

Jesus and the Jubilee: Reflections for the Jubilee Year 2025

BY JOHN BERGSMA

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ON MAY 9, 2024, POPE FRANCIS ANNOUNCED to the world that the following year, 2025, would be a Jubilee Year for the Catholic Church worldwide. The Jubilee Year would begin on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2024, and last until Epiphany, January 6, 2026. This holy year would be marked by special liturgical celebrations, greater availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) and indulgences, concrete expressions of works of mercy (caring for the sick, the elderly, the homeless, migrants, etc.), and pilgrimages to Rome and her most important churches (basilicas). How has the world reacted?

From Apathy to Antagonism and Everything in Between



I'm sure that, for much of the world, the announcement came and went unnoticed. What the Catholic Church does is so irrelevant in some places and to some people that the news of the Jubilee Year never appeared on their radar screen, so to speak.

Others probably received the news with cynicism. I understand this reaction, as I, too, harbored cynicism about the Catholic Church for the first thirty years of my life.

“So the pope is announcing a Jubilee Year that promises

forgiveness of sin for all those who make a pilgrimage to Rome. What a convenient way to drum up tourist revenue for the Vatican city state! The pope's pocketbook must have been getting lean, so he had to think creatively!”

Still others likely reacted with hostility. These would be theologically serious Protestants, who remember quite well what issues were at stake in the Reformation and still identify closely with the theological views of the first generation of Protestant Reformers, men like Martin Luther and John Calvin. For such Protestants, the proclamation of a Jubilee Year is a triggering event that calls to mind the Catholic Church's practice of indulgences. The sale of indulgences provoked the Reformation in the first place. The legend goes that a certain priest by the name of Johann Tetzel was traveling through Germany raising money for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome by selling indulgences. “When the coin in the coffer clings,” he is supposed to have said, “the soul to heaven springs!” This crass distortion of the Church's

theology and practice of indulgences unsurprisingly aroused vocal resistance from Martin Luther and others, who felt that it obscured the Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. For some modern Protestants who remember this history well, Pope Francis' announcement of the Jubilee Year only shows that Rome hasn't changed, that she continues to disguise the Gospel with her traditions and rituals.

Catholics, or at least those favorably disposed toward the Church, probably haven't reacted with cynicism or hostility, but at least some have met the announcement with puzzlement.

There are young people, converts, and "reverts" who have never experienced a Jubilee Year—or at least don't remember the last one well. They want to know, "What *is* a Jubilee Year? Does it make any difference to my spiritual life? How should I participate?" They are open; they just need more information.

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Finally, there are more experienced Catholics who do understand what a Jubilee Year is and remember previous ones. But perhaps they heard the news of the pope's announcement and greeted it with a yawn: "Here we go again . . . another Jubilee Year. I suppose I *should* try to do something this time . . . maybe walk to the local shrine and try to get an indulgence for Dad." I understand that there is such a thing as "Catholic fatigue," even for well-meaning Catholics. And for many, the Jubilee Year can seem like just another thing to do, like the annual diocesan-parish share campaign, the parish picnic, and the monthly Knights of Columbus council meeting.

I think I understand all of these reactions fairly well. This is now the fifth Jubilee Year of my lifetime, the second I will experience as a Catholic, and over the course of my life I personally have had all the reactions I mentioned above: obliviousness, cynicism, hostility, puzzlement, fatigue. And

yet, I'm convinced in my heart that the proper response to the announcement of Jubilee 2025 should be joy, hope, and excitement. Lived well, this Jubilee Year can be a moment of miracle and grace for all of us, a kind of yearlong spiritual Christmas season in which we daily awake to open the gifts of grace that God our Father so lovingly gives us. So, I write these words to wake up the oblivious, calm the cynical and hostile, inform the puzzled, and energize the fatigued to embrace this Jubilee Year and live it to the fullest.

A Personal Connection

In an odd and unexpected way, my life has come to be wrapped up in the Jubilee. My journey into the Catholic Church began in earnest just as the Great Jubilee Year of 2000 was beginning. In the Fall of 1999, when preparations were getting intense, I was accepted into the doctoral program in Scripture at Notre Dame, intending to study with a fellow Calvinist who taught Old Testament there. Then, to my surprise, my doctoral supervisor suggested I write my dissertation on the Jubilee Year of Leviticus 25, even though I'd had no particular interest in this area before.

The year 2000 turned out to be a kind of personal jubilee for me as I discovered the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the liberating power of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And by the end of the year, I made the decision to enter the Catholic Church. This I did, with my wife and family, early in 2001, just as the world's greatest scholar on Leviticus, Rabbi Jacob Milgrom, was releasing his massive commentary on the final chapters of that book, including the Jubilee Year. I can't help but feel that God providentially brought me out of my bondage to sin and error and into the Catholic Church—the only place where I had access to the sacraments necessary to experience spiritual liberation—through the graces Pope John Paul II unleashed by proclaiming the Great Jubilee.

