Francis announces new global jubilee, the Holy Year of Mercy

by Joshua J. McElwee

Holy Year of Mercy

Symbolically calling on the entire global Roman Catholic church to take up his papacy's central message of compassion and pardon, Pope Francis on Friday announced that he is convoking a jubilee year to be called the Holy Year of Mercy.

Saying he has "thought often about how the church can make more evident its mission of being a witness of mercy," the pope announced the new jubilee year during a Lenten penitential service in St. Peter's Basilica.

"I am convinced that the whole church -- that has much need to receive mercy because we are sinners -- will find in this jubilee the joy to rediscover and render fruitful the mercy of God, with which we are all called to give consolation to every man and woman of our time," Francis said in announcing the year.

"Let us not forget that God pardons and God pardons always," the pope continued. "Let us never tire of asking for forgiveness."

"We entrust it as of now to the Mother of Mercy, because she looks to us with her gaze and watches over our way," Francis said. "Our penitential way, our way of open hearts, during a year to receive the indulgence of God, to receive the mercy of God."

The pope also said he wants the church to live the upcoming holy year "in the light" of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Luke: "Be merciful, just as your father is merciful."

A jubilee year is a special year called by the church to receive blessing and pardon from God and
remission of sins. The Catholic church has called jubilee years every 25 or 50 years since the year 1300 and has also called special jubilee years from time to time, known as extraordinary jubilee years.

The last jubilee year was held in 2000 during the papacy of Pope John Paul II and was known as "the Great Jubilee." The last extraordinary jubilee year was held in 1983 to celebrate 1,950 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Francis on Friday said the new jubilee would begin on this year's Catholic feast of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated Dec. 8. It will close on Nov. 20, 2016, the day celebrated that year as the feast of Christ the King.

Announcing the closing date, the pope added a new term to the title of Christ celebrated that day, also calling Jesus "the living face of the mercy of the father."

Francis said he has entrusted the organization of the jubilee year to the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization "so that that they may animate it as a new stage of the journey of the church in its mission to bring to every person the gospel of mercy."

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The jubilee year will formally open Dec. 8 with the opening of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. The other holy doors of basilicas around the world will then be opened as a sign of God's opening a new pathway to salvation.

Francis has made mercy a central theme of his papacy, speaking of it often in homilies and in his texts. His apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium ("The Joy of the Gospel"), uses the word 32 times.

The pope has also called two global meetings of Catholic bishops at the Vatican -- known as synods, with one being held last year and the next this October -- which have focused on issues of family life.

Those meetings are known to have discussed how the church might use its teachings on mercy to address sometimes difficult contemporary family situations, such as divorce and remarriage and same-sex unions.

In his homily at the penitential service Friday, Francis gave another wide-ranging reflection on the role of mercy and pardon in church teaching.

Recounting the Gospel reading of the day -- in which a woman described as sinful washes Jesus with her hair and tears -- Francis said, "Every gesture of this woman speaks of love and expresses her desire to have an unshakeable certainty in her life: that of being forgiven."

"And Jesus gives this certainty, welcoming her and demonstrating to her the love of God for her, truly for her," the pope said.

Continuing the story to talk about Simon, the Pharisee who owned the house, Francis said he was a "lord" who "cannot find the path of love."

For him, the pope said, "all is calculated, all [is] thought. He stands at the threshold of formality."

"It is an ugly thing, formal love," Francis continued. "It cannot be understood."
"The call of Jesus pushes each of us to never stop at the surface of things, especially when we are dealing with a person," the pope said later. "We are called to look beyond, to focus on the heart to see of how much generosity everyone is capable.

"No one can be excluded from the mercy of God," Francis continued, repeating: "No one can be excluded from the mercy of God!"

"The church is the house that welcomes all and refuses no one," the pope said. "Its doors remain wide open, so that those touched by grace can find the certainty of forgiveness."

"Better must be the love of the church expressed toward those who convert," he said.

After listening to the readings of the day and giving the homily at Friday's penitential service, the pope also heard some individual confessions, spending about 45 minutes in a confessional in St. Peter's with individuals.

The pontifical council, with Francis' backing, has called on all parishes around the world to remain open for confessions for 24 hours Friday through Saturday as possible.

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