

# What is a Jubilee Year? The history and meaning behind a centuries-old tradition



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When Pope Francis opened the Holy Door in St. Peter's Basilica on the night of Dec. 24, 2024, he inaugurated the Jubilee Year of 2025. Centered on the theme of hope, this is the 27th ordinary Jubilee in the history of the Catholic Church since Boniface VIII celebrated the first one in the earlier St. Peter's Basilica in the year 1300.

To understand the significance of the Jubilee and its seven-centuries-old tradition in the Catholic Church, it is necessary first to recall its biblical origins and then to briefly revisit the historical events that have shaped the Jubilee we are now celebrating.

The Christian Jubilee has its origins in the Jewish religious tradition. It is first recounted in the Book of Leviticus (25:10-14) that the law of Moses prescribed that every 50th year be observed as a Jubilee—that is, a year of rest for the land, liberation of the slaves and a general enfranchisement of the people aimed at restoring equality and reducing the distance between rich and poor. The Book of Deuteronomy (15:1-11) adds to this the cancellation of debts. This Jubilee institution was also taken up by the prophet Isaiah (Is 61:1-2), and Jesus made the words of the prophet his own at the beginning of his ministry when he presented himself as the fulfillment of “the year of the Lord's favor” (Lk 4:18-19).

The beginning of the Jewish Jubilee was marked by the sounding of a ram's horn. In Hebrew this horn is called *jobel*, from which the Christian term *jubilee* comes.

The Christian Jubilee is also called a *holy year*, not only because it begins and ends with liturgical holy acts, but because its purpose is to encourage holiness of life, strengthen faith, and encourage acts of charity and fraternal love.

The Catholic Jubilee tradition was started by Pope Boniface VIII in the year 1300, without explicit reference to its biblical roots, at a time when throughout Christendom there was not only great suffering, caused by wars and diseases such as the plague, but also a deep desire to return to a more holy way of living.

Boniface VIII established the Jubilee Year by drawing on a tradition of “popular spirituality” that included pilgrimages and indulgences, as Pope Francis recalls in “Hope

Does Not Disappoint” (“*Spes Non Confundit*”), the bull for the Jubilee Year 2025 that he promulgated on May 9, 2024. He wrote:

I like to think that the proclamation of the first Jubilee, in the year 1300, was preceded by a journey of grace inspired by popular spirituality. How can we fail to recall the various ways by which the grace of forgiveness had been poured out upon God’s holy and faithful People? We are reminded, for example, of the great “Pardon” that Saint Celestine V granted to all those who visited the Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio in Aquila on the 28th and 29th days of August 1294, six years before Pope Boniface VIII instituted the Holy Year. The church was already experiencing the grace of the Jubilee as an outpouring of divine mercy. Even earlier, in 1216, Pope Honorius III granted the plea of Saint Francis [of Assisi] for an indulgence for all those visiting the Porziuncola on the first two days of August. The same can be said of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: in 1222, Pope Callistus II allowed the Jubilee to be celebrated there whenever the Feast of the Apostle James fell on a Sunday.

“Pilgrimage is of course a fundamental element of every Jubilee event,” the pope remarked in the bull. Although it was not an element of the Jewish Jubilee, it is something that dates back to the early centuries of the Christian era, when the faithful tended to go to the holy sites linked to their faith. Since it soon became almost impossible for them to go to the Holy Land because of travel difficulties and political realities, Rome quickly became “the new Jerusalem,” a primary place of pilgrimage because of the martyrdom there of SS. Peter and Paul and other early Christian saints.

Throughout the Middle Ages, pilgrims came to Rome from Gaul (what is today much of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, parts of the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland), the Slavic countries and northern Italy. The pilgrims were called *Romei* (from the Greek word *Romaïos*, meaning foreigners/pilgrims to Rome). From the sixth century onward, St. Peter’s tomb (located then as now under a basilica bearing his name) attracted pilgrims from all over the world.

They came to Rome notwithstanding the hazards of travel, risks to life from brigands or robbers, risks to health from the plague and other illnesses, and difficulty procuring food and lodging. In the 13th century, the journey could take weeks or even months, depending on whether one traveled by foot, by horse or by carriage.

