Spirituality



Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica - and so, the year of Jubilee - during the Christmas Mass at the Vatican on Dec. 24, 2024. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

Timothy Gabrielli

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Pope Francis has proclaimed a Jubilee year in the Catholic Church, which began on Dec. 24, 2024, and will continue through Jan. 6, 2026. But what is a Jubilee, and what is this year's about?

Biblical roots

The Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament, offers instructions about celebrating a Jubilee every 50 years. The Jubilee has roots in the Jewish practice of Sabbath rest every seven days, connected to the creation story in which God created the world in six days and rested on the next.

This rest is not merely about "taking a break," but orienting life to what is most important. The prohibition of work on the Sabbath prompts people to look beyond productive work, helping them to see all activity in light of the eternal.

The biblical books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy outline what's called a "sabbatical year," extending that practice of periodic rest to every seventh year. During that sabbatical, the texts call for forgiving debts and freeing enslaved people. Even the land is supposed to get rest, since farmers are told to let their fields lie fallow – a check against unfettered, and destructive, desires for productivity.

The Jubilee extends this logic. Held every 50 years, the Holy Year follows a Sabbath of Sabbaths, "seven times seven years." During the Jubilee, the Book of Leviticus instructs, "you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants." Again, even the land must be freed. Each plot bought and sold over the previous 49 years must be returned to the tribe with which it was originally associated.

Like all the other forms of Sabbath rest, the overriding emphasis is that everyone and everything belongs to God: that the earth is not simply for humans to do with as they please, especially if it creates injustice. People inhabit the earth like wayfarers.

Indeed, the Bible regularly reminds the Israelites that they were once enslaved in Egypt and, once freed, were wanderers.

Medieval traditions

Scholars are not quite sure if and how Jubilees were actually put into practice in the ancient world, though they are referred to in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sums up his mission with verses about the Jubilee from the Book of Isaiah: "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor."

Some of the practices of the church’s modern Jubilees, however, come from the late Middle Ages, a time when Christian grassroots efforts promoted pilgrimages to Rome. As much political as religious and recreational, these pilgrimages demonstrated to power-hungry monarchs that the eternal city was beyond royal control and, by implication, that pilgrims’ identity was more than subjects of a crown.

In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII endorsed these initiatives by instituting a 13th centennial celebration of Christ’s birth. Central to the celebration were pilgrimages to Roman basilicas. Boniface’s decree included no reference to the biblical Jubilee. Over time, however, the link between the biblical Jubilee and these Roman celebrations was articulated and strengthened. The intervening time between Jubilees was reduced to 50 years to resonate with the ancient text. Eventually, Jubilees came to be inaugurated every 25 years to increase the opportunity for participation.

As they developed, Jubilee celebrations kept their link to pilgrimages and reparation. Both are meant to be reminders that human beings are made for the eternal, not merely the productive.

Pilgrims of hope

The Catholic Church’s last ordinary Jubilee celebration, which took place in 2000, was deemed a "Great Jubilee" by then-Pope John Paul II, commemorating two millennia since the birth of Christ. Famously, during a Mass that year, he sought

forgiveness of the church for atrocities committed across its history, including injustice toward Jews, Indigenous peoples and women, among others.

The 2000 Jubilee continued the practice of indulgences for making a pilgrimage, emphasizing that "a pilgrimage evokes the believer's personal journey" of faith, following in Christ's footsteps.

On Christmas Eve 2024, Pope Francis inaugurated the current Jubilee by walking through the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica. This ceremony was instituted by Pope Alexander VI for the Jubilee in 1500, evoking Jesus' description of himself in the Gospel of John as the door to salvation.

In addition to the typical emphases on pilgrimage and indulgences, Francis has identified hope as a particular focus for this Jubilee year. In Christian theology, hope is not optimism. It is an insistence to seek the good, anchored in God: to see difficulties clearly, yet to pursue action rather than despair.

Thus, Francis has called for several specific acts of hope throughout the Jubilee year. The papal bull proclaiming the Jubilee urges peacemaking, a spirit of welcome toward migrants, and openness toward having children. Francis also issues a call for affluent nations to forgive debts, and a general call for both repentance and mercy.

Jubilees ask people to reorient life toward the eternal – a theme that might seem to minimize attention to the specific social ills of our moment. In tune with the long tradition of Jubilees, however, Francis emphasizes that the more people see the world as God sees it, the more people will act against injustice.

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