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Eric LeCompte, executive director of the Jubilee USA Network, poses for a photo at the Vatican on June 4, 2024. Jubilee USA Network is an alliance of faith-based development and debt-relief advocacy organizations. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis may be hospitalized and U.S. President Donald Trump may be wreaking havoc on foreign aid, but one of the Catholic Church's leading crusaders for debt cancellation believes those factors are all the more reason to double down on efforts to alleviate poverty during Jubilee 2025.

"The reality is that Pope Francis and the Catholic Church have already laid out the focus for the Jubilee Year on debt relief and economic relief to deal with poverty and climate issues," said Eric LeCompte, executive director of Jubilee USA Network, an alliance of faith-based development and debt-relief advocacy organizations.

The Old Testament tradition of jubilee years as a time of forgiveness — both of sins and of debt — has been celebrated every 25 years by the Catholic Church in recent centuries.

And on Dec. 24, 2024, Francis officially opened the Vatican's Holy Door marking the start of Jubilee 2025. In the first few weeks of the new year, his calendar was jam-packed with related activities.

All of that changed when, on Feb. 14, the pope was hospitalized with a respiratory infection that developed into double pneumonia. But despite the 88-year-old pontiff's prolonged hospitalization, LeCompte said efforts toward debt cancellation remain in progress.



Pope Francis opens the Holy Door of St Peter's Basilica to mark the start of the Catholic Jubilee Year, at the Vatican, Dec. 24, 2024. (Alberto Pizzoli/Pool Photo via AP)

In an interview with the National Catholic Reporter, LeCompte described this as making good on the "unfinished work of Jubilee 2000."

"Because of the church's work, we won $130 billion dollars in debt relief. That essentially means that 54 million kids are going to school in Africa who never would have seen the inside of a classroom," said LeCompte.

"Over the last 25 years, people have seen doctors for the first time because of this work towards debt cancellation," he continued. "But one of the very important things that the church called for in Jubilee 2000 is a bankruptcy-like process — an actual change to the international financial system."

During the week of March 3, LeCompte took part in a series of high-level meetings within the Roman Curia and Vatican dicasteries to ensure that these plans are moving ahead, despite the disruption caused by the pope's hospitalization.

In particular, he expects a number of major religious figures and world leaders to convene at the Vatican later this year ahead of the 2025 G-7 and G-20 summits in order to "join the church in delivering a message" aimed at influencing the global financial system.

"In almost every country in the world we have a bankruptcy process and that creates financial stability for all of our domestic economies and it's missing from the international financial system," LeCompte explained.

"Pope Francis joins the father of modern economics, Adam Smith — very strange bedfellows — in calling for this process," he added with a laugh.

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According to LeCompte, a bankruptcy process at the international level would be consistent with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to ensure that there is a mechanism in place so countries do not have debts that are unsustainable.

"It creates a continual process that protects both the lender and the borrower, both the creditor and the debtor, so that they have financial stability," he said.

While the last three popes — John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis — have all backed such a proposal, LeCompte said there is particular urgency to push this through in a Jubilee Year and in a climate where the Trump administration's draconian cuts to foreign aid are likely to compound the problems faced by the developing world.

"The lack of USAID, even though some of their funding has been restored, essentially means that health crises are going to be fomented throughout the developing world. And of course there are impacts on poverty, but the health issues are the biggest, where governments are going to struggle and they're going to incur more debt and have more challenges," he noted.

"The beautiful thing about bankruptcy, responsible lending and borrowing and anti-corruption work — these kinds of things do so much because they actually cost taxpayers absolutely nothing," he continued. "But they transform what's possible in the financial system."

For a decade now, Francis has used his voice and convening power to rally world leaders to adopt such changes.

But the fact that he is currently unable to participate in the Holy Year's activities and remains in hospital doesn't mean his witness is not essential to the Jubilee efforts.

In fact, for LeCompte, Francis is giving witness to another aspect of the Jubilee tradition.

"When we talk about the Jubilee promise, when we talk about Catholic teaching and theology, the seventh year is also a year of rest," he said. "We've all been very concerned about the Holy Father's ambitious schedule."

"Not only is Pope Francis taking some rest, like the Jubilee Year, but he's reminding us that in many ways, what he's going through is a gift because he gets to touch the suffering of so many around the world," he added. "And as we pray for the Holy Father, it's incredibly important in this Jubilee Year that we pray for all who are suffering."

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This story appears in the **Pope Francis' health crisis** and **2025 Holy Year** feature series.