

Individual Testimonies from Past Pilgrims

“I wanted to add my personal thanks and appreciation for your solicitous care and teaching throughout our pilgrimage. I am still on cloud nine--the closest I can hope to get to heaven in the near future. Our stay in Assisi was of course the pinnacle of our pilgrimage. Visiting Francis' and Clares' tombs in the company of our fellow pilgrims, the magnificent churches and tiny chapels--and most movingly, the church of the Lepers--was a spiritual revelation. Your thoughtfully presented commentaries and on the spot assistance, planning and knowledge, allowed us to experience every day as it was meant to be, without worry or care about mundane details. You and Katia were, in other words, the perfect hosts and spiritual companions. Thank you for a journey we will never forget, and may God bless you both in your work.” John Doherty, Virginia

“What a wonderful time I had, and everyone was so helpful and kind to each other in the true Franciscan spirit. It felt like we were all family .Francis would be proud of us. Thank you so much for one of the best times of my life. God Bless You and your beautiful Family.” Mary Ann, Georgia

“Pace e bona! I want to thank you especially for your very insightful and forthright bus-presentations and witnesses that reflected solid SFO perspectives. I know that the preparation for such a diverse group must have required many additional hours of reflection and prayer; your commitment to sharing was GREAT. The logistics of this Pilgrimage were daunting IMOP and I admire greatly the efforts you made to "go with the flow" of the circumstances and the group. Your personal comparisons of IT to USA were both informative and fun.” Don, Wisconsin

“I am genuinely touched by the most inspiring event I have ever experienced. When I am asked about our trip, I tell them I am truly unable to put it into words, but if the only way they can go is to sell a kidney, then they must. Thank you for everything you did for us. I can only pray that God will bless what Bret and Katia are doing. And I do not see how our prayers could go unanswered. May the Lord give you His peace.” Faye Martin, Tennessee

“Bret has cultivated an impressive network of contacts throughout Italy. These spirited sisters, friars and brothers provide welcoming and memorable moments for his groups and always left me wanting to connect with them again – a good sign, I would say.” Kevin Forrest, Victoria, Canada

“I cannot express how fired up about the trip I am, and believe me I am sharing and encouraging those I know to think about taking an opportunity of a lifetime to go and experience what Bret and Katia are offering. My two days back to work were filled with the sort of obstacles you can only imagine, but despite them I have maintained the quiet inside that I was able to find on the trip.... That centered stillness is oh so important to ones life.” – Missy Gibbons, Georgia

“This pilgrimage must rank as one of the pivotal experiences of my life spiritually, emotionally, artistically, and in terms of spiritual growth... From the beginning, when we got our prayer books, when things began to unfold in random ways, as they do on trips and with large groups of relative strangers, it became clear that this was a spiritual experience, and all temporal considerations became superficial and superfluous. As I think of all this, I am reminded of the song ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all else will be added unto you.’ I did not see a lot of famous tourist places, but I saw the graves and relics and chapels of many Saints and the Catacombs and so many gorgeous churches – the birthplace of Mary, the many sites associated with St. Francis. I let go of all striving for control, and lo and behold, nevertheless, the Lord provided... The food was exceptional; the people were all so friendly, I was able to manage in a language I didn’t know and everything worked together so I feel like I really experienced Italy – the city and the countryside, the nuns and friars. Many of the personal issues I brought over seem to be clearer now, despite a lack of time to do much contemplation. The shape of the trip was very satisfying: starting in Rome, hectic, exciting, sleepless, fabulous, scary, then to the more contemplative sites, finally returning to the original hotel. One early sleepless night, I opened the Bible at random and read Isaiah 40. Today, my daily Bible readings brought me to Isaiah 40!! So satisfying – a completion of this wonderful trip, and yet a springboard to what I hope will be continued growth when I return home. I cannot say strongly enough how grateful I am for this trip and for the great effort and care and love that went into its organization and execution. It was much different than I imagined and much better! Thank you very much!” Mary Jungerman, Colorado