The Origins of the Jubilee

We need to realize that the Jubilee is not an “extra” or an “add-on” to the Christian faith. It actually lies at the very center of Scripture, salvation history, and Jesus’ mission as the Messiah. The Church’s Jubilee years are ultimately grounded in the biblical Jubilee Year, which—according to Leviticus 25—came around every 50 years, and was celebrated by *forgiving* all debts, granting *freedom* to all in bondage, returning everyone to their homes and *family*, and allowing everyone to rest in God’s *fullness*. Forgiveness, freedom, family, and fullness: these were the goals of the Jubilee, and these goals were reached by four actions: redemption, release, return, and rest.

The liturgy of ancient Israel was set up to sanctify time by setting aside Sabbath days and years on cycles of seven. A cycle of seven (or a “week”) recapitulated creation (which took place in seven days) and also called to mind the covenant, since seven is the number of covenant. (This arose from the practice of repeating a sacred act seven times as part of covenant-making rituals; see Gn 21:22–34.) The liturgy of Israel continually celebrated and renewed God’s good creation and his covenant with his people. Every seventh day was set aside as a Sabbath. The seventh month of the year witnessed the highest solemnity of the calendar, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Every seventh year was set aside as a year of rest and worship, a “Sabbath year.” After the seventh Sabbath year, the capstone of Israel’s entire liturgy was the Jubilee: the 50th year that fell after the seventh Sabbath, in which not only was rest observed but the entire economy was reset, all debts were forgiven, all ancestral land was returned to its original family owners, and all indentured Israelites were freed to return to their family and their land. All this took place on the Day of Atonement of the fiftieth year, when the ram’s horn trumpet was blown throughout the land. At the sound of the horn, all Israelite debt-servants began to pack their things and head for home. We can imagine the lanes and highways of Israel gradually filling with young and not-so-young Israelites heading back to their tribes, their clans, their families, and the family land. What joyful reunions and family feasts must have taken place!

The point of the Jubilee was to make sure that the freedom Israel had gained through the Exodus from Egypt was always maintained. Moses did not want Israel to slide back into being a slave economy through the inevitable increase of indebtedness decade after decade and the debt-slavery that resulted from it. If that happened, even though the masters were the elite of Israel, the nation would be a slave society not much better off than they were in Egypt.

Yet, even the freedom gained in the Exodus was itself a restoration of an earlier state of freedom—the freedom of our first parents in the Garden of Eden. They lived in a state of perfect freedom—being without sin, there was not yet the

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need for redemption and reconciliation with God. Adam and Eve were royalty who exercised “dominion” over creation; they were in perfect family relationship with God as their Father:

and they had the joyful potential to raise a family of their own. But sin destroyed this liberty and subjugated them to a curse on creation and their roles within it.

Unfortunately, the Israelites did not faithfully observe the Jubilee year. Indeed, some scholars say it was *never* observed, although I am not that pessimistic myself. For most of their history, though, it was a dead letter, or “blue law,” with one notable but short-lived attempt to resurrect it near the end of Israel’s monarchy (Jer 34:1–22). The prophets realized that hard-hearted Israel would never repent and observe the law, so they began to look to the future and the coming of the Messiah for the Jubilee to be fulfilled. Isaiah, for example, spoke in the person of the Messiah when he wrote the prophetic oracle, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the poor; . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives, . . . to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favor” (Is 61:1–2, RSV, alt.). Isaiah here borrows archaic Hebrew words and phrases from Leviticus 25, the

Jubilee legislation. His point is that the “anointed one”—“Messiah” in Hebrew, “Christ” in Greek—would be the one to announce God’s great and final Jubilee Year that would restore his people.

Another prophet, Daniel, also took up themes and language from the Jubilee legislation and actually provided a chronology for when it would be fulfilled. According to Daniel 9:24–27, it would be “seventy weeks of years,” or roughly half a millennium from the rebuilding of the holy city Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, until the coming of the Messiah and the fulfillment of the prophetic promises.

Jesus and the Jubilee

A few centuries after Daniel, the Essene movement within Second Temple Judaism (the Judaism of roughly 517 BC to AD 70) meditated upon the Jubilee prophecies of Scripture and came up with a provocative scenario for their fulfillment. According to one of their prophetic documents discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, 11QMelchizedek, they expected that the “anointed one” of Isaiah 61 was none other than Melchizedek (see Gn 14:18–20), who would reappear with virtually divine status and proclaim a Jubilee freeing the faithful of Israel not from their monetary debt

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but from the debt of their sin; and not from physical slavery but from slavery to Satan, whom they called “Belial.”

Strikingly, in Luke 4 we read of Jesus returning to his hometown Nazareth, which archeologists now believe

to have been populated at the time with Essenes or Essene sympathizers. There, Jesus enters the synagogue and chooses to read and preach on Isaiah 61:1–2: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed . . . to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”

(Lk 4:18–19). No doubt everyone in the synagogue was electrified to hear what this famous, miracle-working rabbi would say about a text many associated with the return of the divine Melchizedek to usher in God’s Jubilee. Jesus pours fuel on the tinder of their expectations by announcing provocatively: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). In other words, “I am the anointed one spoken of in this text!” Amazing!

