

THE HISTORY OF A HOLY DOOR

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Excerpts from "The Opening of the Holy Door of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000," an article by Archbishop Piero Marini, Titular Bishop of Martirano and former Papal Master of Liturgical Celebrations. Vatican City, December 1, 1999

THE RITE OF THE OPENING OF THE DOOR IN TRADITION

... According to the description given in 1450 by Giovanni Rucellai of Viterbo, it was Pope Martin V who in 1423, at the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, opened the Holy Door for the first time in the history of the Jubilee. In those days, Holy Years were celebrated every 33 years. In the Vatican Basilica the opening of the Holy Door is first mentioned at Christmas 1499. On that occasion Pope Alexander VI desired the Holy Door to be opened not only at Saint John Lateran but in the other Roman Basilicas as well: Saint Peter's, Saint Mary Major and Saint Paul's Outside the Walls.

A small door, probably a service door in the left part of the facade of Saint Peter's Basilica, was then enlarged and turned into a Holy Door, in the same location where it is found today. This involved the destruction of a chapel decorated with mosaics located inside the Basilica and which had been dedicated by Pope John VII to the Mother of God.

The Pope also desired the norms of the *Ceremoniale* of the Holy Year, left vague by his predecessors, to be more clearly defined, particularly the rite of the opening and closing of the Holy Door. The drawing up of the rites was entrusted by the Pope to the famous John Burckard, Master of Papal Ceremonies, a native of Strasbourg and Bishop of the combined Dioceses of Civita Castellana and Orte. The Holy Door of the Jubilee of 1500 was opened on Christmas Eve 1499 and was closed on the Solemnity of Epiphany in 1501. The Ritual prepared by Burckard and approved by the Pope, apart from a few slight changes introduced in 1525 by the Master of Ceremonies Biagio da Cesena, has been substantially followed in all subsequent Jubilees.

RITUAL SEQUENCES IN THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CEREMONIES

a) *Opening*

- The Pope vests in a room of the Apostolic Palace and then, together with the Cardinals, proceeds to the Sistine Chapel. There the sending of the Cardinal Legates for the opening of the other Doors and the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament takes place.
- The procession makes its way to the Holy Door accompanied by the chanting of the *Iubilate Deo* or the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.
- The Pope says the prayer *Deus qui per Moysen*.
- He then takes the hammer, recites the verses *Aperite mihi portas iustitiae* and strikes the wall covering the Holy Door three times.
- The Pope returns to his seat and says the prayer *Actiones nostras*.
- The masons continue the work of opening the Door to the chanting of the Psalm *Iubilate Deo omnis terra*.
- The Pope genuflects at the threshold of the door.
- The Pope is the first to pass through the Holy Door as the choir chants the *Te Deum laudamus*.
- The procession moves towards the altar for the celebration of Vespers.

b) *Closing*

- The Pope processes into the Basilica through the Holy Door and presides at Vespers in the Basilica.
- He then sends the Cardinal Legates charged with closing the Doors of the other Basilicas.
- A procession follows, first to the relics and then to the Holy Door, accompanied by the singing of appropriate hymns.
- The relics of the Veronica and the Lance are publicly shown and venerated.
- The Pope is the last to leave by the Holy Door.
- He then blesses the stones and the bricks.
- With the trowel he applies cement to the threshold of the Holy Door and sets in place three bricks and a few gold and silver coins.
- Other bricks are added and then the masons, outside and inside the Basilica, finish the work of closing the Door while the choir chants the hymn *Caelestis Urbs Ierusalem*.
- The Pope says the prayer *Deus qui in omni loco* and ascends to the Loggia of the Basilica where he solemnly imparts the Apostolic Blessing.

CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS OF THE TRADITIONAL CEREMONIES

(1500-1950)

In the Jubilees from 1500 to 1950 the rites involving the Holy Door remained practically identical. These rites had certain characteristic elements:

The wall

From 1500 to 1975 the Holy Door of the four Roman Basilicas was closed on the outside by a wall, not by a door. Consequently, at the moment of the opening, rather than a door being opened, a wall was taken down: the Pope took down a part of the wall and masons then completed the work demolishing it. There are still vivid memories of the sense of anxiety felt when cement fragments fell just a few inches from Pope Paul VI during the opening of the Holy Door on Christmas Eve 1974.

The hammer

At Christmas 1499 the Pope used a hammer to strike three times the wall covering the Holy Door. Initially the hammer of the masons was used and the strikes were not entirely symbolic. Almost immediately however the hammer became a precious work of art. In 1525 it was made of gold and in 1575 it was of gilded silver with an ivory handle.

The trowel

The trowel was used by the Pope for the rite of closing the Door. The first evidence of its use dates from Christmas 1525. The last Pope to use the trowel was Pius XII, during the closing rite of the 1950 Holy Year (cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 26-27 December 1950).

Bricks

The use of bricks in the rite of the closing of the Holy Door is first mentioned in the Jubilee of 1500. The chronicler of the Jubilee of 1423 writes that "people show such devotion to the bricks and cement fragments that as soon as the door is uncovered they are carried away by a general frenzy; the northerners take them home as holy relics" (L. Bargellini, *L'Anno santo*, 66). The rite of the closing the Door composed by Burckard for Epiphany 1501 calls for two Cardinals to set two small bricks, one of gold and the other of silver, into the wall.

Coins

The custom of placing some coins into the wall of the Holy Door is also recorded from the time of the Jubilee of 1500. Initially the coins were simply set into the cement. From 1575 on they were placed in a small metal box. This custom is still observed.

