



Jubilee 2025: pilgrims of hope

Archbishop Maurizio Bravi

Permanent Observer of the Holy See at the UNWTO
Delegato for Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe

4 I tratti propri del Giubileo

4.1 The indulgences

The jubilee of the Catholic Church is characterized by its profound penitential dimension, which in turn justifies and explains the granting of special indulgences.

Every Jubilee is a time of grace, forgiveness, and mercy, which is offered to believers to renew themselves in the Christian life. The Catholic Church ordinarily exercises the power to “remit sins”, in the name of God, through the sacrament of Penance or Confession. It is in this sacramental seat that the reconciliation of the sinner with God takes place and forgiveness is given. The Church administers a “sacramental power”, drawing on the treasure of grace of the merits of Christ’s Redemption. At the same time, part of Catholic doctrine is the belief that, even after confession, some consequences of sin may remain from which it is necessary to purify oneself, both while one is alive and after death. In this sense we speak of “temporal punishment for sins”. Therefore, the practice of indulgences should be understood as an aid that the Church offers to her children to cancel the penalties due to their sins, but also and above all to push them towards a greater fervor of charity. Indulgence, as understood by the Church and under the conditions established by her, aims at the cancellation, not of the sin (remitted to the sacramental seat), but of this temporal punishment, as established in canons 992–994 of the Code of Canon Law.

The centuries-old practice of the Church on indulgences has known numerous expressions, some of which remain even today, such as, for example, pilgrimages or works of mercy, carried out as an exercise of expiation for the penalties incurred for sin. Meanwhile, due to illicit or excesses or abuses, other types of indulgence have been abolished, suppressed, or strictly regulated. How can we fail to mention the denunciation of the “trade” of indulgences against which Martin Luther (1483–1546) railed. The Council of Trent (1545–1563), in its XXV session, put this discipline in order and established that “all evil gains for the obtaining thereof, –whence a most prolific cause of abuses amongst the Christian people has been derived, –be wholly abolished”.

A collection of indulgences can be found in the 1999 Enchiridion indulgentiarum, Normale de Indulgentiis. Usually the general conditions required are as follows: the faithful must be in a state of grace (sacramental confession is therefore required); he must be inwardly disposed to a complete detachment from sin; he must have received Holy Communion; he must pray according to the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff. All this must take place, even on different days, at least in the 20 days before or following the indulgent act. Indulgences are always applicable to oneself or to the souls of the dead, but they are not applicable to living persons.



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On special ecclesial events, such as the Holy Year, each Pontiff determines specific acts and conditions for gaining the indulgence. The closest reference to us is the Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary of 29 January 2000, "The gift of the Indulgence", prepared for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. . Numbers 7-10 list the dispositions, acts and works to be done to obtain the Jubilee indulgence. It is a matter of choosing between a "work of piety or religion", such as visiting or pilgrimaging certain sacred and devotional places; or dedicate oneself to a "work of mercy or charity", in an evangelical spirit; or perform a "work of penance", such as mortifications, acts of asceticism and renunciation.

4.2. The pilgrimage

The pilgrimage is another characteristic feature of the Christian jubilee, since to gain indulgences, it is necessary to visit one or more sacred places, most often the city of Rome, as the seat of the Apostle Peter and his successors.

Since its inception, the Jubilee pilgrimage has had a profound penitential dimension. Today the term penance, in all modern languages, mainly indicates an external work of mortification (e.g.: fasting, abstinence, inflicting some bodily pain on oneself) a punishment, implemented to repair damage caused, to atone for a fault or to correct a mistake. The theological meaning of penance is, in reality, much broader and, as Sacred Scripture and the tradition of the Church teach, penance goes hand

in hand with repentance for the sin committed and with the conversion of the heart, conditions for undertaking a change radical way of life, a new orientation, all devoted to the good and service of God. Therefore, Christian penance is not limited to the penalty (punishment) that the confessor assigns to the penitent as reparation for the sins committed and confessed; rather it indicates an itinerary that points to its final goal, that is, conversion.

As it is known, the Christian pilgrimage takes its first steps from the desire to know the places where Jesus had lived and where his earthly life had taken place. It is used to define it as a "devotional pilgrimage". For some centuries, Jerusalem was the only destination for true Christian pilgrimage. Going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a very difficult undertaking, with considerable risks for personal safety. In those days the journey was accomplished in the name of unpredictability.

Later, starting from the sec. VI-VII, through the work of Saint Colombano (525-612), the pilgrimage also assumed penitential and ascetic characteristics. Alongside the "pro voto" pilgrimage and the "devotionis causa" pilgrimage, there is the "ex poenitentia" pilgrimage. While the first two are the result of a free choice, the penitential pilgrimage was born as an obligation imposed by ecclesiastical authority. This is linked to the fact that the sacramental discipline of confession required that serious faults be paid for in public, with exemplary penance.



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Such sinners became part of the *ordo poenitentium*, with a disciplined and regulated ecclesiastical juridical statute, which remained in force until the thirteenth century. Thus, only after having served the sentence imposed by the authority, that is after having completed the penance, could one finally obtain the sacramental absolution imparted by the confessor.

Over time, the practice of a new form of confession made its way, the auricular one, that is, the accusation of sins in private, which is immediately followed by the absolution and the assignment of a penance, to be performed after the absolution. Thus, canonists distinguished three forms of penance: the private one (auricular, in front of a priest), the publica solemnis one (imposed by the Bishop, in front of the whole assembly), and the publica non solemnis one, such as the pilgrimage which becomes a real form of penance, imposed for sins in the public domain. In this way, until the end of the thirteenth century, the pilgrimage was constituted as an institution of its own, becoming itself one of the three possible forms of the penitential process. This imposition forced the penitent to “wander”, in a condition of permanent insecurity, as if he were in an “exiled” state. The penitent pilgrim was recognizable by going barefoot and wearing chains, hence the formula “*nudi homines cum ferro*”.

Rome was one of the main penitential destinations since the sec. IX. This is also because some more serious sins were classified as *casus reservati* (sacrilege, murder of priests and monks, thefts in

churches, together with an increasing number of minor faults), the absolution of which was left to the authority of the pope. Thus, the bishops sent the guilty-sinner to Rome to receive penance directly from the pope, and this transfer already took the form of a penitential pilgrimage. In the mid-twelfth century a new tribunal arose in Rome, the Apostolic Penitentiary, whose sentences could be valid not only in the forum of conscience but also in the judicial and criminal courts. This explains how the Penitentiary became one of the most important institutions of the central government of the Church in the high and low Middle Ages.

In the following centuries, the most accentuated forms of penitential pilgrimage were slowly abandoned, while devotional pilgrimage was consolidated, thanks also to the rise of sanctuaries such as the Marian ones (Loreto, Caravaggio, Guadalupe, Aparecida, La Salette, Lourdes, Fatima, Czestochowa, etc.), or sanctuaries dedicated to saints (San Francesco in Assisi, Sant'Antonio in Padua, Santa Rita in Cascia, etc.). Finally, in the contemporary era, the increase in pilgrimages is also the result of the testimony of the Popes, starting with the pilgrimage to Assisi of Saint John XXIII (October 4, 1962), from that to the Holy Land of Saint Paul VI (January 4-6, 1964) and, in particular, of the pastoral journeys and world youth days of Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis. All this leads us to affirm that, in modern and contemporary times, a more varied typology of pilgrimage is born, which could be called “pilgrimage of supplication” or “pilgrimage of intercession” (think of the role of the sanctuaries of Lourdes or that of San Father Pio).



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