The origins of the Jubilee

The bull Antiquorum habet fida relatio, with which the first Roman Jubilee was proclaimed in 1300, was reproduced on the façade of the ancient Basilica of St. Peter, and this engraved document can now be found at the upper left of the Holy Door.

A spontaneous and grassroots movement gave rise to the first Jubilee. Pope Boniface VIII, who lived in challenging times for the Church, responded to the unprompted requests of the faithful who, at the dawn of the new century, sought the remission of sins and punishments. In 1300, he proclaimed a Jubilee Year for the Church. Previously, there had been grants of remission for those who went to fight the Moors in Spain, for example, Alexander II, in 1063 or for the liberation of Jerusalem (Urban II, 1095). During a night in July 1216, Francis of Assisi obtained an extraordinary promise from Christ and the Virgin, who appeared to him that all who, through the centuries, prayed at the Porziuncola would receive full remission of sins (the Pardon of Assisi). Honorius III granted the desired indulgence and later extended it to pilgrims visiting the tomb of Thomas Becket (1220), who was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral. Finally, Pope Celestine V established the so-called *Celestinian Pardon* for pilgrims to the Basilica of Collemaggio (L'Aquila, September 29, 1294).

With the Bull *Antiquorum habet fida relatio* ("There is credible testimony from the ancients that great remissions and indulgences of sins are granted to those who visit the venerable Basilica of the Prince of the Apostles in Rome"), the first Roman Jubilee was proclaimed. Pilgrims flocked to Rome throughout the year 1300, as recounted by Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi in his *De centesimo sive Iubileo anno liber*. The Bull, widely reproduced and disseminated, was engraved on the façade of the old Basilica of Saint Peter and can now be found above and to the left of the Holy Door.

LIVING THE JUBILEE

The Jubilee begins with the opening of the Holy Door (recalling Jesus' words, "*I am the door; if anyone enters through me, he will be saved*" - John 10:9). Pilgrims cross this threshold, which enables them to gain the indulgence for the remission of penalties due to sin. The Jubilee expresses a desire for conversion, symbolized by crossing the Holy Door, and is supported by certain conditions, which are: sacramental confession, participation in the Eucharistic Celebration, profession of faith, prayer for the Pope's intentions, and acts of charity. These highlight the awareness that, beyond guilt, trust in God's mercy prevails.
Sin is forgiven only by God in the sacrament of penance. Christ entrusts to His Church, through the merits He obtained on the Cross, the forgiveness and remission of sins. The indulgence that can be gained during the Jubilee additionally permits the remission of the punishments that remain to be expiated (on earth or in purgatory) after the sin has been forgiven. The indulgence can be obtained multiple times, and it can also be applied to the deceased.

The importance attributed to indulgences dates back to the High Middle Ages when Popes granted them to those who made pilgrimages to the Tomb of Saint Peter in Rome, the Holy Land, or Santiago de Compostela.

Boniface VIII, a learned and visionary man, understood the spiritual needs of his time, leading to the perpetual establishment of the Jubilee with innovative characteristics. Boniface VIII decreed that the Jubilee would occur every 100 years, doubling the biblical interval of 50 years according to Levitical tradition. The Bull was issued at Saint Peter's February 22, the Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter. In doing so, the Pope tied the plenary Jubilee indulgence to his apostolic authority as Peter's successor, acting by virtue of Christ's commission to Peter to remit sins.

Historical accounts suggest that hundreds of thousands of pilgrims participated in the First Jubilee, braving the challenges and dangers of travel (disease, bandits, swindlers, unreliable transportation, poor roads, etc.). Among them were notable figures such as Dante, Cimabue, and Giotto.

The unexpected spiritual success of the first Jubilee placed Rome at the heart of the Christian world, as pilgrimage to the Holy Land had become extremely difficult and dangerous.

THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

The Christian Jubilee (from *Yobel*, the ram's horn, which is used to announce the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*) has roots in the biblical Jubilee, celebrated as a sabbatical year according to the Book of Leviticus (25:1–17). The Jubilee Year symbolized the restoration of God's place as the sole Lord of the earth and all living things. This involved the cancellation of debts, the liberation of slaves, the annulment of land mortgages, and even the resting of the land itself, emphasizing that divine grace surpasses human justice.

The success prompted Boniface VIII to establish that the Jubilee would be celebrated every 100 years. However, Clement VI (1350) reduced the interval to 50 years, allowing many to experience it at least once in their lifetime; Urban VI (1389) then changed it to every 33 years and finally, Paul II (1475) set it to every 25 years.

The Jubilees of Our Time

In the last 100 years, the highest number of Jubilees has been celebrated. In addition to the Ordinary Jubilees – held every 25 years – several Extraordinary Jubilees have also been added.

Ordinary Jubilees

Pius XI, who was a learned and "conciliatory" pope, proclaimed the Jubilee of 1925 during the Feast of the Ascension through the Bull *Infinita Dei misericordia* (1924). The scourge of the Great War had left deep social, political, and religious wounds, and the so-called "Roman Question"—the unresolved dispute between Italy and the Holy See—remained open. For that Jubilee, the Pope called for a return to lasting peace and the reconciliation of those estranged from the Church. He also sought a resolution to the situation in the Holy Land, where tensions between Arabs and Jews were already underway. Then, he turned his attention to the missions and the space to be given to emerging young local Churches. In addition, he established the Christ the King Feast (*Quas primas*, 1925).

Pius XII, through the Bull *Jubilaeum maximum*, proclaimed the Jubilee of 1950, which focused on peace and reconciliation in a world shaken by World War II. During that year, with the Bull *Munificentissimus Deus*, the Pope declared the Assumption of Mary dogma. Scholars note that on the eve of the dogma's proclamation, while in the Vatican Gardens, the Pontiff witnessed an extraordinary phenomenon similar to the "miracle of the sun," as described in the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917. At the end of the Holy Year, in his Christmas radio message on December 23, 1950, Pius XII announced the identification of Saint Peter's tomb in the Vatican crypt.

Paul VI dedicated the 25th Jubilee in history (1975) to Renewal and Reconciliation. In recalling the ten-year anniversary of the lifting of mutual excommunications between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, he kissed the feet of Orthodox Metropolitan Meliton, the head of the delegation from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This powerful gesture of humility marked the close of the Holy Year, which aligned with the significance of Church Jubilees and the vision of the Second Vatican Council, desired by John XXIII, of which he had been the continuator.

John Paul II proclaimed the Great Jubilee of 2000. During the year, he called for the World Youth Day—held August 15–20—, which was attended by over two million young participants. The Pope envisioned, in an ecumenical celebration, a near future where Christians could walk together as one people, and, serving the truth. He prayed that never again would acts against the Church's communion, offenses toward any people, violence, discrimination, exclusion, oppression, or disdain for the poor and marginalized be committed.

Pope Francis is presiding over the 27th ordinary Jubilee, and has emphasized the theme of Hope that does not disappoint.

Extraordinary Jubilees

The Church has also celebrated various Extraordinary Jubilees. Among the most notable are those of **Pius XI** in 1929, marking his 50th anniversary of priesthood, and in 1933, commemorating 1,900 years since Christ's death. For the first time, at this Extraordinary Jubilee, the opening of the Holy Door was broadcast via radio. **Paul VI** declared a five-month extraordinary Jubilee in 1966 to mark the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, while **John Paul II** held one in 1983–84 to commemorate the 1,950th anniversary of Christ's death and resurrection.

Finally, in 2015–2016, Pope Francis called for a new Jubilee to mark 50 years since the end of the Second Vatican Council. He dedicated this one to Mercy, with the extraordinary opening of a Jubilee Door in Bangui (in the Central African Republic), a nation torn apart by years of internal conflict.

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