Holy water

The use of holy water was already mentioned in the 1525 Ritual for blessing the rubble and bricks used in the closing of the Holy Door. Later, holy water was also used for the opening of the Door: the Pententiaries of the Basilica, once the wall was removed, cleaned both the door-jambs and the threshold with cloths soaked in holy water. This rite was observed until the last Holy Year.

The wooden door

Outside the Basilica the Holy Door was covered by a wall, while inside the wall was covered by a simple wooden door. The door was taken away prior to the removal of the wall and replaced immediately afterwards, since it served as a barrier at night, when visits by pilgrims were not permitted. The simple and unadorned wooden doors, still seen today on the outside of the Holy Doors of Saint John Lateran, Saint Mary Major and Saint Paul's, were the older doors which until the Jubilee of 1975 were placed in front of the Holy Door inside the Basilica. In Saint Peter's Basilica on the other hand, the last wooden door, installed by Pope Benedict XIV in 1748, was replaced on 24 December 1949 by a bronze door blessed by Pope Pius XII immediately after the opening of the Holy Door.

THE CHANGES OF 1975

At Christmas 1975 modifications were made to the rite of closing of the Holy Door. The Pope no longer used the trowel and the bricks to begin the rebuilding of the wall, but simply closed the two sides of the 1950 bronze door. The door, which until that time had been inside the Basilica, thus faced outside, as we still see it today. The wall which once covered the door outside was later built inside the Basilica and on 27 February 1975 the traditional box with coins and the parchment document attesting the closing of the Holy Door was sealed inside it...

...The changes introduced in the closing rite of the 1975 Holy Year have drawn attention away from the wall and towards the door. The Holy Door has thus been enriched by the profound biblical, theological, liturgical and pastoral significance attached to the door in salvation history and in the history of the Church; it thus becomes one of the most powerful signs of the Jubilee... [cf. Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33]. The ritual aspect has also needed to be modified. In 1975, for example, the trowel was no longer used, since there was no longer a wall to be built; in 2000 the hammer will not be used, since there is no longer a wall to be removed but only a door to be opened.

The elements of the old ritual which have become obsolete will be replaced by others which better express the biblical and liturgical significance of the Holy Door. These ritual elements are also meant to highlight some of the special aspects which, following the indications of *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, have typified these last years of the universal Church's preparation for the Jubilee. These will be evoked and in some way made present at the crossing of the threshold of the Holy Door of the Jubilee of the Second Millennium of the Birth of Christ.

The following are the most expressive ritual elements planned for the rite of the opening of the Holy Door of the Vatican Basilica at the beginning of the Jubilee [1999-2000]:

THE 1999 ORDER OF OPENING THE DOOR

- The procession and the "statio" in front of the door, with the proclamation of the Gospel of Luke, vv. 4:14-25. Jesus' proclamation in the synagogue of Nazareth: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has sent me ... to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord" ...
- The acclamation sung before the open Door: *Christus heri et hodie, Finis et Principium; Christus Alpha et Omega, Ipsi gloria in saecula!* These are the words which the Pope has proposed as a synthesis of the Jubilee. They point to the open door as a sign of Christ, Lord of history, present in his Church until the end of time (cf. Heb 13:8).
- The presence of a special group of the faithful from various continents and of cultural expressions belonging to different peoples are meant to emphasize the universality of salvation and the mission of the Church
- The decoration of the Door with flowers and the use of fragrances is meant not only to honour the symbol of Christ, the universal door of salvation, but also to be a sign of the joy which is so much a part of the Jubilee Year (cf. TMA 16; IM 6).
- The showing of the Gospel Book by the Holy Father at the center of the Holy Door emphasizes once more the centrality of Christ, the Word of the living God, the Gospel of the Father. Proclaiming the Good News will continue to be the task of the new evangelization in the coming Millennium.
- The sounding of horns, using native African instruments, evokes the convocation of the biblical Jubilee, but it also marks the joyful beginning of the Jubilee year for the whole Christian people.... The sound of the horns not only expresses joy at the opening of the door but also invites all Christians to cross the threshold of hope during the Jubilee year.
- A group of lay people from America and Europe will also accompany the procession with the Gospel Book towards the papal altar of the Basilica.
- A deacon chants the text of the *Proclamation of the Great Jubilee*

CONCLUSION

... The sign of the *Holy Door*, so outstanding a sign of the Jubilee of 2000, "evokes the passage from sin to grace which every Christian is called to accomplish. Jesus said: 'I am the door' (Jn 10:7), in order to make it clear that no one can come to the Father except through him. This designation, which Jesus applies to himself, testifies to the fact that he alone is the Saviour sent by the Father. There is only one way that opens wide the entrance into the life of communion with God: this is Jesus, the one and absolute way to salvation. To him alone can the words of the Psalmist be applied in full truth: 'This is the door of the Lord where the just may enter' (Ps 118:20)

... All are waiting to see the Pope who began his papacy with the cry, "Open wide the doors to Christ", personally open the Holy Door. All are waiting to see the author of *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* himself cross the threshold of the Great Jubilee. He will be the first to cross this threshold as a means of encouraging great crowds of the faithful to enter more profoundly into the mystery of the salvation present in the Church as she joyfully celebrates the two-thousandth anniversary of the Birth of her Spouse and Lord, Jesus Christ.

■ Archbishop Marini, 1st December 1999