But talk is cheap. Can Jesus back up such stupendous claims with his actions? Immediately after this sermon in Nazareth, he departs to Capernaum and there casts a vicious demon out of a man. He does this in full daylight, in public view, in the midst of the great synagogue that stood in that city (see Lk 4:31–37). That constitutes freeing Israelites from slavery to Satan. Then, in the next chapter, a paralytic is lowered down in front of him as he teaches, and he declares, “Man, your sins are forgiven you” (Lk 5:20). That constitutes forgiving Israelites of their debt of sin. So Jesus is delivering on the expectations that the Essenes had for the anointed “Melchizedek” of Isaiah 61! He brings the final Jubilee.

Not only that, but in the rest of the Gospel, Jesus ensures that his Jubilee powers of exorcism and forgiveness of sin are never lost. He entrusts these same powers to the apostles as his representatives and successors. The apostles, in turn, will later choose men called *episkopoi* (bishops) and *presbuteroi* (priests) with whom to share the authority they received from Christ. These men perpetuate the gift of liberation from Satan and forgiveness of sins down to the present day, primarily by celebrating baptism and reconciliation but also through sacramentals like exorcism. The age of the Church is the age of perpetual Jubilee.

How to Live the Jubilee Year

Nonetheless, the Church is wise to exercise her authority and set aside special years of jubilee—in continuity with this great jubilee tradition going back to Moses in Leviticus 25—when we can renew our focus on the reality of Jubilee and plunge

ourselves more deeply into practices like frequent reception of the sacraments, acquisition of indulgences, undertaking pilgrimages, and performing the works of mercy. Let's talk about each in turn.

Of course, it is the sacraments that first and foremost release Jesus' Jubilee power, which is really the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Baptism and reconciliation in particular have exorcistic power, and those who work in spiritual warfare and deliverance ministry know that good and thorough confession, especially a general confession, is the front line in the warfare seeking to deliver people from slavery to Satan. Reconciliation revokes the permissions we gave through our sins for Satan and his spirits to work in our lives. When all sin is confessed and renounced, he has to leave.

If reconciliation frees us from slavery to Satan, indulgences release us from the "debt" of sin. The Church teaches that every sin has two effects: guilt and temporal punishment. The Jewish and Christian tradition has typically conceived temporal punishment as a debt that must be paid. Indulgences are a release of the Church's "treasury of merit" to assist us in paying the debt of temporal punishment. Indulgences are tied to a good work designated by the Church—certain prayers, devotional exercises, works of mercy, or (especially in Jubilee years) pilgrimages. When the faithful perform these works with the right intention and in conjunction with the usual requirements—confession, Communion, detachment from sin, and prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father—the Church unleashes her "treasury" to defray part or all of the debt of temporal punishment. This debt, then, need not be paid in purgatory. Jesus seems to use this language himself: "Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny" (Mt 5:25–26). Jubilee years are times to "indulge in indulgences." The Church makes them more available: in 2025 she will permit two plenary indulgences to be gained daily rather than the usual limit of one.

During the Jubilee, indulgences will be attached to making pilgrimages, whether to Rome, to the Holy Land, or to certain local churches or shrines as designated by the bishops. A pilgrimage is always a return home, even if it is to a place where



we have never been. For every Catholic, Rome is home because it is the residence of our spiritual father on earth, the Holy Father. Likewise, Israel is home because it was the home of Our Lord, sanctified by his

footsteps. Any holy place is home because it is like heaven on earth, and heaven is our true home.

The first Jubilee pilgrimages were those Israelite servants who set off for home when they heard the blowing of the ram's horn on the Day of Atonement in the fiftieth year. The Jubilee redeemed their debt, released them from bondage, returned them to their home, and permitted them rest. This resulted in forgiveness, freedom, the restoration of the family, and the experience of God's fullness—his providential and abundant provision. We recognize immediately that these goals and actions—forgiveness, freedom, family, fullness—are right at the heart of God's plan of salvation.

We should want these goods not only for ourselves, but for others, and a concrete way of sharing Jubilee with our neighbors is to embrace the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in this coming year. There are so many apostolates that are already doing good work in this area and could use our support: the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Relief Services, local organizations to support single mothers and their newborns, and so many others. Giving money is good, but during the Jubilee Year we should

make it a goal to participate in at least one charitable event in person, where we can connect face-to-face with those we help. That's putting Jubilee into action.

I hope we've seen in this short overview that Jubilee is at the heart of God's call on our lives. We could even say that the goal of the Bible, the Holy Mass, and every sacrament is to draw us more fully into God's "Jubilee." I urge everyone to put off any indifference, suspicion, confusion, or fatigue, and to fully embrace—with joy!—the opportunity for conversion and deeper experience of God's presence that the 2025 Jubilee presents us.

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