we had an entire team in place at St. Peter's Square to cover every inch of every story we could get our hands on. But these weren't the only stories that NCR published in 2025. We also followed President Donald Trump's mass deportation orders, the Los Angeles wildfires, flooding in Texas and Trump using Francis' funeral as an opportunity to meet with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. These stories may not have made the top 10 most read, but were important topics that directly affected Catholics worldwide.

These were NCR's most read — not necessarily the most important — news stories of the year. They are listed in order by the number of website visitors who read the story, with short summaries of their contents. We'll post a separate article about our most read opinion and commentary pieces later this week.

1. In final act of mercy, Pope Francis donates entire private bank account to prisoners, published April 29, 2025



Pope Francis washes the foot of a prison inmate during the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper at Rome's Casal del Marmo prison for minors March 28, 2013. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

At the end of his life, Pope Francis made one last symbolic gesture: He emptied his personal bank account to donate 200,000 euros to the prisoners he had long championed.

It was a final act of love toward those he had called his "brothers and sisters behind bars," an act that Bishop Benoni Ambarus, auxiliary bishop of Rome and director of the Office for Prison Pastoral Care, said captures the very essence of Francis' pontificate.

Ambarus has witnessed firsthand the pope's commitment to the incarcerated. Even as his strength visibly declined, Francis refused to abandon the most forgotten members of society during Holy Week.

"A few days ago, the Holy Father dragged his body to Regina Coeli," Ambarus said in an April 23 interview with the Italian daily LaRepubblica, referring to the pope's last

visit to the historic Roman prison on Holy Thursday, April 17.

2. 'He's not ours anymore': Pope Leo XIV's brother on seeing a pope in the making, published Dec. 17, 2025



John Prevost and his brother Pope Leo XIV pose for a photo together October 2025. (Courtesy of Beth Verdun)

Vatican correspondent Justin McLellan conducted an interview with John Prevost, the brother of Pope Leo XIV, at his parish in New Lenox, Illinois, as part of the series " Looking for Leo in History."

In this installment, John reflects on the years after his brother left home, from his brother Robert's time in the minor seminary and missionary life in Peru to his transition into the papacy.

3. Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope



The stove that will be used to burn ballots during the conclave to elect a new pope in the Sistine Chapel and the machine that adds chemicals to create dark black or bright white smoke are seen at the Vatican May 2, 2025. Cardinals under the age of 80 will enter the conclave May 7. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Four profiles of papal front-runners made it into the top 10 most-read stories of 2025 — Cardinal Robert Prevost, Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu and Cardinal Mario Grech:

The first American pope? This cardinal has the best chance of making history in this conclave, published April 30, 2025

It is typically absurd to think of an American as pope. But in this conclave, a Chicago-born Augustinian friar who has spent much of his life outside of the United States is worthy of serious consideration.

Cardinal Robert Prevost, 69, heads the influential Vatican Dicastery for Bishops, the office tasked with advising the pope on bishop appointments around the world.

Once on the outs, American Cardinal Tobin now a contender, published April 28, 2025

There has been little appetite historically among the College of Cardinals for the idea of a pope from the United States, a global superpower. But this conclave could be different.

Two possible papal contenders from the United States are receiving consideration, including Cardinal Joseph Tobin, archbishop of Newark, New Jersey.

At 72, Tobin's ecclesial resume is a full one — built predominantly outside of the United States, which might ease concerns by those wary of an Americentric papacy.

Advertisement

Cardinal Ambongo could be first African pope in over 1,500 years, published April 29, 2025

If Catholicism's future is in Africa, as is so often touted, then when, not if, will there be an African pope in the modern era?

There have been three popes who have hailed from North Africa, the last one being Gelasius I, who reigned A.D. 492-496.

Today's Roman Curia is lacking African leadership. No Vatican office is currently headed by an African. The most well-known prelate on the continent is undoubtedly 65-year-old Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This papal front-runner from a small island has a big role in the global church, published May 1, 2025

It is becoming clearer every day in the lead-up to the 2025 conclave that the vote for the next pope might be a referendum on Pope Francis' efforts to involve more laypeople in decisions on the future of the Catholic Church.

If the cardinals want to advance Francis' vision of synodality — a church where everyone participates in decisions and the mission — then they are expected to consider whether Cardinal Mario Grech of Malta should become the next pope.

Since 2020, Grech, 68, has served as secretary general of the Synod of Bishops. In this capacity, he was Francis' point person organizing and overseeing the synod meetings that took place in Rome every couple years on a particular theme.

4. Exclusive: Catholic Relief Services lays off staff, cuts programs after USAID shakeup, published Feb. 5, 2025



Sean Callahan, president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, visits southern Gaza Jan. 23, 2024. CRS is bracing for massive cuts because of draconian reductions in U.S. foreign assistance ordered by the Trump administration, according to a Feb. 3, 2025, internal email from Callahan. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Relief Services)

Catholic Relief Services is bracing for massive cuts — as much as 50% this year — because of draconian reductions in U.S. foreign assistance ordered by the Trump administration, according to an internal email from the chief executive of the international relief organization.

CRS is the top recipient of funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development, known as USAID, which the Trump administration has targeted with a

spending freeze, office closure and extensive staff cuts this week.

