



What is a jubilee year?

In December, the Church will begin celebrating what is called a “jubilee year,” or sometimes simply a “holy year.” The upcoming holy year will be an ordinary jubilee, which takes place every 25 years. The last ordinary jubilee was the Great Jubilee marking the end of the second millennium since the birth of Christ. Popes have in the past declared extraordinary jubilees that take place outside the 25 year timeframe, the last one of which was the Holy Year of Mercy called by Pope Francis in 2016. But what is a jubilee year in the Church? What are its origins? And why do we celebrate them?



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The Holy See describes the holy year as:

... a year of forgiveness of sins and also the punishment due to sin, it is a year of reconciliation between adversaries, of conversion and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and consequently of solidarity, hope, justice, commitment to serve God with joy and in peace with our brothers and sisters. A Jubilee year is above all the year of Christ, who brings life and grace to humanity (History of the Jubilees, www.vatican.va).

Jubilee years have a scriptural pedigree. In the Book of Leviticus, a jubilee year was to be celebrated every fifty years. (Lev 25) It was marked by the remission of debts, the freeing of slaves, and the restoration of lands and property. The jubilee year was to be a restoration of the Lord’s generosity and a display of his mercy. However, it was not until the year 1299 that the Church introduced a holy year





of the Lord's mercy. At that time, **Pope Boniface VIII** was persuaded by the testimony of pilgrims about the graces they received, while making their pilgrimage to Rome, to establish a holy year to be celebrated every 100 years.

The holy year was marked especially by a pilgrimage to Rome, sacramental confession, the reception of holy Communion (at that time, not a frequent occurrence), praying for the pope's intentions, having no attachment to sin, and praying at the Basilicas of St. Peter and **St. Paul Outside the Wall**. The graces that were received were the forgiveness of one's sins and the remission of all temporal punishment in this life and in the next, or what we call a "plenary indulgence."

Pope Clement VI decreed a holy year for the year 1350, adding a pilgrimage to St. John Lateran, and mandating a holy year every 50 years. This was amended again by Pope Urban

VI who mandated a holy year every 33 years — the length of the life of the Lord and the average lifespan of the time. He also added the Basilica of St. Mary Major to the pilgrimage itinerary.

Over the years the timing of the jubilee or holy year varied, but by the 15th century it had been well established to take place every 25 years. What did not change was the work associated with obtaining the graces of the holy year. Individuals were required to make a spiritual journey with



the explicit goal of redeeming of one's soul, in other words, a pilgrimage. This pilgrimage was to Rome and the four major basilicas already mentioned.

To mark the special dignity of the jubilee, the custom of **the holy door** developed. This special door is located at each of the major basilicas and is only opened for the celebration of a jubilee year. Ordinarily, the pope of the day opens the door, but only after the brickwork erected to block the door after the previous jubilee is demolished. It is by passing through the holy door to enter the basilica, in addition to the usual requirements, that a pilgrim satisfies the requirements necessary for the indulgence.

It has become customary to extend the benefits of the holy year to the whole church so those who cannot make the journey to Rome could also reap its rewards. Each decree declaring a holy year or jubilee outlines the parameters of

the works necessary. Usually, they require a pilgrimage to one or a number of churches

or shrines and a work of penance or a work of mercy. All indulgences, including holy year indulgences, require the confession of sins, reception of holy Communion, no attachment to sin, and to pray for the pope's intentions.

Today, a jubilee year or a holy year is an opportunity for the faithful to recommit themselves to living out their dependence on God's mercy. It is not by our works that we are saved but by the grace of God, and the Church, to whom Christ entrusted the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and is the minister of that grace. Our faith is the response to God's grace, and our good works are the proof of that faith. As members of Christ's faithful we are called day after day to respond actively to God's loving mercy, to make special efforts to witness to God's love and mercy, and to remind ourselves that the rich reward of eternal life requires an effort on our part.