

Ethical Implications of Jubilee: An Overview of the Papal Bulls Proclaiming Holy Years from 1825 to 2025

Etyczne implikacje jubileuszu. Przegląd bulli papieskich
ogłaszających lata jubileuszowe w latach 1825–2025

Marco Panero¹

Salesian Pontifical University, Rome
Faculty of Philosophy

Abstract: The Jubilee Year bulls offer a distinctive lens through which to observe the life of the Church in particular historical contexts, illuminating urgent concerns as well as the pastoral and spiritual practices promoted during these periods. Notably, they also place considerable emphasis on both personal and social ethics. This paper examines the Jubilee Year bulls from 1825 to 2025, exploring recurring moral concerns, tracing the development of key themes, and analysing the guidance they provide regarding individual conduct and political responsibility. The study highlights moral commitment as a defining aspect of the Jubilee experience.

Keywords: jubilee, Catholic Church, indulgence, pilgrimage, moral commitment

Abstrakt: Bulle roku jubileuszowego stanowią wyjątkową perspektywę, z której można obserwować życie Kościoła w określonych okresach, rzucają bowiem światło na najpilniejsze kwestie oraz promowane praktyki duszpasterskie i duchowe. Duży nacisk kładzie się również na etykę osobistą i społeczną. W artykule przeanalizowano bulle jubileuszowe z lat 1825–2025, badając powracające kwestie moralne, ewolucję kluczowych tematów oraz wytyczne dotyczące postępowania indywidualnego i decyzji politycznych. Dzięki tej analizie zaangażowanie moralne jawi się jako definiujący aspekt doświadczenia roku jubileuszowego.

Słowa kluczowe: jubileusz, Kościół katolicki, odpust, pielgrzymka, moralne zaangażowanie

¹ Marco Panero—Faculty of Philosophy, Salesian Pontifical University, Rome; e-mail: panero@unisal.it; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9180-4519>.

Introduction

The papal bulls proclaiming Jubilee Years provide an excellent lens through which to observe the life of the Church in specific historical periods. They reveal the issues deemed most urgent at the time, and highlight the pastoral and spiritual practices being promoted. Matters of personal and social ethics also receive attention in these documents. This study focuses precisely on that dimension, offering an overview of the Jubilee bulls from 1825 to 2025—a span of exactly two centuries.

To avoid redundancy, the analysis is divided into two parts. The first part surveys the bulls from 1825 to 1950, which, despite varying historical contexts, display a notable consistency in structure and content.

The second part examines the more recent bulls, issued for the Jubilees from 1975 to the present. This analysis concludes with reflections demonstrating that moral commitment constitutes a central element of the Jubilee tradition.

1. Historical Survey (1825–1950)

Let us begin by considering the Jubilee bulls from 1825 to 1950. It is helpful to list them, particularly since not all the ordinary Jubilees of the 19th century were celebrated, due to political and even military circumstances.²

1825: Leo XII, Bull *Quod Hoc Ineunte* (May 24, 1824)

1875: Pius IX, Encyclical *Gravibus Ecclesiae* (December 24, 1874)

1900: Leo XIII, Letter *Properante ad Exitum Saeculo* (May 11, 1899)

1925: Pius XI, Bull *Infinita Dei Misericordia* (May 29, 1924)

1933: Pius XI, Extraordinary Jubilee for the 1900th Anniversary of the Redemption, Apostolic Constitution *Quod Nuper* (January 6, 1933)

1950: Pius XII, Bull *Jubilaenum Maximum* (May 26, 1949)³

The Jubilee of 1800, for example, was never celebrated. Pope Pius VI had died in exile in Valence, France, on August 29, 1799, effectively a prisoner of Napoleon. His successor, Pius VII, was elected on March 14, 1800 in Venice, while Napoleon's forces still posed a threat in northern Italy. Nevertheless, the newly

² For a comprehensive reconstruction of the historical context of the Jubilees over the past two centuries, see VV. AA. *La Storia dei Giubilei*, vol. 4, Prato 2000; F. Glicora, B. Catanzaro, *Anni santi. I giubilei dal 1300 al 2000*, Città del Vaticano 1996; *Giubilei e Anni Santi. Storia, significato e devozioni*, a cura di L. Mezzadri, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2015.

