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A cloth barricade reading "Rome Jubilee 2025" surrounds a construction site at the beginning of the broad boulevard leading to St. Peter's Square and St. Peter's Basilica Dec. 4, 2024. The city of Rome is preparing for the Holy Year with hundreds of roadworks and restoration projects. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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The celebration of a Holy Year every 25 years is an acknowledgment that "the Christian life is a journey calling for moments of greater intensity to encourage and sustain hope as the constant companion that guides our steps toward the goal of our encounter with the Lord Jesus," Pope Francis wrote.

Opening the Holy Door to St. Peter's Basilica on Christmas Eve, the pope will formally inaugurate the Jubilee Year 2025 with its individual, parish and diocesan pilgrimages and with special celebrations focused on specific groups from migrants to marching bands, catechists to communicators and priests to prisoners.

Inside the Vatican basilica, the door had been bricked up since Nov. 20, 2016, when Francis closed the extraordinary Holy Year of Mercy.

Dismantling the brick wall began Dec. 2 with a ritual of prayer and the removal of a box containing the key to the door and Vatican medals. The Holy Doors at the basilicas of St. John Lateran, St. Mary Major and St. Paul Outside the Walls were to be freed of their brickwork in the week that followed.

In January 2021, as the world struggled to return to some kind of normalcy after the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Francis announced that he had chosen "Pilgrims of Hope" as the theme for the Holy Year.

"We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and farsighted vision," the pope wrote in a letter entrusting the organization of the Jubilee to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the then-Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization.

The pope prayed that the Holy Year would be marked by "deep faith, lively hope and active charity."

A holy year or jubilee is a time of pilgrimage, prayer, repentance and acts of mercy, based on the Old Testament tradition of a jubilee year of rest, forgiveness and renewal. Holy years also are a time when Catholics make pilgrimages to designated churches and shrines, recite special prayers, go to confession and receive Communion to receive a plenary indulgence, which is a remission of the temporal punishment due for one's sins.

Crossing the threshold of the Holy Door does not give a person automatic access to the indulgence or to grace, as St. John Paul II said in his document proclaiming the Holy Year 2000. But walking through the doorway is a sign of the passage from sin to grace which every Christian is called to accomplish.

"To pass through that door means to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; it is to strengthen faith in him in order to live the new life which he has given us. It is a decision which presumes freedom to choose and also the courage to leave something behind, in the knowledge that what is gained is divine life," St. John Paul wrote.

Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed the first Holy Year in 1300 and decreed that jubilees would be celebrated every 100 years. But just 50 years later, a more biblical cadence, Pope Clement VI proclaimed another holy year.

Pope Paul II decided in 1470 that holy years should be held every 25 years, which has been the practice ever since — but with the addition of special jubilees, like the Holy Year of Mercy in 2015-16, marking special occasions or needs.

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The Jubilee of Mercy had a special focus on encouraging Catholics to return to confession, but the sacrament is a key part of every Holy Year.

Francis, in his bull of indiction for the 2025 Holy Year, said churches are places "where we can drink from the wellsprings of hope, above all by approaching the sacrament of reconciliation, the essential starting point of any true journey of conversion."

The pope also asked Catholics to use the Jubilee Year to nourish or exercise their hope by actively looking for signs of God's grace and goodness around them.

"We need to recognize the immense goodness present in our world, lest we be tempted to think ourselves overwhelmed by evil and violence," he wrote. "The signs of the times, which include the yearning of human hearts in need of God's saving presence, ought to become signs of hope."

Even in a troubled world, one can notice how many people are praying for and demonstrating their desire for peace, for safeguarding creation and for defending human life at every stage, he said. Those are signs of hope that cannot be discounted.

As part of the Holy Year 2025, Francis has announced the canonization of Blessed Carlo Acutis April 27 during the special Jubilee for Adolescents and the proclamation of the sainthood of Blessed Pier Giorgi Frassati Aug. 3 during the Jubilee for Young Adults.

The lives of the two men, active Catholics who died young, are emblematic of Francis' conviction that hope, "founded on faith and nurtured by charity," is what enables people "to press forward in life" despite setbacks and trials.

Both young Italians knew that the hope they drew from faith had to be shared with others through their words, their way of acting and their charity.

Francis, in the bull of indiction, told Catholics that "during the Holy Year, we are called to be tangible signs of hope for those of our brothers and sisters who experience hardships of any kind."

In addition to individual acts of charity, love and kindness like feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger or visiting the sick and the imprisoned, Francis has continued his predecessors' practice of observing the jubilee by calling on governments to reduce the foreign debt of the poorest countries, grant amnesty to certain prisoners and strengthen programs to help migrants and refugees settle in their new homes.

Italy and the city of Rome are keeping one of the messier and tension-producing traditions of a Holy Year: Roadworks and the restoration or cleaning of monuments, fountains and important buildings. With the opening of the Holy Door just three weeks away, none of the major projects had been completed, but Mayor Roberto Gualtieri promised in late November that most of the roads would open and most of the scaffolding would come down by Jan. 1.

Fisichella, the chief Vatican organizer of the Jubilee Year, said in late November that the Vatican had commissioned a university to forecast the Holy Year pilgrim and tourist influx. They came up with a prediction of 32 million visitors to Rome.

The multilingual jubilee website — www.iubilaeum2025.va — has been up and running for months and includes the possibility of reserving a time to pass through the Holy Door at St. Peter's and the other major basilicas of Rome.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also has a special section on its website — www.usccb.org/committees/jubilee-2025 — with information about traveling to Rome for the Holy Year and for celebrating the special jubilees in one's own diocese or parish.

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.