“How can one describe walking in the steps of St. Francis? I've had that wonderful opportunity several times as I've been a part of the Pilgrimage led by Bret. My parishioners and I have benefited greatly from well planned trips and opportunities to really enter into the Franciscan experience. I've particularly benefited from the opportunities to visit more remote areas of Italy that were off the beaten track and touched into the heart of St. Francis and his vision of ministry and service to God's people. I will encourage you to do a pilgrimage with Bret. I guarantee you a wonderful spiritual experience.” Fr. Fred Wendel, Army Chaplain stationed Ft. Belvoir, VA

"I was blessed by a wonderful American tour guide, Bret Thoman who spoke perfect Italian and is a Secular 3rd order Franciscan. Bret was very knowledgeable about the life of St. Francis, as if Francis were a personal friend of his." Sr. Bernadette Beamsley, DLJC, Texas

"Kim and I had an incredible experience; we speak about something on that trip darn near everyday. Kim said it so well that our lives have been changed and that trip continues to mold our thinking." John Slagle, Georgia

“Bret Thoman, a Secular Franciscan layman, leads religious and spiritual experiences in pilgrimage. I recommend him for your retreat, pilgrimage to Assisi, Rome, and the rest of Italy. I appreciated all the work Bret did for our pilgrimage to Italy and the footsteps of St Francis in September of 2008. I hope to go again in 2010. I recommend his pilgrimages. I think he added many good touches to our experience. He brought us to good Italian

cuisine. He got us into places I had never dreamed we could go, such as the tomb of St Francis and the catacombs for Mass. He also arranged for us to have an audience with the Pope. He helped us navigate the bus system in Assisi. I liked the trip to the Marches and the visits to Second Order convents. I also liked meeting his wife and children. I think the spiritual insights he gave us helped make the pilgrimage better for us and more meaningful. We had a smaller group, but I think he gave us royal service.” Fr David Vincent, SFO, Ohio

“I did travel to some of the places visited on this pilgrimage before, but not to the extent that we did now. Beginning in Assisi brought me to the top first. Then each day was better than the days before. After 5 days, I wondered what you would or could do to improve on it. But somehow you did. What a delightful spiritual experience that has been but somehow I don’t see it ending upon our arrival home. I feel that I need to take what I’ve experienced and share it first with my family. I’m anxious to tell and show them what we’ve experienced. I also need to share it with my SFO fraternity and other folks I’ve told about where we were going.” Peter Bekkers, Wisconsin

“I have never been on a pilgrimage before this one. At times, I felt I was on silent retreat in our local retreat center in Alberta due to the sense of spirituality. The whole experience was wonderful and left me wanting to keep going. I was sorry to see it end. The Audience with the Pope was a lifetime dream for me.” Anna Hutmacher, Canada

“The first pilgrimage that St. Francis Springs Prayer Center in Stoneville, NC sponsored to Assisi in 2006 was a guided trip. Bret Thoman, SFO our very capable guide provided us with such wonderful experiences on this trip that many pilgrims felt that they could never be duplicated again. Since that trip, some of our pilgrims have returned to Assisi once again hoping to capture the spirit of Francis & Clare.” Fr. Louis Canino, OFM, North Carolina

“Your leadership skills are fantastic!” Raymonde, Calgary, Canada

“I experienced (beyond words to express) the love of Jesus. Many spiritual/inspirational moments touched me deeply during this Pilgrimage, however, the defining moment was at LaVerna. Thank you, Bret, for your servant’s heart – for your diligence in caring for us – you are gifted to treat each Pilgrim with Respect and Love! God bless you and your family!” Canada

“If I were your Mother I would be so proud of you, you did a magnificent job with this trip. For me it was so spiritual that my life will never be the same. You did a great job but what also was so special is that we had our own priests with us and could celebrate Mass at the holy of holiest. That first morning at the tomb of St. Francis is a vivid image in my mind and then Fathers anointing at the Poor Clares’ church was a holy healing. My love...” Dee Dawn, California