The Romei came on a spiritual journey to renew their faith by drawing physically close to the tombs of the martyrs and confessors of the faith, to do penance for their sins and seek God’s mercy and pardon—and, from 1300 onward, to obtain the Jubilee indulgences. Since the ninth century, bishops across Europe had granted indulgences, which according to the Catholic Church are “a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven,” to those who contributed to building churches or gave gifts to charitable institutions. The new mendicant orders—the Franciscans (founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1210) and the Dominicans (founded

by St. Dominic in 1216)—promoted pilgrimages, developed the concept of indulgences and greatly influenced the Christian people of that time.

The term *jubilee* came to be used for indulgences granted for participation in the Crusades. Pope Urban II called the First Crusade (1096-99) to regain the Holy Land from the Islamic rule of the Seljuks (Turkish-Persian Sunni Muslims) and granted indulgences to those who participated, confessed and repented of their sins. St. Bernard spoke of the Second Crusade as “a year of pardon, a true jubilee year.” (Pope Francis, who has developed a close relationship with the Muslim world, makes no mention of the Crusades and the indulgences linked to them in his Bull of Indiction for this Jubilee Year.)

From the mid-1200s onward popes granted indulgences for visits to some Roman churches. Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope (1288-92), granted indulgences to pilgrims who visited St. Peter’s Basilica (the earlier basilica, not the current structure) on certain days.

In those days, and up until 1870, the pope was not only a spiritual ruler, he was also a temporal ruler as head of the papal states. Then, at a time of rising nationalism when people began moving away from the church, Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) managed to rekindle religious sentiments and overcome political contrasts by celebrating the first Jubilee Year.

### **The First Jubilee**

In the bull announcing this Holy Year, Pope Francis recalled that “the proclamation of the first Jubilee, in the year 1300, was preceded by a journey of grace inspired by popular spirituality.” The historian Paolo Brezzi, in his 1975 history of church Jubilees, *Storia degli Anni Santi*, from which I have gathered much of this history, reports that news (from unidentified sources) began circulating in Rome at the end of 1299 claiming that a total plenary indulgence would be available to all those who visited the Basilica of St. Peter’s from sunrise to sunset on Jan. 1, 1300, while lesser indulgences could be obtained in the following days and perhaps year. This caused crowds to flock to St. Peter’s, and they were soon joined by an influx of foreign pilgrims.

When Pope Boniface saw what was happening, he first consulted the archives but found no precedent for it. He then convened the College of Cardinals to discuss the matter and finally took the decision to give his seal of approval to the spontaneous event. Two months later, he issued the bull of indiction for the first Jubilee Year, “*Antiquorum Habet Fida Relatio*,” on Feb. 22, 1300, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, and announced the granting of the Jubilee indulgence—“the fullest pardon of their sins”—to all who visited the basilicas of the two apostles of Rome “with reverence, true repentance and having confessed [their sins].” He backdated the Jubilee indulgence to Christmas Day 1299 and extended it throughout the Jubilee Year. To obtain the Jubilee indulgence, Romans were required to visit the basilicas on 30 days during the year, while pilgrims needed to do so only 15 times.

In another bull, Pope Boniface excommunicated anyone who attacked pilgrims coming to Rome. He also granted the Jubilee indulgence to those who could not complete the visits or who died on the way to Rome, as many did.

The first Jubilee was surprisingly successful. Pilgrims came to Rome, which then had a population of 20,000, from France, Germany, Spain and even England. "The old came on the shoulders of the young," one report said. Among the many pilgrims were Dante (who in "The Divine Comedy" refers to the Jubilee several times), and artists like Giotto and Cimabue. Pilgrims prostrated themselves before the tomb of St. Peter; and on every Friday and feast day, Veronica's Veil, with an image of Jesus' face, was exposed for their veneration.

Rome has benefited from every Jubilee in terms of infrastructure and works of art. Already in 1300, the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva was built near the Pantheon and the churches of Aracoeli and the Lateran were restored for the Jubilee. Rome's inns were full then, as now, and Vatican finances gained.