Layoffs have already begun as CRS has been forced to begin shutting down programs funded by USAID, which supplies about half of the Catholic organization's $1.5 billion budget, said CRS president and CEO Sean Callahan in a staffwide email sent Feb. 3.

5. Detroit archbishop fires 3 Sacred Heart Seminary theologians who criticized Pope Francis, published July 26, 2025



Pictured is the campus of Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. Ralph Martin and Eduardo Echeverria, prominent theologians who taught there and who have criticized Pope Francis, have been fired by Archbishop Edward Weisenburger of Detroit. (Wikimedia Commons/CC-by-sa/3.0/Andrew Jameson)

Archbishop Edward Weisenburger of Detroit has fired three prominent theologians from their longstanding roles at Sacred Heart Major Seminary.

Ralph Martin, Eduardo Echeverria and Edward Peters have been vocal critics of Pope Francis in the past, raising concerns about what they say was confusion and ambiguity caused by some of the late pope's actions and writings.

6. Conclave roundup: Parolin's star falls, spotlight on synodality , published April 30, 2025

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, former Vatican secretary of state, reads his homily while celebrating M

Cardinal Pietro Parolin reads his homily at a Mass for some 200,000 young people in St. Peter's Square. The Italian cardinal said the late pontiff's legacy of mercy must live on in the church. While the words were stirring, some reports say his fellow cardinals were unimpressed. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

On the day after Pope Francis' funeral, Cardinal Pietro Parolin celebrated a Mass for some 200,000 young people in St. Peter's Square, where he said the late pontiff's legacy of mercy must live on in the church.

"Our affection for him must not remain a mere emotion of the moment," Parolin said on April 27. "We must welcome his legacy and make it part of our lives, opening ourselves to God's mercy and also being merciful to one another."

It was a spotlight moment for someone considered one of the top contenders to succeed Francis, having served as his secretary of state, or No. 2 official, since 2013. But according to multiple cardinals now gathered in Rome for meetings ahead of next week's papal conclave, Parolin is said to have failed the audition.

7. Catholic outrage grows over 'Pope Trump' image on official White House media, published May 4, 2025



The White House X account posted this A-I generated image of U.S. President Donald Trump posing in papal regalia. (NCR screenshot/White House X account)

U.S. President Donald Trump is facing a firestorm of criticism from leaders of the Roman Catholic Church after posting on social media a computer-generated image of himself as pope in full papal regalia as Catholics worldwide continue to mourn Pope Francis.

At least one U.S. bishop said Trump needs to apologize, and even his closest prelate in the church, New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, said it was "not good."

The image was posted on Trump's official X accounts — one from the White House and one from his personal account. They were posted just after 5 a.m. on May 3, days after Trump told reporters in Washington, "I'd like to be pope. That would be my No. 1 choice."

8. White smoke, Black pope? Genealogist says Leo XIV has Louisiana African roots, published May 8, 2025



Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, who has chosen the papal name Leo XIV, appears on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 8, 2025, following his election during the conclave. (OSV News/Reuters/Claudia Greco)

The Catholic Church has a new leader, with the Augustinian Cardinal Robert Prevost elected as Pope Leo XIV, his chosen name as bishop of Rome. He is the first North American pope and, according to a prominent genealogist, a pope with African-Creole ancestry.

Louisiana Creole expert Jari Honora has traced Prevost's ancestry to the Black community of New Orleans. His maternal ancestors lived in the Crescent City before migrating to Chicago in the early 20th century, Honora said.

9. 'A pope in muddy boots': Viral photos of Leo XIV reveal a history of pastoral care, published May 20, 2025



Then-Bishop Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV, stands in floodwaters in the Chiclayo Diocese in the aftermath of heavy rains in northwestern Peru in March 2023, in this screenshot from a video by Caritas Chiclayo (NCR screengrab/Caritas Chiclayo)

The photo shows a man wearing a simple, short-sleeved white shirt and gray pants with a bishop's cross around his neck standing in floodwaters up to the shins of his black rubber boots.

A somber look rests on his face as he scans a village inundated with high brown water. In another photo, his head hangs low as he walks with two men and a woman down a street turned canal.

The images of then-Bishop Robert Francis Prevost in the muddy aftermath of severe flooding in northern Peru in 2023 offer a glance at a man the world now knows as Pope Leo XIV.

10. Conclave roundup: Conservative cardinals attack Pope Francis' legacy in US and Italian media, published May 1, 2025

Cardinal Stella

Cardinal Beniamino Stella, retired prefect of the Dicastery for Clergy, walks toward the Petriano entrance at the Vatican April 24. Stella, 84, publicly criticized Pope Francis' church reforms, America magazine reported. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

A few in the College of Cardinals are ratcheting up their attacks on the legacy of Pope Francis and debates on the future of the Catholic Church are getting heated, both in closed-door, pre-conclave meetings and in interviews in the worldwide media.

In a dramatic session of the seventh pre-conclave plenary assembly on April 30, Cardinal Beniamino Stella, 84, publicly criticized Pope Francis for what he described as a break with "long-standing tradition" in the Catholic Church, America magazine reported.

Stella is among several Italian cardinals, ineligible to vote because they are over age 80, who in recent days has been outspoken in the media trying to influence cardinal electors to slow the reforms Pope Francis started. Joining the minority chorus of criticism of Francis are conservatives Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, 82, and Cardinal Camillo Ruini, 94, both former presidents of the Italian conference of bishops.