

Pope announces special Catholic Church Holy Year on theme of mercy



VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - Pope Francis announced on Friday the Roman Catholic Church will mark an extraordinary Holy Year, one of its most important events, in which faithful make pilgrimages to Rome and other religious sites around the world.

During the last Holy Year - or Jubilee - in 2000, millions of pilgrims came to Rome to take part in religious festivities throughout the year.

Making the surprise announcement in St. Peter's Basilica on the second anniversary of his election, Francis said the Holy Year will focus on the topic of mercy, one of the most important themes of his papacy.

It will start on Dec. 8 of this year and end on Nov. 20, 2016. This will be only the 29th Holy Year in the Church since the tradition started more than 700 years ago.

Holy Years normally take place every 25 years unless a pope decrees an extraordinary one to bring attention to a particular topic or need. The next one had been scheduled for 2025.

Francis, who says he wants his Church of 1.2 billion members to be more merciful and less rigid towards sinners, said the Jubilee would be an occasion for all members - and the Church itself - to rediscover the need to be forgiving and generous.

"The Church is the home that accepts everyone and refuses no one ... the greater the sin, the greater the love that the Church should show towards those who convert," he said.

During a Holy Year, one of the entrances to St. Peter's Basilica, which is known as the Holy Door and normally bricked up, is opened so pilgrims can pass through it. The Holy Doors of Rome's other basilicas are also opened.

According to the Vatican website, a Holy Year should be a time of reconciliation with adversaries and an occasion to promote solidarity, hope and justice in the world.

Faithful who make pilgrimages to religious sites or do good works during a Holy Year can receive indulgences, or the remission of punishment for sins, under certain conditions.

The Vatican said the official proclamation of the Holy Year, known as a papal bull, will be published next month. Cathedrals and other religious venues around the world are expected to be designated as national pilgrimage sites.

The last extraordinary Holy Year was called in 1983 by Pope John Paul II to mark the 1,950 years after the death of Jesus.

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