“This has truly been the most amazing experience of my life- Thank you – you were so wonderful. Your knowledge of each important stop along the way has been such an experience- one I will remember always.” Carmel Vaughn, Georgia

“The experiences and graces received surely will stay on and will continue....! For me the every experience was grace-filled! Thank you very much for facilitating! It was a wonderful opportunity to meet new people and make new friends! The whole group was friendly and accommodating!! I have seen some authentic people! Once again, thanks and congratulations!!!!” -Cynthia Decial, England

“Thank You, Thank You many times over, for a truly "Awesome" Pilgrimage, We will remember this for a life time. The depth and breath of the Spirituality was opened to us in a masterful presentation by You and Fr Linus. We could not have asked for any better. I am still pinching myself thinking this was a Dream, but it wasn't it was REAL. God Bless you and your wonderful family. Keep up Your good work, it is necessary, and You do a masterful job at it... You all are in Our Prayers.” Joann and Joe Backo, North Carolina

“Trust God, leave all your troubles behind, and faithfulness is more important than success!” Susan Quek Beng Neo, Singapore.

“I am very satisfied with the service of St. Francis Pilgrimages in our recent pilgrimage to Italy. It was very well planned with Bret's experience. He helped to create a friendly atmosphere, to keep our religious focus, and to enjoy the places. All this besides the financial savings, timely answers, and personal contact. I'm really grateful for his services.” Fr. Edgar Sánchez, M.Sp.S., Oregon

“Just as Saint Francis prayed constantly and sometimes used words, Bret Thoman guides pilgrims to places they've never been and sometimes uses a bus. This trip for us was both an introduction to Italy and an awareness of our spiritual journey. We still have a long way to go.” Charlene George, California

“To have a pilgrimage director who knows the language of the country and the background and history of the sites visited is phenomenal. The information you imparted to us each day made the visits so much more meaningful. Your rapport with the various monasteries and officials in basilicas, cathedrals and other sites really personalized the trip and made it so much more meaningful. I truly appreciate all the work you put into the trip to make the connections and give us a look at a little slice of life in Italy. I also appreciated meeting your wife and children. That made it very special. Thank you for a wonderful two weeks in Italy. It was amazing!” Judy Powers, Oregon

“Thanks so much for a wonderful pilgrimage. I can still feel the graces and I hope I continue to do so! You are a wonderful guide. God bless you and your wonderful family.” Madeline Nugent, Rhode Island

“You are the best. God Bless.” Johnson Koh, Singapore

“First of all, let me begin by saying this trip had a more profound effect on me spiritually than anything I have ever done. It doesn't take long to see how much you both believe in your ministry. It is so obvious the way you relate to each other and to others. The kindnesses and consideration shown to members of the pilgrimage was awesome. There is nothing I would change as far as the itinerary goes. The stop to allow wading in the Adriatic was a nice touch. I don't think I could say any specific place was my favorite. However, attending Mass and receiving Holy Eucharist in St Peter's was especially moving for me. Hopefully, I will be able to make another pilgrimage. God Bless You Both and I wish you much success.” Ruth Kenipp, Georgia

“This pilgrimage is a good mix of spirituality and history. Bret is very knowledgeable about the local history and the history of St. Francis in the area to make it an enjoyable ten days. On this pilgrimage you get to see parts of Italy away from the everyday tourist places as well as seeing some great scenery and great old buildings. A trip I would highly recommend to anyone who wants a very different and enjoyable experience.” Wayne Hutmacher, Canada.