### **Establishing a Tradition**

Although Pope Boniface decreed that a Jubilee should be held every 100 years, the next one was held just 50 years later. During the 1340s, the people of Rome were upset at the exile of the popes to Avignon and sent delegations there to the reigning pope, Clement VI, to plead with him to declare a Jubilee Year in 1350. They argued that Rome was in miserable condition and human life was too short to allow a person to gain the plenary indulgence if it could only be obtained every 100 years. Clement VI agreed to declare 1350 a Jubilee Year but published the bull only in August, after the great plague had hit Europe and Italy in 1348. Soon after that a powerful earthquake hit Rome on Sept. 9, 1349, damaging the basilicas of St. John Lateran and St. Paul's Outside the Walls.

Clement VI's bull granted the fullest pardon to those who visited and prayed at the tombs of SS. Peter and Paul and extended it to those who did likewise at St. John Lateran. Henceforth the Lateran Basilica would be included in the Jubilee agenda.

The second Jubilee Year was opened in St. Peter's Basilica on Dec. 24, 1349; it was the only time in history that the pope was not present for the opening of a Jubilee Year, as he was in Avignon. More pilgrims came than for the first Holy Year; they came from Spain, England, Sweden, Germany, Hungary and Greece. Lodging again was a major problem, and food prices were high.

St. Bridget of Sweden, a Catholic mystic and founder of the Bridgettines, arrived in Rome for the Jubilee in 1350 and to get approval for her order; during her visit, she spoke out against ignorant and immoral clergy and called for the return of the papacy from Avignon.

It was only much later, however, that St. Catherine of Siena convinced Gregory XI, the last French pope, to return to Rome in 1377. When he died in 1378, the Romans

demanded that the cardinals “elect a Roman, or at least an Italian” as next pope. They elected the archbishop of Bari (not yet a cardinal) in 1378. He took the name Urban VI and called a Jubilee for 1390 (a nod to the 33 years of life for Christ on earth, though it was actually 40 years after the previous Jubilee), but he died before it happened.

His successor, Pope Boniface IX, held two Holy Years: the first in 1390 and another 10 years later. He was one of three popes to hold two Jubilees: John Paul II and Francis are the only others.

The Great Western Schism (September 1378 to November 1417) saw three bishops claiming to be pope. It ended with the election of Martin V (1417-31), not yet a priest, as pope. He called a Jubilee for 1423 (33 years after the Jubilee of 1390, again for the 33 years of Christ’s life) to strengthen Catholic unity, and the Holy Door of St. John Lateran was opened for the first time.

The next Jubilee Year was held in 1450, under Pope Nicholas V (1447-55), the first of the Renaissance popes. Such a vast number of pilgrims came to Rome that he had to limit their stay in Rome to five days because of the lack of food.

During that Jubilee Year, Nicholas V canonized St. Bernardino of Siena, O.F.M., the famous 15th-century Franciscan preacher, just six years after his death. This appears to be the first instance of canonizations during a Jubilee Year, and since then it has become an element of many Jubilees, including the present one.

That Holy Year of 1450, however, was marred by two tragic events: an outbreak of the plague and a panic-crush on the bridge of Castel Sant’Angelo on December 19, in which 172 people died.

Pope Paul II (1464-71) issued the bull “Ineffabilis Providentia” on April 19, 1470, decreeing that a Jubilee be celebrated every 25 years, as has happened ever since with only a few exceptions. He also established that the Jubilee pilgrimage should include visits to the four main basilicas: St. Peter’s, St. Paul’s, St. John Lateran and St. Mary Major. He died a year later, and it fell to his successor, Sixtus IV, to celebrate the Jubilee of 1475.

Sixtus IV (former minister general of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor) was elected pope on Aug. 9, 1471. He wished to adorn Rome with works of art for the Jubilee Year and ordered the building of the Sistine Chapel. He also had the Ponte Sisto bridge built over the Tiber to prepare for the arrival of pilgrims and avoid another tragedy like that of December 1450. He opened the Jubilee on Dec. 24, 1474, but because of the flooding of the Tiber and a recurrence of plague, the crowds were small, so he extended the Jubilee to Easter 1476.

