

The “Porta Sancta” or Holy Door During the Jubilee Year

Pope Boniface VIII (papacy 1294-1303) inaugurated the tradition of the Holy Year, also known as a Jubilee Year, in the year 1300. While the pope can announce a Holy Year for any year, the so-called “ordinary” Jubilee years occur every 25 years.

At the heart of each Jubilee Year is the theme of mercy and recovery. In the Old Testament, a Jubilee was observed every fifty years, and during that year, debts were forgiven, indentured servitude was commuted, and confiscated lands were restored to their original owners and their descendants. Jubilee was identified with mercy and the recovery of one’s human dignity, and thus it makes perfect sense that Jesus declared that he himself was essentially the Year of Jubilee for all peoples and especially for the poor and captives (Luke 4:18-19).

We are all poor in heart and captive to sin, and so each Jubilee Year the Church implores us to put away our own self-oppression and to receive the Lord’s mercy and restoration. We are called to cross over into the grace and freedom of a renewed life in Christ. The Holy Door, and our crossing through it with amendment, outwardly signifies what takes place in our hearts when we seek to receive God’s forgiveness and amend our lives.

The principal Holy Doors of the Church are designated entrances into the four “patriarchal” basilicas of Rome, the capital city of the Church in succession of Saints Peter and Paul and the apostolic ministry entrusted to them and to all the apostles. St. Peter’s, St. John Lateran, St. Mary Major, and St. Paul Outside-the-Walls each have a designated “Porta Sancta” which is opened during every Holy Year and sealed the rest of the time. For centuries, the faithful have made pilgrimage to these sacred edifices during each successive Jubilee and have crossed the threshold of these opened doors, prayerfully asking for pardon and the strength to amend and receiving Christ’s pardon and peace through the sacramental known as an indulgence. An indulgence is simply the favor of the Lord in granting release from the spiritual consequences of our sins. In a sense, an indulgence is a form of Jubilee itself, when the debt of sin is lifted and the soul is released from its attachment to past sins.

In modern times, the popes have permitted and encouraged during a Jubilee the erection or designation of Holy Doors in cathedrals and other significant churches throughout the world, thus making pilgrimage to these holy thresholds more easily accessible to those unable to venture to Rome. For this Holy Year, the Cathedral of Saint Peter the Apostle in Kansas City, Kansas has been designated a Holy Site in which pilgrims can prayerfully receive its blessings and indulgences.

Jesus invited many to come and follow him during his ministry on earth, and he invites us his disciples as well. Let us take the opportunity to outwardly express what we inwardly seek: to enter in to where the King of Glory himself has entered, symbolized by the church building where he dwells in his Sacred Person in the Eucharist. For centuries, the Church building has been seen as a place not only of divine worship, but also one of sanctuary and refuge. As we enter the Holy Door during this next year at St. Peter’s in Kansas City, Kansas, let us be mindful of all that the Lord has done to deliver us from sin and its imprisonment, and let us enter in where he himself awaits us with compassion and tenderness.