“This pilgrimage was very prayerful for me as well as inspirational by visiting the holy sites and hearing the stories of their lives. Many times they (saints and martyrs) chose the more difficult path in life for the sake of their belief in Christ. We must do the same. This was a very inspiring trip.” Carol Bekkers Wisconsin

“The pilgrimage was very well organized and the people amazingly hospitable and warm-hearted. It was very well planned out and each day was filled with religious activities. It's the best trip I have ever been on! Seeing the Pope so close was an amazing blessing. The pilgrimage was amazing! I'll miss your daughter, Claremarie, very much.” Paulysia, Guam, USA

“I don't have enough words to tell you what a good time I had. I had been to Italy twice before and I didn't see it the way I did on this trip. The country side was breath taking; meeting the friars and nuns was special; and I can't say enough about the meals. You went over board to accommodate us. The people that I brought said that they will never forget this experience and that they want to go back. I love you and your family. God bless you all.” Joanne, Georgia

“It was a great exposure to Catholicism through the eyes of a Franciscan worldview.” Father Ricardo Bailey, Georgia

“Our experience on the pilgrimage was greater than our expectations. We felt connected with our group and we developed a closeness to everyone and came away feeling like we had new brothers and sisters to walk with us through this life. It helped to deepen our faith and have a better understanding of our patron saint – St. Francis. It was such a pleasure having Bret as a guide and he does a fantastic job of giving you a true spiritual experience... he's very organized and knowledgeable and we would definitely go on another pilgrimage with him.” Alan & Marie Lamantie, California

“You and your family were a blessing to me on this trip. Assisi was a blessing for me....if ever I had the money for another trip I would go back and just stay a month in Assisi on retreat. God is Good to me and I am grateful. You are very gifted, very knowledgeable...you are gift to many...as well as your wife and children. You are blessed with a precious family. And because of that I was blessed. Once again thank you.”
Barbara Stoffel, California

“There is no way I can adequately thank you for one of the most moving religious experiences of my life. I had always wanted to go to Assisi, but the pilgrimages or tours were always \$3200-4000 and I couldn't afford that. Then I saw your article in the church bulletin and I knew I was going to go. It was great having private prayer in the different places we visited. I really want to go again.” Mary Alice, Wisconsin

“This pilgrimage has excelled any pilgrimage I ever went on. I have learned so much about St. Francis and St. Clare that I never knew before. Having the three priests saying Mass each day was great and made this trip so special. Bret and the other guides were very well informed and so knowledgeable and the driver was so careful and charming. This to me was just a great spiritual journey. Well done to all the organizers.” Angela McCrystal, N. Ireland

“Bret & Katia's familiarity with both North American and Italian languages and cultures, their deep spirituality and winning personalities make them excellent guides for pilgrimages in Italy.” Kevin and Jean Forrest, Canada.

“Our driver, Luca, became ‘one of us’. The bus trips were great - on time and clean. We had more luxury than I had expected in the religious convents. The food was great at the convents in the Marches and Rome. Fr. Linus DeSantis, OFM Conv. gave inspiring homilies while Cricket Aull, SFO challenged us to step beyond in our spiritual journey. Fr. Steve Gross, OFM Conv. gave an excellent overview of St. Francis' life and informative explanation on the Basilica of St. Francis. The overall organization was well thought out and executed. The highlight of the trip was understanding the depth of St. Francis' prayer life and being in those places. Bret's knowledge of Italy and the Franciscan presence in the area is strength. Someone should sign up for these pilgrimages to learn more about St. Francis and the Franciscans of today and which helps gain knowledge and support of the remote convents.” – Judy Haupt, SFO, South Carolina

“I came away with experiences and information that opened my heart and mind to God's wonderful plan and love of his people. Hearing the history of our faith shared and taught by men and women who accept, believe, and live God's word inspired me and gave me a peace I have not experienced on other trips to holy places that were promoted as pilgrimages. I was able to learn, reflect, and experience the experience that always comes to me when I am validated in my faith, no matter how many bugs, how much salt, or how steep the hills. Out of 6 pilgrimages I have been on, this was the best. Thank You and God Bless you and your family.” Olga Lelgemann, Oregon

“The experience was beyond my expectations by far – I never knew how beautiful Italy could be, especially in the Marches area. Ancient Rome is also beautiful. If you are looking for a spiritual journey that will serve to increase your faith in God, help you to look deeper within your soul, help in your quest to love your fellow man as you do yourself, help you replenish your cup – these are all the things I have gained for myself – and much more. Thanks be to God.” Terry & Jeanne Lathangue, Canada.