The next Jubilee Year was held under Pope Alexander VI in 1500. He issued the bull “Inter Multiplices” on March 28, 1499, and put order into the Jubilee agenda by developing a liturgical ceremony and structure that, for the most part, have survived to this day. He wanted the beginning of the Jubilee Year to be marked by an event with a

powerful impact and so established the rite of the opening of the Holy Door, with a ceremony that explicitly refers to Jesus' words, "I am the door. Whoever passes through me will be saved" (Jn 10:7).

Pope Alexander VI opened the Holy Door in St. Peter's on Dec. 24, 1500, by striking the wall (built in front of the Holy Door) with a hammer before workers demolished the wall—a practice that continued until 1975.

Not long afterward, the Protestant Reformation started on Oct. 31, 1517, and Pope Leo X excommunicated Martin Luther on Jan. 3, 1521. Two Jubilee Years followed: in 1525, under Clement VII, and in 1550 under Julius III.

During the 1550 Jubilee, Ignatius Loyola was living in Rome, as was Philip Neri, who came to the help of the remarkable influx of pilgrims with his Holy Trinity Confraternity and set up a hospice. The hospice was enlarged for the 1575 Jubilee Year under Pope Gregory XIII, which was the first Jubilee after the Protestant Reformation and the redrafting of the political map of Europe, and in which the confraternities played an important role. Some 400,000 pilgrims came to Rome, which then had a population of 80,000. Many were Italians, but Arabs, Ethiopians and Armenians also came.

In 1600, Pope Clement VIII set an example by hearing confessions during Holy Week, serving meals to pilgrims and eating with 12 of the city's poor every day during Lent. Some cardinals stopped wearing their red robes as a sign of penitence. But on Feb. 17 of that same year, Giordano Bruno, a Dominican Friar, was burned at the stake in Rome's Campo de' Fiori after being condemned as a heretic by Clement VIII following a trial by the Inquisition.

From 1600 onward, Jubilees were held every 25 years for the next two centuries, but they appeared to lack the spiritual and religious enthusiasm of the first Jubilees and of those that would follow from Leo XIII onward.

At the Jubilee of 1625, Urban VIII extended the Jubilee indulgence to those who were unable to travel to Rome, to prisoners and to the sick. Pope Innocent X instituted the Way of the Cross at Rome's Colosseum for the 1650 Jubilee Year, a religious event that continues during Holy Week even today and attracts many people.

The Jubilee Year of 1700 was the only one in which the Holy Door of St. Peter's was opened by one pope, Innocent XII, and closed by another, Clement XI.

There was no Jubilee in 1800 because there was no pope. Pius VI had been taken prisoner to France by Napoleon's troops and died in Valence on Aug. 29, 1799, and the conclave to elect his successor took place in Venice. On March 14, 1800, the assembled cardinals elected Pius VII as pope.

After Leo XII held a Jubilee Year in 1825, there was a 75-year gap with no Jubilee Year because of political turmoil.

## **Modern Jubilees**

On the Feast of the Ascension, May 11, 1899, Pope Leo XIII proclaimed the Jubilee Year of 1900. For the first time in the 600-year history of the Christian Jubilee Year, responsibility for welcoming pilgrims fell to the authorities of the new Italian state. During that year, Leo XIII canonized John Baptist de La Salle and Rita of Cascia.

After World War I (1914-19), Pius XI held a Jubilee Year in 1925. His bull identified three goals: peace among peoples, a return of Catholics to the church and “the definitive settlement and organization of Palestine.” More than half a million pilgrims came to Rome, including over 110,000 from across the globe, including from the Far East, the United States, Canada, and Latin America.

During that Jubilee Year, Pope Pius XI canonized St. Therese of the Child Jesus, Peter Canisius and the Curé d’Ars and beatified Bernadette Soubirous. He also instituted the feast of Christ the King. [also St. John Eudes]

After World War II (1939-45), Pius XII held a Jubilee Year in 1950. His bull spoke about the religious renewal of the modern world and presented the Jubilee as “the year of the great return, the year of the great pardon.” During it he proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven. He canonized Maria Goretti, a virgin martyr at the age of 11, at a ceremony attended by 200,000 people.

Visitors were given a “pilgrim card” which, for that occasion, was recognized as having the same validity as a passport within Italy. Ever since, pilgrim cards have been available for the Jubilee Years.