³ For the official Latin/Italian texts of the Jubilee bulls, see *Bollario dell'Anno Santo. Documenti di indizione dal Giubileo del 1300*. Edizione bilingue, Bologna 1998 [hereafter *Bollario*]. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of pontifical documents are my own.

elected Pope wished to grant, under specific conditions, the plenary indulgence and remission of sins—equivalent to those granted in a Jubilee—for a period of two weeks.⁴ This was intended as a form of consolation for the faithful who had anticipated a Jubilee Year. However, a proper Jubilee celebration did not take place.

Turning to the Jubilee of 1825, it was eagerly awaited, carefully prepared by Pope Leo XII, and celebrated with great solemnity and a significant influx of pilgrims. This Jubilee formed part of a broader initiative to re-Christianise the city of Rome and, more broadly, society as a whole. In this context, edicts were also issued in defence of public morality—measures that were not well received by the Roman populace. For example, access to taverns and public entertainments was prohibited, and severe penalties were imposed for acts of lust.⁵

I will focus on the bull *Quod Hoc Ineunte* (May 24, 1824), which proclaimed the Jubilee of 1825. This document contains all the key elements that would later appear in subsequent Jubilee bulls, although the order of the themes may vary, as well as the emphasis placed on particular aspects:

1. The purpose of the Jubilee.
2. Reference to the historical context in which the Jubilee is proclaimed.
3. The formula proclaiming the Jubilee Year.
4. The conditions for obtaining the indulgence, including the number of required visits to designated churches and the prayer intentions specified by the Roman Pontiff.
5. Provisions for those unable to fulfil the prescribed visits due to illness or death.
6. An exhortation to the faithful to receive the indulgence, reform their lives, and, in particular, undertake the pilgrimage to Rome in view of its spiritual benefits.
7. An exhortation to the bishops to promote the Jubilee within their dioceses.

⁴ Pius VII, Encyclical *Ex quo Ecclesiam*, May 24, 1800: ‘...We grant the plenary indulgence and the remission of all sins to all and to each of the faithful of both sexes, wherever they may reside, provided that: They *visit* at least once, with proper inner devotion and outward reverence, the churches or one of the churches which the local Ordinaries or their Vicars—or, by their mandate and in their absence, those who have the care of souls—will designate after this Our letter has come to their knowledge; They make this visit within two weeks from the announcement of the churches to be visited, made by the Ordinaries or their Vicars or Officials, or by others as mentioned above; There, they *pray* for some time for the triumph of the Holy Mother Catholic Church, for the eradication of heresies, and for peace and concord among Christian Princes; They *fast* on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of either of the two aforementioned weeks; After duly *confessing* their sins, they devoutly receive the Most Holy Sacrament of the *Eucharist* on the immediately following Sunday, or on another day of the same week; They give some *alms* to the poor, as their devotion may suggest to them’ (Italics mine).

⁵ See F. Glicora, B. Catanzaro, *Anni santi...*, p. 178.

8. A concluding formula affirming the validity of authentic copies of the bull, issued by a notary, along with the traditional apostolic anathema against anyone who might oppose its provisions: ‘Let no one whatsoever be permitted to violate or dispute this page [...]. If any man should presume to make such an attempt, let him know that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul’ (Leo XII, *Quod Hoc Ineunte*).

At times, two additional elements are also included:

9. An ecumenical appeal to the faithful of other Christian denominations, expressing the hope for the restoration of full unity among Christians.
10. Special faculties granted to confessors—for example, in the Jubilee of 1875, Pius IX granted confessors the authority to absolve from any excommunication, including those ordinarily reserved to the Holy See.⁶

As mentioned, this general structure remains consistent through to the bull of 1950. In what follows, I will focus specifically on the moral dimensions, selecting and analysing four representative aspects.

1.1. ‘An Extraordinary Means for the Spiritual Renewal of Souls’

In the bull *Quod Hoc Ineunte* (1825), the Jubilee is described as ‘a year of atonement and forgiveness, of redemption and grace, of remission and indulgence.’⁷ Pope Leo XII firmly defended the decision to proclaim the Jubilee, even though many of his advisors had recommended caution—particularly in view of the financial strain such an event might place on the papal treasury. He remained resolute, insisting that the Jubilee be celebrated as an authentically religious event, untainted by worldliness or any semblance of commercial exploitation.

From its inception, the Christian Jubilee, has functioned as an extraordinary instrument for the spiritual benefit of the faithful,⁸ aimed at deepening the path to salvation. Leo XII affirms this in the bull:

In this year, which we rightly call a time of favour and salvation [...], the most abundant means of reconciliation and grace for the salvation of souls are offered to all the faithful, urged to the duties of piety.⁹

⁶ Pius IX, *Gravibus Ecclesiae*, in *Bollario* 627.