“Thank you for a wonderful experience! While this is my first pilgrimage, I’m confident that it ranks up there with the rest by long-established companies. It exceeded all my expectations!” Marie Lzama, Guam, USA

“To take time out of a busy lifestyle to collect your thoughts and prayers on what is most important in life; your faith. Thank you for a great journey.” Joe Vaughn, Georgia

“Bret has the energy, knowledge and personal experience needed in a pilgrimage guide. His spiritual presence as a prayerful and compassionate man is all one can hope for in a guide. He was very helpful and concerned that we have the pilgrim experience we wanted. I felt very safe and could relax knowing Bret had everything under control.” Diane Maguire, Georgia

“I will always look back with delight on our wonderful, spirit filled trip with you. You do a fine job leading pilgrims and I am so delighted that you are presenting this ministry to people wanting to know more about Frances and Clare and all of our Saints that we visited! Blessings.” Sarah Harrison, Oregon

“Thank you so very much for probably the best adventure and one of the greatest experiences of my life. I know we paid you for this trip but you gave so much of yourself that it was worth 10 times what we paid. Keep up the passionate work you are doing. I sure hope to book another trip with you someday! You have a beautiful family! Peace and blessings to all of you.” Julie W.

“I was so impressed with Bret. He answered so many dumb questions, made very good decisions every day, was passionate about the pilgrimage, was wonderful with the friars and Sisters. I was absolutely in awe and proud of him. The itinerary was perfect. It has to be the best trip in the world for a Catholic. Every day was full of awe and wonder and each place meaningful. For me the highlights were the small, out-of-the-way places. I felt like I was in an extraordinary yet ordinary town with ordinary people, away from the big stops on the trip, but with very meaningful churches and histories. It’s as if LaVerna, Assisi, Loreto, Rome were well known masterpieces, but these small towns were living communities of equal beauty. When I talk about the trip, I don’t usually talk about these two stops, but they hold a special place in my heart.” – Mary Smith, Georgia

“This pilgrimage was grace filled and spiritually renewing. It was the most wonderful spiritual experience for me. The daily mass, divine office prayers, your teachings, the sharing of Fr. Ignatius and Sister Laura Christiana, all had some meaning for me. Much of it is just beginning to sink deeper into my heart and mind. To walk in the foot steps of

Sts. Francis and Clare with others who desire to know and love God is miraculous. The love for God and St. Francis the tour leadership exhibits, certainly helps to make this all happen.” Sharon Cleveland, Florida

“Great drivers, tour guides, organizers, priests with a great spirituality, a friendly group of pilgrims, what more can I say? Truly a great spiritual experience to remember in the days ahead. ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever.’ *Grazie!*” Debsmond & Teresa Walsh, N. Ireland.

“Please know how very, very much we are indebted to you and Father Linus as well as Katia for the incredibly wonderful pilgrimage you arranged for us. It was the most memorable trip we have ever taken and will be with us forever.” – John Martin, Tennessee

“If you wish to grow in your Franciscan spirituality, make a pilgrimage to Assisi with Bret Thoman, SFO. You will never be the same.” Dolores Gendre, Canada.

“It was a great blessing to have a Secular Franciscan that is fluent in Italian and knows the Assisi area so well. His contacts with monasteries and bus/taxi drivers provided a secure pilgrimage. Bret Thoman, St. Francis Pilgrimages, will be the only pilgrimage or retreat I would ever consider.” Lillian White, SFO, Ohio

“The pilgrimage, organized and led by Bret Thoman, SFO, of St. Francis Pilgrimages, was absolutely a wonderful blessing from start to finish. An excellent itinerary and great handouts, readings and reflections. The pace was just right for almost any age group, and there was ample free time. An experience of a lifetime! You will feel that you know Sts. Francis and Clare as never before!” Steve White, SFO, Ohio.

