News



Pilgrims from the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the Diocese of San Bernardino, Calif., and St. Agnes School in St. Paul, Minn., receive Communion and pray during a Jubilee Mass at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican March 17, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

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Vatican City — March 18, 2025
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Hundreds of pilgrims from the United States gathered for Mass at the majestic Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica with two main intentions in mind: the health of Pope Francis and the needs of their loved ones at home.

In early March, the bishops of Pittsburgh and of San Bernardino, California, led official diocesan pilgrimages for the Holy Year 2025. For the Mass March 17 at the Vatican, they were joined by groups from St. Agnes School in St. Paul, Minnesota, and several others, filling all the pews and many plastic chairs as well.

Pittsburgh Auxiliary Bishop Mark Eckman gave the homily at the Mass, focusing on the Lenten call to conversion and the Jubilee Year gift of an indulgence, which is the remission of the temporal punishment due for one's sins.

"A lot of times, people don't understand what an indulgence is," the bishop said, but basically it is a way "to eliminate that time that we are to spend in purgatory."

Often people think that "if I go to confession, that's it. It's a done deal," the bishop said. But "confession, when we are absolved by the priest, it says that we are not going to hell, but it does not say we are getting to heaven right away; we are going to get there, but there might be a delay, depending upon whatever type of sins we had."

The indulgence removes the delay, he said. And "we know that eventually, whenever our time is done, we are going to be in God's presence where there is only joy and love and happiness. So that is why we try to do our best each day to live out our life following the Lord's commandments, being the people of love that he has asked us to be."

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Bishop Alberto Rojas of San Bernardino concelebrated the Mass and afterward led his pilgrims on the long procession to the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica.

The Jubilee pilgrimage, he said, "is a special time of grace, a time to remember who we are as Catholic Christians," and "to pray for the people back home — so many people have asked us to pray for them."

The groups originally were scheduled to attend Francis' weekly general audience March 19, the feast of St. Joseph and the 12th anniversary of the inauguration of Francis' pontificate.

Rojas said not being able to see the pope, who has been hospitalized at Rome's Gemelli hospital since Feb. 14, is a disappointment, but the pilgrims intend to come back to the Vatican anyway and pray for him.

Araceli Villarreal, one of the pilgrims, said missing the pope "is so sad, but it is best that he get better" rather than hurry back to the Holy Year pilgrims.

The group spent March 16 in L'Aquila, Italy, celebrating Mass at the Basilica of San Bernardino, the burial place of the 15th-century namesake of their diocese. The Franciscans who staff the basilica gave the diocese a relic of the saint.

"The connection with the local community and the friars there was a moving experience and very unexpected," said Michelle Clark, another of the pilgrims.

She was traveling with her 22-year-old son, Matthew, who works with his father building churches in the diocese.

After saying he particularly liked the Gothic cathedral in Orvieto, north of Rome, and while looking at St. Peter's Basilica, he said, "this is far beyond what we are doing."

His mother noted, however, that most of the churches they have visited on pilgrimage took hundreds of years to build and embellish in such a way that every detail "glorifies God."