⁷ Leo XII, *Quod Hoc Ineunte*, in *Bollario* 571.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* 570.

Pius IX is even more explicit in his proclamation of the 1875 Jubilee:

[The Jubilee Year] was always considered the year of salutary atonement for all the Christian people, the year of redemption and grace, of remission and indulgence, in which people came from all over the world to this our Holy City and See of Peter, and to all the faithful, urged to works of piety, the most abundant means of reconciliation and grace for the salvation of souls were offered.¹⁰

The Jubilee in its essence, has a single primary aim: to promote eternal salvation through a faithful and consistent Christian life. Pope Leo XIII, on the eve of the 1900 Jubilee, makes this clear when he writes:

In effect, what do we aim for, or what do we want? Nothing else truly, except to facilitate eternal salvation for as many as we can through our efforts, and for this purpose, to provide the remedies for the illnesses of the spirit that Jesus Christ wanted to place in our hands.¹¹

Pope Pius XI, who called the Jubilee of 1925, defines it succinctly as ‘an extraordinary means for the spiritual renewal of souls’. Introducing the same Jubilee, he further explains:

The Church proposes, from time to time, with some extraordinary means, to draw and bring back to the practice of penance and the correction of behavior those who, either voluntarily or through indifference and inertia, have neglected the ordinary means of salvation.¹²

From this brief overview, it becomes evident that the Jubilee is understood as an exceptional opportunity for grace. Its extraordinary nature justifies the effort it demands. Especially in the 19th century, when the indulgence was closely tied to the pilgrimage to Rome—the hardships and dangers of travel were seen as a worthy price for so great a spiritual benefit.

1.2. The Sense of the Roman Pilgrimage

The second element, bearing notable moral implications is the meritorious value of the pilgrimage to Rome, despite the difficulties it entails. Pope Leo XII states:

¹⁰ Pius IX, *Gravibus Ecclesiae*, in *Bollario* 622.

¹¹ Leo XIII, *Properante ad Exitum Saeculo*, in *Bollario* 639.

¹² Pius XI, *Infinita Dei Misericordia*, in *Bollario* 774.

It is not permissible to be lazy and inactive in seeking those salutary goods that the most holy and most indulgent Mother Church draws from the eternal treasures of divine grace. [...] It would indeed be a shame, too contrary to the pursuit of eternal beatitude, to renounce the pilgrimage to Rome either because the roads are unsafe, or for economic reasons, or for other similar excuses.¹³

The theme of the pilgrimage as an act of spiritual merit recurs in nearly all the Jubilee bulls up to 1950, when Pope Pius XII, proclaiming the Holy Year of 1950, asserts:

If one fights with such passion to overcome the difficulties of earthly life, why we should not hope that vast multitudes, not sparing sacrifices and not frightened by hardships, will flock from every part of the world to the Eternal City, to implore heavenly gifts?¹⁴

The emphasis placed by the popes on pilgrimage to Rome is understandable. Rome is the See of Peter, sanctified by the testimony of countless martyrs and saints. Over time, the Christian faith has shaped in Rome a spiritually evocative architectural and cultural landscape. Citing St. Charles Borromeo, Leo XII affirms:

This is the city where the soil, the walls, the monuments, the churches, the tombs of the martyrs, and every other feature that meets the eye, inspire in the hearts of those who visit these sacred places with a proper disposition of spirit, a feeling of the sacred.¹⁵

He continues with a distinctly persuasive tone:

Who will ever be able to approach the testimonies [of Peter and Paul], prostrate before their tomb, and kiss those chains more precious than gold and gems, if not filled with the most intense devotion? Who could hold back their tears seeing the cradle of Christ, reflecting on the infant Jesus crying in the manger, or adoring the sacred instruments of the Lord's Passion, or meditating on the Redeemer of the world hanging on the cross?¹⁶

¹³ Leo XII, *Quod Hoc Ineunte*, in *Bollario* 574.

¹⁴ Pius XII, *Jubilaum Maximum*, in *Bollario* 1017.