“I wanted to again tell you how very wonderful this second Franciscan Pilgrimage was. You did such an incredible job in getting everything organized and then making sure that everything went well. May our Blessed Lord continue to shower you and your beautiful family with His graces.” John Martin, Tennessee

“I want to compliment you on an exceptional pilgrimage. As I wrote on our critique, if you could read it, it was extremely well planned and your coordination with all of the hotels and monasteries was exceptional. Even after three previous visits to Assisi, you took us to several places we had never seen before. Your handouts on our trips to locations outside of Assisi were very informative and providing the time for Daily Offices was particularly pleasing. Fr Linus is a super Priest and his prayers and homilies were insightful and sometimes I felt he was reading my mind with no thought of malice.” Chuck and Norma Matthews, Georgia

“This was a holy experience. The pilgrimage truly allowed a genuine Franciscan walk. My spirit and body were fed generously. My mind and heart will slowly digest the taste and fullness of this blessed experience.” Pam Barber, North Carolina

“Traveling with you has been a pleasure showing us Italy’s best kept treasures. On our vacation, it’s so nice not to fret ‘coz all our concerns we took to Bret.” Anne Gan, Singapore

“Highly recommended for SFO or would be SFO or anyone interested to follow Christ in the footsteps of Francis.” Er Margaret, Singapore

“The pilgrimage will allow you to encounter our Lord in the sites you see, the words you hear and God’s people you meet. Those you meet on the pilgrimage and those who now are in the presence of our God.” Eileen Chaney, North Carolina

“We wish you God’s love and peace.” Agatha & Richard, Singapore.

“We were met at the airport, always had our representative guide available for questions and translation. Family atmosphere with kind and concerned providers. Lodging provided (excellent) access to churches and areas where others who were touring did not get to go. Taken back to airport for return flight.” Mary Pickrell, Ohio

“It truly was an amazing experience. I came with no real expectations and very tight from stress. I left with a deeper appreciation of our Franciscan heritage and a vow to try and maintain more balance in my life which must include more quiet time for prayer.” Theresa Knippel, North Carolina

“I felt as if I had a guardian angel watching over me the whole tie- Bret makes sure that all of our needs are met – physical and spiritual! Many Thanks!” Mary Ann Hargrove, Ohio

“I never thought I would have a chance to visit a monastery in Europe. The two we visited in the Marches were exceptional. Of all my travels, the visits to the monasteries in the marches stand out as both extraordinary spiritual and temporal experiences.” Bob Golen, Ohio.

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Peter and the popes, and the entire Vatican visit--but each day brought a new highlight because of what I learned and discovered about each site/saint. As a convert, I was convinced of the truth of the Catholic Church because it can be traced back to the Apostles, and to see the ancient sites and realize that our Fathers in faith had walked those same roads made my faith come alive. To visit the homes of the saints and the places where they lived and died made everything so much more real, and not just a story. It's very humbling to be able to walk the same path as St. Francis, St. Clare, St. Rita and all the rest. There seemed to be a nice balance between the spiritual aspects of the pilgrimage and the chance to be a tourist." Judy Powers, Oregon

"I personally want to thank you for a spiritually moving experience one that I will keep in my heart. Through it I have met new friends and saw things I don't think I would have seen on a "TOUR". God Bless your whole family." Greg Savold, Georgia

"For me there was a highlight each day. And each day was full of surprises. Congratulations to Frs. Con, Eugena and Sean, for the beautiful Eucharistic celebrations each day and for the inspiring homilies. Many thanks for making our pilgrimage to Assisi and Rome such a memorable occasion." Amelia and Gemma Devine, N. Ireland.

