



THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY BEGINS

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November 29, 2015**

Already regarded by many as the “Pope of Mercy,” Pope Francis has called for only the third extraordinary jubilee in the history of the Church, a Holy Year of Mercy, to highlight the Catholic Church's "mission to be a witness of mercy.” The pontiff has also said that he will allow all priests around the world to absolve women who confess to having had abortions, an ability normally reserved only to bishops. The priests of St. Helena, along with every priest in every parish in the archdiocese, will hear confessions on Monday, December 14 from 4 - 8 pm, and we will also conduct an Advent Penance Service that day at 6:30 pm.

Pope Francis has called the special Jubilee year for mercy to begin this Dec. 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception and the 50th anniversary of the closing of the groundbreaking Second Vatican Council. It will close on Nov. 20, 2016, the feast of Christ the King. In Rome, Pope Francis will open the Holy Door in St. Peter’s Basilica, which is normally bricked up. The last one to do so was St. John Paul II, who opened it in 2000.

"No one can be excluded from God's mercy,” said the Pope. “Let us not forget that God forgives and God forgives always,” Francis said, “Let us never tire of asking for forgiveness.”

Having already described his entire papacy as a “Kairos” of mercy, meaning a privileged moment in God’s plan of salvation, Francis said the time is ripe for that message. “I am convinced that the whole Church — which 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,” the pope said.

Traditionally, every 25 years the popes proclaim a holy year, which features special celebrations and pilgrimages, strong calls for conversion and repentance, and the offering of special indulgences and opportunities to experience God's grace through the sacraments, especially confession. Extraordinary holy years, like the Holy Year of Mercy, are less frequent, but offer the same opportunities for spiritual growth. The tradition of Holy Years started 700 years ago. Since then, the Catholic Church has celebrated 26 jubilees. Of those, only three have been "extraordinary" (including this one called by Francis); the last was called by Pope St. John Paul II in 1983 to mark the 1,950 years after the death of Jesus.

The granting of special indulgences for the remission of sins during Catholic holy years is a traditional practice, but Pope Francis has announced he is widely expanding the traditional indulgences available to Catholics during his upcoming Jubilee Year of Mercy, opening them to anyone who performs just one of the traditional works of mercy and to prisoners who pray at chapels available to them. He also addressed women who have had abortion in a respectful way, blaming abortion not so much on them but on "a widespread and insensitive mentality has led to the loss of the proper personal and social sensitivity to welcome new life."

"I think in particular of all the women who have resorted to abortion," states the pope. "I am well aware of the pressure that has led them to this decision. I know that it is an existential and moral ordeal. I have met so many women who bear in their heart the scar of this agonizing and painful decision. The forgiveness of God cannot be denied to one who has repented, especially when that person approaches the Sacrament of Confession with a sincere heart in order to obtain reconciliation with the Father. For this reason too, I have decided, notwithstanding anything to the contrary, to concede to all priests for the Jubilee Year the discretion to absolve of the sin of abortion those who have procured it and who, with contrite heart, seek forgiveness for it," writes Francis. "May priests fulfill this great task by expressing words of genuine welcome combined with a reflection that explains the gravity of the sin committed, besides indicating a path of authentic conversion by which to obtain the true and generous forgiveness of the Father who renews all with his presence."

Francis also said that he wants the holy year to be "for all believers a true moment of encounter with the mercy of God." He then announced a special

jubilee year indulgence, or remission of the punishment for sin, for those who during the year are able to make a pilgrimage to the papal basilicas in Rome or to their local cathedral and pass through the appointed Holy Doors of Mercy. As is traditional, those making those pilgrimages will be asked to make confession, attend Mass, and pray for the pope's intentions.

The pope also extended the possibility of gaining the indulgence in a special way to those who are sick or imprisoned. For sick or elderly persons unable to travel, he says: "Living with faith and joyful hope this moment of trial, receiving communion or attending Holy Mass and community prayer, even through the various means of communication, will be for them the means of obtaining the Jubilee Indulgence."

For those in prison, he said: "The Jubilee Year has always constituted an opportunity for great amnesty, which is intended to include the many people who, despite deserving punishment, have become conscious of the injustice they worked and sincerely wish to re-enter society and make their honest contribution to it. May they all be touched in a tangible way by the mercy of the Father who wants to be close to those who have the greatest need of his forgiveness," writes the pope. "They may obtain the Indulgence in the chapels of the prisons."

The pontiff also extended the possibility for forgiveness of sin to anyone who performs one of the traditional spiritual or corporal works of mercy during the year. "I have asked the Church in this Jubilee Year to rediscover the richness encompassed by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The experience of mercy, indeed, becomes visible in the witness of concrete signs as Jesus himself taught us," states the pope. "Each time that one of the faithful personally performs one or more of these actions, he or she shall surely obtain the Jubilee Indulgence."

Finally, the pope added that "the Jubilee Indulgence can also be obtained for the deceased. We are bound to them by the witness of faith and charity that they have left us. Thus, as we remember them in the Eucharistic celebration, thus we can, in the great mystery of the Communion of Saints, pray for them, that the merciful Face of the Father will free them of every remnant of fault and strongly embrace them in the unending beatitude."

In his official proclamation of the year, the pontiff powerfully called on the entire Catholic Church to refashion itself as a place not of judgment or

condemnation but of pardon and merciful love. The biblical theme the pope has chosen for the jubilee year is “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” something that the pope said applies “especially to confessors.” The Holy Year of Mercy is being organized by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization and it’s designed to widen access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.