



Jubilee 2025: pilgrims of hope

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3 The jubilee in history

In the Catholic tradition, the jubilee is celebrated as an event of religious significance. It is characterized as a time of the remission of sins and punishments for sins. It is a time of reconciliation, conversion, and penance, which are then transformed into a commitment to charity and solidarity.

Is there a difference between “jubilee” and “holy year”? It does not appear to be a substantive issue, and, in fact, the two terms end up being used synonymously or as equivalent. We should say that the Church announces the jubilee, the celebrations of which usually take place over the course of a year which is thus called the holy year.

The history of the Christian jubilee begins with the year 1300, on the initiative of Pope Boniface VIII (Benedetto Caetani; 1294–1303). He instituted the first Christian Jubilee, with the Bull *Antiquorum habet fiducia relatio*, issued on 22 February 1300 (which at the time was still counted as 1299 and about a month after the new year according to the custom *ab incarnatione*, which fell on 25 March). In that bull were already found the typical elements of each subsequent jubilee, such as the plenary indulgence and the acts to be performed to obtain it. No alms were imposed. In addition, the plenary indulgence for temporal punishments was also granted to pilgrims who could not conclude their visits due to force majeure, as well as to those who died during the journey or before concluding the visits. The Bull of Indiction also stipulated that the jubilee should

be held every hundred years. The bull is kept in the Vatican Apostolic Library.

It seems that the novel decision of Pope Boniface was inspired by the so-called “Hundred Years Indulgence”. Although there are no official texts and documents in this regard, the chronicles of the time tell that, on the eve of the transition to the new century, in December 1299, a considerable and unexpected number of pilgrims arrived in Rome to visit, in a penitential spirit, the tomb of the apostle Peter, in the Constantinian Basilica dedicated to him at the foot of the Vatican hill.

To understand Pope Boniface’s decision, it is not out of place to recall at least three other events linked to a jubilee or proclamation of a jubilee year, which are still practiced today. The oldest one is the Jacobean Holy Year. It was announced for the first time in 1126, by Pope Callistus II (Guido dei conti di Borgogna; 1060–1124), in honor of the Apostle St. James, venerated in Santiago de Compostela, one of the major pilgrimage destinations in the Christian world.

Almost a century later, in 1216, Pope Honorius III (Cencio Savelli; 1150–1227), accepting a request from St. Francis, instituted the Pardon of Assisi, granting plenary indulgence to anyone who visited the Porziuncola, from noon on August 1 to midnight on August 2.



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Finally, we must remember the “Perdonanza Celestiniana” instituted on September 29, 1294, by Pope Celestine V (Pietro da Morrone; born in Isernia, 1209/1215; elected to the supreme pontificate on August 29, 1294, he renounced it on December 13, 1294; died on May 19, 1296). With the Bull of Forgiveness, he granted the pilgrims who entered the church of Santa Maria di Collemaggio, in the city of L’Aquila, between 28 and 29 August, a plenary indulgence, if they confessed and repented of their sins. As far as is historically known, on that occasion the first “holy door” was opened, that is, a special passage to access the Basilica, different from its main entrance.

3.1 The “ordinary” holy years

In these special ecclesial events, we can note common characteristic features: pilgrimage and visit to a specific place of worship, they are carried out in a fixed period of time, with the aim of obtaining an indulgence, under the conditions established by the competent ecclesiastical authority. These are characteristics that will remain over the centuries, although with some variations, which, however, do not affect the mainly penitential character of the event itself.

Thus, by virtue of Pope Boniface’s disposition, the second holy year should have been celebrated in 1400. But that was not the case. In fact, accepting the requests received from various parties, Pope Clement VI (Pierre Roger, born in 1342; elected

pope on May 7, 1342; deceased on December 6, 1352, in Avignon), proclaimed the Jubilee for 1350, promulgating from Avignon the Bull Unigenitus Dei filius, dated 27 January 1343. In it he established that the Holy Year would be celebrated every fifty years and that, in addition to the Basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul, the Lateran Basilica should also be visited. It should be noted that the pilgrims who arrived in the Eternal City for that jubilee not only did not find the Pope there (who, having remained in Avignon, sent his legate), but they found Rome in conditions of desolate degradation: a few months earlier it had been hit by an earthquake (September 9, 1349). Furthermore, the devastating effects of the plague persisted, which went down in history as the “black plague” which swept through Europe around 1347 and lasted until 1354, sowing death and desolation everywhere [it is estimated that it killed at least a third of the European population, causing probably nearly 20 million victims].

The fifty-year deadline was maintained for the Holy Years of 1400 (announced by Pope Boniface IX; 1389–1404) and 1450 (called Pope Nicholas V; 1447–1455; with the Bull Immensa et innumerabilia, of 19 January 1449). However, Pope Paul II (Pietro Barbo; 1417–1471), decided to further shorten this period of time and, with the Bull Ineffabilis providentia summi Patris (April 19, 1470), decreed that the “jubilees” (a term used for the first time) were to be celebrated every twenty-five years, in consideration of the brevity of human life.



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It was also established that the opening ceremony should take place on Christmas Day of the year preceding the Jubilee. When Paul II died on 26 July 1471, the Jubilee of 1475 was opened and concluded by his successor Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco Della Rovere; 1471-1484).

The interval of twenty-five years has been maintained until today, starting from the Holy Year of 1500, proclaimed by Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia; 1492-1503) with the Bull *Inter multiplices* (20 December 1499). For the first time, the ceremonial to be performed in the jubilee religious functions was elaborated and it was established that in each of the four Roman basilicas there should be a holy door, to be opened to the faithful only during the recurrence of the holy year. On Christmas Day 1499 the solemn ceremony of the opening of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica took place. Due to the overflow of the Tiber in November 1500, it was decided that the closing of the holy doors took place with the feast of the Epiphany of 1501.