"I am not good at putting my feeling in words! It has been much better than I ever expected! This is the first pilgrimage that I have been on but I also know that it will not be the last. The care of the people that was shown not only by Bret but the entire group was just so much more than I ever expected! God bless you and the work that you do! You are building your 'Skymiles' in heaven for sure!" Dot Howard, Georgia

"What an incredible trip!! I can only imagine the myriad of details you had to track and all the follow-up you had to do to make this event for the 32 of us so special and I am awed by your compassionate, servant's heart. My every expectation was exceeded, memories were created, contemplative thoughts altered. I went as a pilgrim rather than a tourist and returned with my spirituality challenged in a positive way. I fell in love with your daughter, Claremarie. Katia is incredible; her smile brightens every moment she is present. I can just feel the respect and love you have as a couple; never lose that. On a scale of 1 to 10, this was at least a 13! I feel so blessed to have met the three of you, to have appreciated the depth of your incredible and varied knowledge, and to have enjoyed so much meeting and listening to the people whose paths you have crossed. I will pray for you and your families." –Colleen J, Georgia

"I can see that lay people (me!) can hope to achieve some form of this [spirituality], even in our overly-complex lives of too much stuff and attempts to control everything and everyone! It will take discipline and constant surrender of each moment of the day to do so in middle-class America, but in this clear early morning light, I can almost see my way. [Now] I am asking for His guidance to direct me to the place He wants me to serve...whether hospice, with the abandoned elderly, or another situation." Jennie Ferrell, Oregon

"It is hard to put into words the impact Assisi had on me on my first pilgrimage. The

presence of Francis is felt every-where.” – Kathy, Kansas

“Prior to the trip, I was anticipating the audience with Pope Benedict XVI to be the highlight for me, and it was surely great, and I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. But I can honestly say that every experience throughout the pilgrimage was a highlight. Besides going to places and seeing things we have only heard about, a pilgrimage like this also deepens one’s faith. I had never been on a pilgrimage before and honestly was expecting more of a trip, so I was pleasantly surprised to have this experience. I have had “tours” of historic places before, but they were not as engaging, so I went away with much less than on this pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is more than any vacation or trip or cruise that any Catholic who desires to know more about his/her faith and to walk in the paths of so many saints and holy people throughout the ages. This pilgrimage brought to life so much of what I had read and heard through the years. The price of this trip is CHEAP. I would have paid more for less!” – Steve Smith, Georgia

“The depth of knowledge and living example of the tour director helped to make the pilgrimage more interesting, spiritually rewarding than I thought possible. I hope to make lasting changes in my daily life based on the spiritual renewal of this pilgrimage. It felt great to get away from the ‘world’ and spend quality time with Jesus, the Saints, and new Catholic friends.” Julie Nagy, Georgia

“I have to tell you. I totally went into this experience thinking. . . ‘I am a good catholic, this is not really going to be a pilgrimage for me, it’s a vacation!’ What an experience and change of heart I had. The experience I had in Italy and the love of the religion I witnessed has made me want to learn so much more about it. I want to be able to explain why we do what we do!!! Again I can not really put into words what this trip has meant to me. Peace be with you and your beautiful family.” - Carol Ann H, Georgia

“You were wonderful. Your spirituality and historian ability really added to the experience. Thank you and God. Bless you.” Pam, Georgia

“We are going home filled with ‘awe’ at the places where we had Mass were very special and will remain with us always.” Noel & Anne McMullan, N. Ireland

“Deepened and renewed my faith and resolve to be more of a good Catholic and experience a closeness with Jesus and the saints I have needed to continue on my journey to Heaven. (My first pilgrimage! and trip out of the country)” Mary W., Georgia

“I didn't get a chance to thank you properly for all your support and kindnesses you lent when I was having my difficulties walking. I probed my mind to try to discover why this happened to me and I think God wanted to hand me a lesson in "how to accept help gracefully". I was a nurse for 40 years then nursed my husband and mother thru illness, raised 3 children ...never needing help.....the rest you know. Lesson Learned. God bless you and your dear family and your special work” Ann Antoci, Georgia