¹⁵ Leo XII, *Quod Hoc Ineunte*, in *Bollario* 575.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

A century later, Pope Pius XII significantly states that ‘Rome, for every faithful person from every nation, is like a second homeland; [...] here, the Father awaits them with tender affection, arms open.’¹⁷

Effectively, undertaking a pilgrimage to Rome and wandering through its artistic monuments—witnesses to the faith of past generations—possesses a high spiritual value that justifies the inconveniences of travel. Yet the bulls suggest something further.

The very difficulty of reaching Rome—given the conditions of the time, the costs, the dangers of the journey, and the often precarious circumstances of pilgrims was already part of the Jubilee experience: it was an invitation to entrust oneself to Providence and a confirmation of the sincere will for conversion that should characterize every genuine Jubilee pilgrim.

Moreover, upon arriving in Rome, pilgrims were required to visit one of the four major basilicas for fifteen days to obtain the indulgence, while but Roman citizens—being spared the hardship of the journey—were required to make these visits for thirty days. This condition (fifteen or thirty days) was established by Pope Boniface VIII during the first Jubilee of 1300¹⁸ and remained virtually unchanged until the 1900 Jubilee, when it was reduced to ten or twenty days. It was subsequently further relaxed during the 20th century: by 1950, it was sufficient to visit each of the four basilicas once, and from 1975 onwards, a single visit to one basilica was deemed sufficient to obtain the indulgence.

An important lesson may be drawn: the act required to obtain the Jubilee indulgence—in this case, the pilgrimage—is not significant primarily for its external value—it is not a ‘magical’ act—but rather for the interior disposition of conversion and trust in God that the pilgrimage fosters in the faithful. A review of the series of bulls reveals a progressive relaxation of the physical demands of the pilgrimage, accompanied by an increasing emphasis on the interior dispositions.

1.3. Personal and Civil Moral Renewal

The pilgrimage, however, should never be separated from personal and civil moral renewal. Pope Leo XII, for example, in the 1825 Jubilee, calls on the Roman people to take responsibility for offering exemplary witness to the pilgrims who would come to Rome for the Holy Year, in order to avoid occasions of scandal:

¹⁷ Pius XII, *Jubilaum Maximum*, in *Bollario* 1016.

¹⁸ See Boniface VIII, *Antiquorum habet*, in *Bollario* 4.

Everything should suggest seriousness, moderation, Christian decency, so that from their behaviour others may draw examples of modesty, innocence, and every other virtue. [...] Rather, let the strict and holy discipline with which each person, with outward composure, demonstrates that they are present at divine rites not only with the body but also with the mind and with the devout disposition of the heart be a reason for admiration. Regarding holidays, we insist that in the holy city they should not be dedicated to frequent feasts and amusements, pleasures, but rather those holy days should be assigned to sacred functions and the veneration of God and the Saints.¹⁹

As one might expect, this control over public morals provoked silent discontent, particularly among the intellectual classes with liberal inclinations.²⁰ Indeed, such a paternalistic attitude would no longer be found in the subsequent bulls, which preferred instead to issue a personal call to the moral responsibilities of Christians in a world increasingly marked by immorality and secularism.

Pope Leo XIII, for example, laments ‘the unwillingness to live Christianly, the widespread immorality, [...] the sharp and insatiable desire for material goods, cares, and thoughts all removed from God and rooted in the earth.’²¹ The Jubilee, in the intention of the popes, is thus an opportunity to ‘shake the souls lulled by forgetfulness and recall them to the thought of their own salvation.’²² It is an invitation, as Pope Pius XI expressed in 1933, ‘to turn thoughts away from earthly and transient things [...] to those heavenly things that will remain forever.’²³

The invitation to personal reform and to embrace a virtuous life sometimes leads to very detailed guidelines, as seen in Pope Pius XI’s exhortation during the 1925 Jubilee:

You should not stay in Rome like the usual tourists and travellers, but, far from all worldliness, filled with the spirit of penance, which so greatly contrasts with the materialism of our times, modest in your demeanour, your bearing, and especially in your clothing, you should solely seek that which can serve to benefit your souls.²⁴

The commitment to a life morally consistent with the faith professed is, therefore, a decisive aspect of the Jubilee Year. As Pope Pius

¹⁹ Leo XII, *Quod Hoc Ineunte*, in *Bollario* 577.

²⁰ The liberal Massimo d’Azeglio, in one of his letters, laments that during the Jubilee Year of 1825 ‘Rome had been transformed for twelve months in a large establishment of spiritual exercises.’ (*Giubilei...*, p. 225).