From 1300 up to the present day, at regular intervals of 50 or 25 years, 24 "ordinary" holy years have been proclaimed and celebrated (someone also calls them "major", while the extraordinary ones are called "minor"). The last in the series was the "Great Jubilee of 2000", announced, opened and closed by Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła; 1978-2005), with the Bull *Incarnationis mysterium* (November 29, 1998).

Due to the concomitance with the transition to

the new millennium, a long preparation preceded the "Grand Jubilee of 2000". Pope John Paul II published the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, on November 10, 1994, immediately constituting a large Central Committee for the Jubilee. The opening of the Holy Door took place simultaneously in Rome, in the Holy Land and in Catholic cathedrals throughout the world.

The 2025 jubilee will be the 25th of the series of ordinary jubilees.

The chronology of the jubilees, however, is marked by two missed celebrations: there was no jubilee in 1800 and in 1850, due to turbulent political events which prevented the presence of the pope in Rome. In the first case Pope Pius VI (Gianangelo Braschi; 1717-1799), arrested and deported to France (February 20, 1797), after alternating and exhausting events, died "in exile" outside Rome, August 29, 1799, in Valence. Even Pope Pius IX (Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti; 1792-1878) did not announce the jubilee of 1850 because of the revolutionary movements that led to the so-called Roman Republic. In fact, he was in Gaeta where he had taken refuge since November 1848. He was finally able to return to Rome, after 17 months of exile, on 12 April 1850. However, Pius IX was able to celebrate the following holy year of 1875, proclaimed with the Bull *Gravibus Ecclesiae et huius saeculi calamitatibus* (December 24, 1874), in which he allowed himself to gain indulgences not only in Rome, but also by visiting three churches in the territory of the dioceses scattered throughout the world.



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3.2. "Extraordinary" Holy Years

So far, the brief review of the "ordinary" holy years, that is, of those jubilees with a fixed temporal recurrence, which is now that of twenty-five years. In fact, the history of the Church also enumerates eleven other jubilees, proclaimed on the occasion of special events or commemorations.

Thus, Pope Urban VI (Bartolomeo Prignano; 1378–1389) proclaimed a jubilee for 1390 (Bull *Salvator noster unigenitus*, of 8 April 1389), but died shortly before being able to open it. His successor Boniface IX (Pietro Tomacelli; 1350–1404), even in a situation of serious ecclesial and political crisis, which went down in history as the "great western schism" (started in 1378, lasted, in its remote consequences, until 1449), kept his commitment and, indeed, established that, subsequently, the jubilee should be celebrated every thirty-three years, in memory of the years Christ spent on earth. 1423 was also an extraordinary holy year, proclaimed by Pope Martin V (Oddone Colonna; 1369–1431), to celebrate the healing of the schism and the return of the papacy to Rome.

Two Popes proclaimed a holy year to coincide with their election to the Roman Pontificate. Thus were extraordinary jubilees called in 1585 by Pope Sixtus V (Felice di Peretto da Montalto; 1521–1590); and the year 1655, proclaimed by Pope Alexander VII (Fabio Chigi; 1599–1667).

Pope Benedict XIV (Prospero Lambertini; 1675–1758), preceded the holy year of 1750 with the extraordinary jubilee of 1745, and wanted it to implore peace among the Christian princes. He himself wrote: "we have proclaimed the present Jubilee for the peoples of Italy and the adjacent islands, afflicted by so many calamities, and we have strengthened in everyone the great hope of divine help" (short *Multorum Charitate*, 18 February 1745).

An extraordinary jubilee was proclaimed by Pope Leo XIII (Luigi Pecci; 1810–1903), to recall the importance of the encyclical letter *Immortale Dei*, of 1 November 1885, concerning the good governance of States, the need to promote and re-establish the good virtues and the commitment of the faithful in public affairs. Thus, with the Letter *Quod Auctoritate*, dated December 22, 1885, he decreed the methods for gaining Jubilee indulgences. Leo XIII proclaimed and also opened the Holy Year of 1900 (Bull *Properante ad exitum saeculo*, of 11 May 1899).

In the 20th century there were two extraordinary jubilees, dedicated from the 1900th and the 1950th anniversary of Christ's death and resurrection. It was Pope Pius XI (Achille Ratti; 1857–1939), who had already proclaimed the Holy Year of 1925, who opened the Holy Door on Holy Saturday, 2 April 1933, and closed it on Easter Monday on 2 April 1934 (cf. Bull *Quod Nuper*, 15 January 1933).



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Fifty years later, Pope John Paul II performed the same rite by opening the holy door on 25 March 1983 and closing it on 22 April 1984, Easter Sunday (cf. Bull *Aperite Portas Redemptori*, of 6 January 1983).

Also, in the twentieth century there are two other extraordinary jubilees. The first one was proclaimed by Pope Pius XI for the year 1929, on the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination (Apostolic Constitution *Auspicientibus Nobis*, of 6 January 1929). The second in 1966, wanted by Pope Paul VI (Giovanni Battista Montini; 1897-1978), for the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, the extraordinary jubilee “of mercy”, proclaimed by Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio; 1936-happily reigning), with the Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (11 April 2015), to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. It began on 8 December 2015 and ended on 20 November 2016. In reality, on the occasion of his apostolic journey to the Central African Republic, Pope Francis opened the holy door of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Bangui on 29 November 2015, anticipating in fact the beginning of the extraordinary jubilee.



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