

WHY WALK THROUGH A DOOR

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The Jubilee of Mercy began on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8, 2015) and will conclude on the feast of Christ the King (November 20, 2016).

This Jubilee is a journey that begins with a spiritual conversion for all Catholics. Pope Francis has placed the mercy of God at the center of this special year and encourages all Catholics “to live this year in the light of the Lord’s words- ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,’” (Lk. 6, 36)

It was an ancient Hebrew tradition to celebrate a jubilee every 50 years. This custom offered new hope to families who had lost their property and even their personal freedom.

The Catholic practice of a Holy Year began in 1300 under the papacy of Pope Boniface VIII. It involved a general pardon, an indulgence, open to all, and the opportunity for people to renew their relationship with God and neighbor.

It is the custom that the pope will begin a Jubilee Year by unsealing the Holy Year Door at St. Peter’s Basilica. When Pope Francis announced a Year of Mercy, he said, “I will have the joy of opening the Holy Door on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On that day, the Holy Door will become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope.”

In our diocese two churches have been designated as places of pilgrimage with Doors of Mercy- the Cathedral of St. Paul in Birmingham and, at the request of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration, the chapel at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Hanceville- which accords with the wishes of Pope Francis that significant pilgrimage sites may be designated as Holy Year Churches.

When a bishop opens a Holy Door for the Jubilee Year (which I will do on December 13th at the Cathedral and December 19th at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery), he says the words: “As we pass through the Holy Door, as a sign of our penitential journey, let us do so with an open heart, to receive the patience and indulgence of God, to receive the mercy of God, and let us do so in company with the Saints, asking them to assist us on this journey of conversion.”

In the Decree for the Jubilee Year of Mercy (“Misericordiae Vultus”), Pope Francis wrote, “God never tires of casting open the doors of his heart and of repeating that he loves us and wants to share his love with us.” (No. 25)

In John’s Gospel (Jn. 10, 7) Jesus reminds us that He is “the door.” He brings to fulfillment the words of Psalm 118 (vs. 20), “This is the door of the Lord, where the just may enter.”

The ritual of opening a Holy Door goes back to the year 1499, when Pope Alexander opened the door on December 24 to begin the Holy Year 1500. At the end of a Holy Year the door is customarily bricked shut, to be ceremoniously reopened at the next Holy Year.

This ritual helps us recall that the door to our salvation is Jesus Christ Himself.

We have the opportunity to take advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation often during this Holy Year and to receive a Plenary Indulgence associated with the passing through the Holy Year Door, praying special prayers for our Holy Father, and taking advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at a time close to our visit to the designated church. At that time we are also called upon to be totally detached from sin, a devotion fostered by our actually receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

An Indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1471). Through the merits of Jesus Christ and the intercessory prayers of the Saints, such a lifting of punishment brought about by our sins can occur through an indulgence granted by the Church. An indulgence can be partial or plenary, depending on whether it lifts part or all of the punishment due to sin. The knowledge of the punishment due is known to God alone.

One is encouraged to engage in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in a more intense way in this Year of Mercy. With numerous charitable apostolates available in our parishes and dioceses, including volunteer work at our Centers of Concern, it is not hard to find a venue of service. Members of the St. John Vianney Society came by our St. John Vianney residence last weekend to help put up decorations for the Season.

We are indebted as a diocese to Philipp Szabo for crafting the amazing Holy Year Doors for our Cathedral- a work of ingenuity and love on his part. You will be welcomed to the Year of Mercy through doors that contain the papal and diocesan coat of arms and Pope Francis' coat of arms and mine as bishop of the diocese as well.

Through these symbols, both Pope Francis and I myself personally welcome you to the Year of Mercy and the many gifts and graces God holds in store for you, especially the grace of conversion and the grace to receive and to extend to others the Mercy of God.

In passing through the Doors of Mercy we ask, in the words of the Jubilee prayer, that "through the devotion of passing through the Door of Mercy we will once again rejoice in our salvation and dedicate ourselves to be witnesses of mercy in our parish, in our diocese, and as members of the universal household of faith that is the Catholic Church throughout the world."