²¹ Leo XIII, *Properante ad Exitum Saeculo*, in *Bollario* 639.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Pius XI, *Quod Nuper*, in *Bollario* 864.

²⁴ *Id.*, *Infinita Dei Misericordia*, in *Bollario* 782.

XII affirms, ‘The Jubilee primarily aims to call all Christians not only to atone for their sins and to amend their lives, but also to strive for virtue and holiness.’²⁵ This ‘renewal of hearts’—still in the words of Pius XII— must also be reflected externally, both in private life and in public morals.

1.4. A Growing Social Sensitivity

Another morally significant aspect of the Jubilee Year is the social impact of personal moral renewal.

Reading through the Jubilee bulls, one observes a growing social sensitivity: beginning with simple recommendations for charitable works under Pius IX,²⁶ and progressing to a greater emphasis on social and geopolitical issues with Pius XI—likely a response to the intense international tensions and the rise of totalitarian regimes that characterised the period between the two World Wars. The Jubilee of 1925, in the Pope’s intention, was to serve as an opportunity to restore bonds of fraternity among nations and to promote lasting peace.²⁷ The pilgrimage itself was viewed as a means of fostering fraternity among peoples.

The call for peace is also strongly emphasized by Pius XII in 1950. The context is, in many ways, similar to that of 1925: Europe had just emerged from a devastating war between Christian nations; there was an urgent need not only to rebuild cities, but also to restore the social fabric and moral sensibility that had been deeply damaged by years of conflict.

‘May peace finally return to the hearts of all,’ Pius XII hopes, ‘within the domestic walls, in the individual nations, and in the universal community of peoples.’ He adds:

Everywhere, but especially in Palestine, let tranquillity return as soon as possible, through a fair resolution of issues; so that the different social classes, with hatred extinguished and dissensions quieted, may unite in justice and fraternal concord; that, finally, the multitudes of the needy may, through their work, earn an honest living, and that from the liberality and charity of those more fortunate, they may receive the necessary and appropriate assistance.²⁸

²⁵ Pius XII, *Jubilaum Maximum*, in *Bollario* 1008.

²⁶ ‘Nothing is more worthy of the time of the Holy Jubilee than to tirelessly practice every work of charity.’ (Pius IX, *Gravibus Ecclesiae*, in *Bollario* 633).

²⁷ See Pius XI, *Infinita Dei Misericordia*, in *Bollario* 776.

²⁸ Pius XII, *Jubilaum Maximum*, in *Bollario* 1014–1015.

Never before had there been such a specific reference to contemporary social issues in a Jubilee bull. This marks a growing sensitivity to these problems, yet always framed within a strong perspective of faith. This is evident in the order in which Pius XII articulates his expectations for the Jubilee Year: first, the atonement for sins and the reform of morals; then faithfulness to God and the Church; and finally the pursuit of peace and attention to social concerns.

2. Historical Survey (1975–2025)

I will now offer a brief examination of the Jubilee bulls from 1975 to the present, grouping them together due to the many elements they share:

1975: Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Apostolorum Limina* (May 23, 1974)

1983: John Paul II, Extraordinary Jubilee for the 150th Anniversary of the Redemption, Bull *Aperite Portas Redemptori* (January 6, 1983)

2000: John Paul II, Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium* (November 29, 1998)

2015: Francis, Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, proclaimed on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, Bull *Misericordiae Vultus* (April 11, 2015)

2025: Francis, Bull *Spes non confundit* (May 9, 2024).

The apostolic letter *Apostolorum Limina*, by which Saint Paul VI proclaimed the Jubilee of 1975, introduced various novelties in both style and content, marking a partial departure from the model of previous Jubilee bulls. I would like to review those elements that, in my opinion, are characteristic of post-conciliar Jubilee bulls.

1) To begin with, whereas earlier Jubilee bulls were generally concise documents following a relatively standardised protocol, beginning with Paul VI, we encounter much longer and more elaborate texts, in which the original structure is no longer clearly discernible.

2) Secondly, each Jubilee becomes *thematic*. What I would call the ‘Genitive Jubilees’ begin to emerge; that is, each Jubilee is characterized by a specific theme around which the Jubilee bull is structured.