Paul VI held the Jubilee Year in 1975, 10 years after the ending of the Second Vatican Council, with the themes of conversion, renewal, reconciliation and social justice. It was the first Jubilee with events broadcast worldwide. (At the opening of the door of St. Peter’s, some masonry in front of the door collapsed, nearly injuring the pope.)

John Paul II celebrated two Jubilee Years. The first was an extraordinary jubilee in 1983 to celebrate the 1,950th anniversary of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The second, the ordinary jubilee observed every 25 years, was known as the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, during which the pope made several pilgrimages, including to Mount Sinai in Egypt and to the Holy Land. He beatified two of the children of Fatima and held a World Youth Day attended by more than two million young people.

## **Jubilee 2025**

Pope Francis’ first Jubilee Year was the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in 2016. For the first time in the history of Jubilees, he opened a Holy Door elsewhere than in Rome: in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Bangui, capital of the war-torn Central African Republic, on Nov. 29, 2015. He opened the Holy Door in St. Peter’s on Dec. 8, and decreed that a

“Door of Mercy” be opened in cathedrals, sanctuaries, hospitals and prisons throughout the world.

The second is the current Jubilee of Hope, which Francis inaugurated by opening the Holy Door in St. Peter’s on the evening of Dec. 24. He explained in the bull that the Holy Door is opened “to invite everyone to an intense experience of the love of God that awakens in hearts the sure hope of salvation in Christ.”

He made history on Dec. 26 by opening another Holy Door in the chapel of Rebbibia, Rome’s largest prison, as a sign of hope for the inmates there. He is the first pope to open a Holy Door in a prison.

Following tradition, the pope’s legates opened the Holy Doors in the three other major basilicas in Rome.

He called on pilgrims during this Jubilee Year “to discover hope in *the signs of the times* that the Lord gives us” and “to recognize the immense goodness present in our world, lest we be tempted to think ourselves overwhelmed by evil and violence.”

In the bull, he listed at least eight ways in which we can be agents of hope in today’s world. He said “the first sign of hope” in this war-torn world should be “the desire for peace.” He reminded everyone that “those who are peacemakers will be called ‘children of God’” and said, “the need for peace challenges us all, and demands that concrete steps be taken.”

He called on believers “to be signs of hope” in countries where there is a decline in birth rates by their “openness to life and responsible parenthood,” and by working—also through legislative efforts—“for a future filled with the laughter of babies and children.”

During the Jubilee Year, he said, “we are called to be tangible signs of hope for those of our brothers and sisters who experience hardships of any kind.” He called for efforts at the government level “to restore hope” to prisoners through amnesties, pardons, improving prison conditions and the abolition of the death penalty. Before Christmas, he called for the commutation of the federal sentences of prisoners on death row in the United States.

He also urged believers to be “signs of hope” for the young, the elderly, the sick and those in hospital or affected by illnesses or disabilities, and for migrants.

He appealed for “hope [to] be granted to the billions of poor, who often lack the essentials of life,” and, like John Paul II in the Year 2000, pleaded with “the most affluent nations” to “forgive the debts of countries that will never be able to pay them” and to address “the ecological debt,” describing this as “a matter of justice.”

The 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (now Iznik in Turkey) occurs during this Jubilee Year. That council, held from May to July 325, affirmed the full divinity of



Jesus Christ and that his being was of one substance (consubstantial) with the Father. Francis said he plans to travel to Nicaea and hopes a major ecumenical event can be held there. He also expressed hope that the Christian churches can finally reach agreement on a common date for Easter.

Pope Francis' agenda for this jubilee year includes encounters with no less than 35 different groups of people who are coming to Rome to celebrate their particular jubilee, starting with "the world of communications" and concluding with "the jubilee of prisoners." He will canonize two young people during the Jubilee Year, Carlo Acutis and Pier Giorgio Frassati.

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*The full calendar of events and all relevant information for pilgrims to Rome can be found on the Vatican's Jubilee website, including how to get a free digital pass that will be needed to take part in the main Jubilee events: [www.iubilaeum2025.va/en/contatti.html](http://www.iubilaeum2025.va/en/contatti.html).*