

Jubilee of Mercy – Holy Doors

The tradition of the Holy Doors is one of the oldest features of the Jubilee observance. The opening of the Holy Doors at St. Peter's Basilica on Dec. 8, 2015, begins the Jubilee Year of Mercy, and their closing next Nov. 20 will mark its end. Pilgrims pass through the Holy Doors to meet one of the requirements for the Jubilee Indulgence. And Holy Doors – once limited to certain basilicas in and around Rome – are so much more accessible to us this year, with a site in every deanery of our diocese. Our nearest one is Sacred Heart Church in Laconia, opening on Sunday, Dec. 13, with a program from 12:30 PM to 2:00 PM.

What can doors signify?

A closed door is meant to keep us out of the space behind it. It blocks our view, hiding things from us. It raises our interest and curiosity – we want to see what's behind the door. Some TV game shows put prizes behind doors or curtains numbered 1, 2, and 3, and contestants have to choose one. The Israelites used special curtains to block the view of the Holy of Holies in the Temple – not even the priests could go inside, but only the High Priest, and then only on the Day of Atonement. For Christians, the closed doors of a church separate the worldly kingdom from the Kingdom of God, keeping unbelievers outside the holy space where the Lord resides and his holy people gather. Closed doors also remind us of the Apostles, gathered fearfully in the upper room on Easter morning until the Risen Lord appears to them.

Sometimes the doors are gates, even though they may not be opaque, but structures we can see through. Yet they serve the purpose of a barrier. Gardens, sheepfolds, courtyards and walled cities all had gates to keep strangers out. The Romans considered the space inside a house or the city walls to be sacred, whereas outside the walls was profane and evil. When soldiers returned from battle outside the walls, they were stained by their encounter with the unholy and profane enemy and were ritually purified at the city gates. The Jews considered themselves to be unclean if they entered a pagan's house; John's Gospel says they did not enter the praetorium when bringing Jesus before Pilate, so that they could eat the Passover.

The function of a doorway or gateway as a means of passage is even more significant than the role of barrier. To pass through a doorway is to take a chance, to go from what is known into the unknown. In going into the holy space of a church, we enter into the unfathomable mystery of God himself. Psalm 118:20 says, "This is the Lord's own gate, through it the righteous enter." Many churches have a baptismal font just inside their doors, so that the purifying waters of baptism may be administered to those coming in faith. And there are holy water fonts for the faithful to bless themselves upon entering. In presenting the image of the good shepherd, Jesus said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (John 10:9). We sometimes use the term "Pearly Gates" to refer to the entrance to Paradise.

In passing through the Holy Doors, we confess our faith in Jesus Christ, who gained salvation for us. We acknowledge our sinfulness and take a step toward purification. Through Christ, we approach the Merciful Father. We pass from the dark of sin to the light of God's mercy, from alienation to unity with God's People, from the deadliness of this world to the eternal life of God's Kingdom. Let us use the Jubilee Year's opportunity to pass through the Holy Doors and experience God's mercy, to be strengthened to better witness that mercy to our world!