In 1975, the focus was on *renewal and reconciliation*.²⁹ In 1983, during the Extraordinary Jubilee of the Redemption, the invitation was to *embrace the grace of redemption*, with its pastoral, sacramental,

²⁹ ‘We have already stated that the Holy Year has been assigned these two main purposes: spiritual *renewal in Christ* and *reconciliation with God*; and these aims concern not only the inner life of each believer but also the whole Church as a community, and, in some way, the entire human family.’ (Paul VI, *Apostolorum Limina*, IV, in *Bollario* 1340).

and moral implications.³⁰ In 2000, the Jubilee theme was ‘the history of salvation [which] finds in Jesus Christ its culmination and ultimate meaning.’³¹ In 2015, the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy focused on *m e r c y* as ‘the architrave that supports the life of the Church.’³² Finally, *h o p e*—the theme of the Jubilee Year 2025—is reflected even in the title of the Jubilee bull *Spes non confundit*.

3) Beginning in 1975, there is an increasing *e m p h a s i s* on *i n n e r r e n e w a l*. This has always been a fundamental element of the Jubilee—*c o n - v e r s i o n* is its essence and ultimate aim—but following the Second Vatican Council, the emphasis on inner renewal is notably heightened:

It will be, first and foremost, an interior renewal and reconciliation, because it is in the depths of the heart that the root of all good—and, unfortunately, of all evil—is found; it is there, therefore, that conversion must take place, or *metanoia*, that is, a change of direction, of mindset, of choices, of life.³³

Conversely, the emphasis placed on external acts is diminished. In particular, the pilgrimage to Rome becomes *o n e* of several possible ways to obtain the Jubilee indulgence, which may also be gained through other means, since it pertains above all to an interior disposition, and is therefore not tied to any specific location. Thus, Paul VI, in 1975, affirms:

...we gladly extend the participation in the gift of indulgence—according to the tradition of the Church—to all the faithful who, through a profound conversion of the soul to God, by means of works of penance, piety, and fraternal solidarity, sincerely and fervently demonstrate their desire to remain in charity toward God and their brothers and sisters, and to grow ever more in it.³⁴

4) Naturally, the reference to the *J u b i l e e i n d u l g e n c e* remains, however, it is now enriched by the doctrinal and disciplinary elements introduced in the apostolic constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (January 1, 1967), which became the authoritative magisterial reference for all subsequent Jubilee bulls.

³⁰ ‘The celebration of this event is intended, above all, as a call to repentance and conversion, as necessary dispositions for participating in the grace of the redemption accomplished by Him, and thus attaining a spiritual renewal in individual believers, in families, parishes, dioceses, religious communities, and other centers of Christian life and apostolate.’ (John Paul II, *Aperite Portas Redemptori*, n. 11, in *Bollario* 1515).

³¹ John Paul II, Bull *Incarnationis Mysterium*, n. 1, ‘Acta Apostolicae Sedis’ 91 (1999), p. 129.

³² Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 10, ‘Acta Apostolicae Sedis’ 107 (2015), p. 406.

³³ Paul VI, *Apostolorum Limina*, in *Bollario* 1325.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 1331.

Whereas earlier bulls simply outlined the procedures for obtaining the indulgence, beginning with Paul VI—and continued by his successors—there emerged a need to explain what an indulgence is and to present its theological foundations, in order to foster a proper understanding among the faithful.³⁵

5) A characteristic feature of post-conciliar Jubilee bulls is also the effort to address all people of good will, thus considering the Jubilee not only as an opportunity for Christians, but, indirectly, for all humanity. Paul VI is the first to adopt this approach, clearly influenced by the conciliar spirit:

For the whole world, this call to renewal and reconciliation meets with the most sincere aspirations to freedom, justice, unity, and peace—aspirations that we see wherever people become aware of their gravest problems and suffer the tragedies brought about by divisions and fratricidal wars. To all people of good will, the Church thus wishes to point out, through the message of the Holy Year, the vertical dimension of life...³⁶

6) Another aspect worth highlighting is the strong rootedness of the Jubilee in the contemporary situation of the Church and the world. This is a characteristic feature of all Jubilee bulls; indeed, the Jubilee is never solely a spiritual event—it possesses a public dimension and is therefore deeply influenced by the ecclesial, pastoral, and geopolitical circumstances of its time.

It is not surprising, then, that among the apostolic concerns explicitly mentioned by Paul VI in 1975 is the ‘development of the Church’s apostolic action’ in a world increasingly marked by a ‘process of secularization’. At the same time—particularly in the Jubilee bulls of Paul VI and Francis—significant attention is given to issues of social justice, which concern not only Christians but also a broader effort to establish a just world order.³⁷ Among the most frequently recurring themes are: the call to care for the most vulnerable, special indulgences for prisoners, attention to migrants, and appeals for the reduction of the debts of the poorest nations.

