Vatican
Vatican News



Visitors pass through the Holy Door of St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican in pilgrimage Feb. 8, 2025, as part of the Jubilee of the Armed Services, Police and Security Personnel. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — April 22, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

With his death April 21, Pope Francis marked yet another first in the history of the Catholic Church: he became the first pope to open the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica without living to close it.

The pope opened the Holy Door Dec. 24, 2024, marking the beginning of the Holy Year 2025, a tradition normally celebrated in the church every 25 years as a time of spiritual renewal and pilgrimage. His death four months later means the Holy Door will be sealed by his successor — an unprecedented moment in the modern history of Jubilee celebrations.

Only once before had a Jubilee begun under one pope and concluded by another. In 1700, Pope Innocent XII, already gravely ill, gave his blessing for the start of the Jubilee he had declared in 1699 but was unable to preside at the opening of the Holy Door. He died in September 1700 and it fell to Pope Clement XI, elected later that year, to close the Holy Door and conclude the Jubilee.

There have been other instances in which a Jubilee was proclaimed by one pontiff and carried out by another.

In 1389, Pope Urban VI declared the following year to be a holy year by changing the cycle of Jubilee celebrations to be observed every 33 years. His death that year meant the Holy Year 1390 was presided over by Pope Boniface IX.

Advertisement

A similar situation occurred when Pope Paul II proclaimed the Holy Year 1475 and laid out the requirement of visiting Rome's four major basilicas, but he died before the Jubilee began and it was presided over by Pope Sixtus IV.

Pope Julius III presided over the Holy Year 1550 proclaimed by his predecessor, Pope Paul III, and Pope Pius VI presided over the Holy Year 1775 proclaimed by his predecessor Pope Clement XIV.

Yet Francis became the only pope to personally open the Holy Door to inaugurate a holy year without closing it himself.

He previously opened and closed the Holy Door of the basilica during the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy he called in 2015. The pope was also the first to open a holy door outside the Vatican, opening the Holy Door of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Bangui, Central African Republic, that year.

In December 2024, he opened the Holy Door at the church in Rome's Rebibbia prison complex as a sign of hope to incarcerated people.

A few days before Francis was elected in March 2013, he told his fellow cardinals, "I have the impression that Jesus is locked inside the church and that he is knocking because he wants to get out!"

Among his last gestures as pope, he left the door to the world's largest church wide open.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** and **2025 Holy Year** feature series.