



A Year of Mercy



If you walk into the entrance area of St Peter's Basilica in Rome and look along the inner wall, you will see five doors. The furthest one on the right is called 'the Holy Door'. This is usually closed and bricked up from the inside. However, it is opened each time there is a Holy Year, a year announced by the pope as a special year to celebrate the mercy of God. The next time the Holy Door will be opened will be on December 8 this year, marking the start of what Pope Francis has called "an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy".

The practice of celebrating Holy Years draws on the ancient Jewish tradition of jubilee. We read in the Book of Leviticus that every 50th year was to be celebrated as a year of jubilee in which land would return to its original owners and slaves would be set free.

When Jesus was beginning his public ministry he went to the synagogue at Nazareth and read a text from the prophet Isaiah that spoke of "the year of the Lord's favour". Jesus then explained that he had been sent to proclaim this special year that would bring release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. As he travelled from place to place, Jesus fulfilled these words by healing the sick and forgiving those burdened by sin.

Centuries later we find a Christian celebration of special years of jubilee. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII invited people to visit the Roman basilicas of St Peter and St Paul in a spirit of repentance for sins. Writers described this as a "jubilee year". The Italian poet Dante referred to the great crowds crossing the bridge of the Castel Sant' Angelo that year on their way to and from St Peter's basilica. In the following years, popes have announced Jubilee Years (also called Holy Years), initially every 50 years and then every 25 years. There have also been extraordinary jubilees for special occasions.

Pope Francis has announced an extraordinary jubilee to begin on December 8. The date is significant as it is the feast of the Immaculate Conception. In the document announcing the Holy Year, Pope Francis links this feast with God's mercy in choosing Mary and keeping her holy in view of her role as mother of the saviour.

December 8 this year is also the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. In highlighting this anniversary, Pope Francis speaks of the council as involving "a true breath of the Holy Spirit", as the bishops at the council sensed the need "to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way." (*Misericordiae Vultus*, par 4)

Pope Francis recalls the opening of the Second Vatican Council when Pope John XXIII spoke of “the medicine of mercy” and the church’s wish to “show herself a loving mother to all, patient, kind, moved by compassion and goodness”. Pope Francis also quotes the words of Pope Paul VI at the close of the council. Pope Paul observed that the council had been inspired particularly by the gospel story of the Good Samaritan who showed compassion for the traveller who had been attacked on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Pope Paul said that all the teachings of the council were “directed to the service of humankind, of people of every condition, in every weakness and need.” (par 4)

With a sense of gratitude for the gift of the council and for all the gifts the church has received from God, Pope Francis invites us to enter into the Jubilee of Mercy. “With these sentiments of gratitude for everything the church has received, and with a sense of responsibility for the task that lies ahead, we shall cross the threshold of the Holy Door fully confident that the strength of the Risen Lord, who constantly supports us on our pilgrim way, will sustain us. May the Holy Spirit, who guides the steps of believers in cooperating with the work of salvation wrought by Christ, lead the way and support the People of God so that they may contemplate the face of mercy.” (par 4)

The phrase “the face of mercy” echoes the opening sentence of the document announcing the Holy Year. “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy.” Pope Francis speaks of the need to contemplate God’s mercy continually but he also observes that it is helpful to set aside certain times when we focus on God’s mercy more intently. “At times we are called to gaze even more attentively on mercy.”

We might compare this to our custom of celebrating Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. In a sense, every day is a good day for honouring our father and our mother. Yet, it can help us when we set aside a special day to focus on this. Celebrating the contribution of mothers and fathers on these particular days can help us be more mindful of their contribution all through the year. In a similar way, every year is a good year for celebrating God’s mercy. Yet, having a special jubilee year of mercy can help us be more mindful of God’s mercy all through our lives.

What will the Year of Mercy involve? As already mentioned, Pope Francis will start the year by opening the Holy Door in St Peter’s on Tuesday, December 8. On the following Sunday, the Holy Door in the basilica of St John Lateran, which is the cathedral of Rome, will be opened. On that same day, Sunday, December 13, there will be ceremonies of the opening of a Holy Door in each cathedral throughout the world. We will open a special door on the Sturt Street side of St Patrick’s cathedral in Ballarat.

As in earlier times, the practice of pilgrimage will have special place in the Holy Year. This might be a pilgrimage to Rome or a pilgrimage to the cathedral in our own diocese. Such a pilgrimage reflects the journey of our lives and helps us to realise that we are all pilgrims travelling along the road, making our way to our eternal home. As we travel, we can be healed and renewed by the mercy of

God. We are also called to show mercy to our fellow pilgrims. Pope Francis has proposed a motto for the Holy Year: 'Merciful like the Father'. This is drawn from the words of Jesus: "Be merciful just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

The Jubilee Year will close with the feast of Christ the King on November 20, 2016. Pope Francis has expressed his hope that this day will mark the conclusion of a year in which people around the world have experienced the mercy of God in a profound way.

To find out more about the Year of Mercy, I recommend that you read the reflections of Pope Francis announcing the Holy Year. The document is called *Misericordiae Vultus, The Face of Mercy*.

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