None of this is entirely novel, as the biblical Jubilee originally possessed a social dimension, involving the remission of debts and the restoration of land

³⁵ See the clear and rich exposition offered by John Paul II, Bull *Incarnationis...*, pp. 137–139.

³⁶ Paul VI, *Apostolorum Limina*, in *Bollario* 1327.

³⁷ ‘It is well known that one of the Church’s most heartfelt concerns in recent years has been to spread everywhere a message of charity, sociality, and peace, and to promote, to the best of its ability, works of justice and solidarity in favor of all the needy, the marginalized, the exiles, and the oppressed: all—let us say—whether individuals, social groups, or peoples’ (Paul VI, *Apostolorum Limina*, in *Bollario* 1350 and, more broadly, the entire Section V). See also Francis, Bull *Misericordiae...*, nn. 15–16; Francis, Bull *Spes non confundit*, nn. 8–16, ‘Acta Apostolicae Sedis’ 116 (2024).

ownership (cf. *Lev* 25). However, when comparing two centuries of Jubilee bulls, what stands out is the shift in the interpretive perspective applied to *Leviticus* 25. Leo XII in 1825 and Pius XI in 1925 read this passage primarily as a figure of a spiritual reality now fully realised and of incomparably greater value than material possessions: ‘The purpose of the two institutions is not dissimilar, although the graces of the Holy Year are far superior to those, just as spiritual realities surpass earthly ones.’³⁸

By contrast, Paul VI—and to a certain extent Pope Francis—appear more inclined to read the prescriptions of *Leviticus* 25 in a more ‘literal’ or ‘prophetic’ sense, as a contemporary challenge: ‘This is an ancient appeal, one drawn from the word of God, whose wisdom remains ever timely. It calls for acts of clemency and liberation that enable new beginnings: “You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (*Lev* 25:10).’³⁹ These two perspectives are by no means irreconcilable—but they are, undeniably, quite distinct.

3. Conclusions

The path undertaken has necessarily been selective; nevertheless, it has allowed for a journey through two centuries of Church and Christian history from an outstanding and authoritative vantage point—namely, the Jubilee bulls themselves. The following conclusions may be drawn:

1) The Jubilee is fundamentally a spiritual event, but since it is intended to renew the whole human person—and persons are free beings—it also carries profound moral implications, which unfold in two directions.

2) On the one hand, it entails a personal commitment to conversion, the acknowledgment of one’s sin, and a reorientation of life according to the Gospel. In the papal bulls, the Jubilee appears as an opportunity to reclaim one’s life and direct it toward its ultimate goal, with due consideration for the final, eternal destination of the existence.

3) On the other hand, the Jubilee is also presented as an opportunity for the renewal of public morals (as emphasized in the 19th century), or as a call to social justice and peace a focus that became more prominent in the 20th century. The moral dimension of the human person is not

³⁸ Pius XI, *Infinita Dei misericordia*, in *Bollario* 775.

³⁹ Francis, *Bull Spes...*, n. 10, p. 654.

exhausted in the pursuit of a virtuous private life; it also entails a social, public, and even institutional dimension.

4) The *i n d u l g e n c e* has historically been the principal motivation for the Jubilee. Christian Jubilees originated around the possibility of obtaining an indulgence; indeed, the practice of indulgences predates the institution of the Jubilee Year.

In all the bulls, the indulgence is consistently understood in its technical sense as the *r e m i s s i o n o f t e m p o r a l p u n i s h m e n t*. In more recent bulls, however, there is a discernible effort to guard against any quasi-‘magical’ or purely ‘mechanical’ conception of indulgences. The language employed becomes more existential, describing indulgence, for example, as the ‘fullness of the Father’s mercy,’ or the ‘total gift of God’s mercy.’⁴⁰

5) Finally, the *w o r k s* required for the personal reception of an indulgence have increased and diversified over time, whereas originally the pilgrimage to Rome was strictly necessary. Likewise, increasing emphasis is placed on the *i n t e r n a l d i s p o s i t i o n s o f t h e i n d i v i d u a l*, which are regarded as the primary conditions for obtaining the indulgence.

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⁴⁰ John Paul II, Bull *Incarnationis...*, n. 9, p. 138.