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Pope Francis crosses the threshold of the Holy Door of the Church of Our Father at Rome's Rebibbia prison Dec. 26, 2024, before presiding over a Mass with inmates, prison staff and Italian government officials. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Wearing red vestments for the feast of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, Pope Francis knocked on the door of the church in Rome's Rebibbia prison complex and walked over its threshold.

After reciting a formal prayer before opening the prison's Holy Door Dec. 26, the pope took the microphone back to explain that he had inaugurated the Holy Year 2025 by opening the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica.

"I wanted the second Holy Door to be the one here, at a prison," he said. "I wanted all of us, inside or out, to have an opportunity to throw open the doors of our hearts and understand that hope does not disappoint."

Members of the penitentiary police band played the official hymn of the Holy Year 2025 when the pope arrived, while about 300 people waited inside the church; they included just over 100 women and men serving time at Rebibbia, some of their family members, volunteers, prison staff, Rome Mayor Roberto Gualtieri and officials of the Italian justice department.

The door of the prison's Church of Our Father was decorated with a pine garland with white roses and silver-tinted pinecones. Inside the church, a manger with the baby Jesus sat in front of the altar. The inmates, with the help of volunteers, provided the music while a prisoner and a female guard did the readings.

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The prayers of the faithful included a petition for governments to focus on rehabilitating and assisting all people, especially those who have made mistakes.

Seated in his wheelchair in front of the church door, Francis had prayed: "In the joy of Christmas, let us welcome the call of the Lord Jesus to follow him. He is the door of life, the hope that does not disappoint, the good news that saves."

"May the opening of this Holy Door be for all of us a call to look to the future with hope," he said. "Let us open our hearts to the mercy of God so as to celebrate with the whole church his unending love."

The Vatican press office had distributed the text of the homily the pope prepared for the Mass, but the pope did not use it.

Instead, Francis spoke directly to the inmates. He told them that all Christians need to remind themselves that "hope does not disappoint, it never disappoints. I need to think about this, too, because in life's difficult moments one thinks that everything is over, that nothing can be resolved. But hope never disappoints."

"I like to think of hope being like an anchor on the shore, and we, holding the rope, are there, safe because our hope is like an anchor" hooked into the earth. "This is the message I want to give all of us, including myself: Don't lose hope."

At the end of Mass, before greeting and shaking hands with each of the 300 people present inside the church, Francis repeated his message. He told inmates, "Now, don't forget the two things we need to do with our hands: First, hang on to the rope of hope, hang on to the anchor by its rope, never let go; second, throw open your hearts, have an open heart."

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.