“Thanks so much for everything!!! I can't thank you enough. This is one trip I will never forget! I will keep in touch. Take care of you and your family. God bless.” – Elizabeth B., Georgia

“I would like to say a big thank you to you for such a wonderful trip to Italy, it was a dream come true for me. I came home feeling much different than when I went, I mean in a spiritual way. I would really consider doing another trip in a year or two so please keep me posted to your future ones. The trip home was long..... and well worth it. You are a great person and I truly wish you well in your future in Italy. May God bless you and your family with many graces and favors.” - Lois Cartier, Georgia

“Life in the United States is fast-paced and unnecessarily complicated by humankind. If you want to spend a time free of limiting, corporal worries of life in the ‘fast lane’, we recommend a Pilgrimage to Assisi. The experience will help you reconnect with the simple Christ-centered life we are all called to lead.” Robert & Evelyn Sanchez, California

“Thanks for an incredible pilgrimage through Italy! The trip was wonderful in so many ways. I left each place with a spiritual treasure that I will always remember. My most memorable was the Basilica of St. Francis. I felt a greater sense of Christ around me than ever before, after visiting the tomb. You did a great job organizing and planning for our journey and our needs. It's so evident that you love doing this. Thanks for sharing these special places and your love of Italy with our group. I will always remember you and the trip with fond memories.” - Chris Teer, Georgia

“I had a wonderful time on the pilgrimage-- the beauty of Italy, the peacefulness and spiritual significance of the locations we visited, the importance of the feast days we celebrated, the food, the gelato :-)) and the people with whom I shared the experience-- I couldn't have felt more blessed. Surprisingly those were just the consolations prizes. I've gained a lot and continue to gain more every day in the way of spiritual growth. I can't thank you enough for your part in working out my inclusion in the pilgrimage. One of the most important aspects, which contributed to the richness of the experience for me, was the fervent love for, and knowledge of St. Francis embodied in those with whom I walked along side on this pilgrimage. I really got to see, first hand, the charism of the Franciscan way. You have such an awesome calling and I have to say you inspired me through our conversations and simply through observing you preach the Gospel while only using words when necessary. You're living it!” – Brian Boynton, Georgia

“It was difficult coming home - "down off the mountain" so to speak! I will definitely be back! Soon would be good. There is so much more I would like to do - like spend a week in the Marches. If you have a Franciscan spirituality, then this is the trip for you! Bret has arranged an intimate tour of St. Francis' homeland. You truly feel welcomed by all the friars and sisters who joyfully remind us that we are part of the Order. This experience in Italy was very important to my journey. I thank you and Katia from the bottom of my heart for giving your lives to make the experience come alive.” Linda, Georgia

“I have been thankful to be a part of this tour. We have seen so many “Holy Places” that have not only been a wonderful history and religion lesson but also a spiritual journey of a lifetime. What made it so nice is being able to take it all in without having to worry about the details. Bret does an outstanding job of taking care of the details. He also has contacts and friends that got us wonderful meetings with Friars and Sisters and allowed us to share meals with them. He is very knowledgeable of these areas and shares info with us. Thanks for all the effort you put in to making these tours so great. You have made it totally worry free for me!” Nancy M.

“The Holy Spirit seems to bless everyone on the pilgrimage. St Francis’ spirituality of peace, joy and happiness is witnessed in the religious we meet and in return is experienced by the persons on pilgrimages.”

“Spending our time with the Friars and Sisters, seeing face to face, sharing their stories and what brought them to serve the Lord and just how happy and prayerful they are was truly a beautiful experience. If only I could have even a small portion of their peace in my own life. I am going to try very hard to work on this! Thank you for just a beautiful spiritual few days and thank you Katia for sharing Bret with all of us. Fondly, Patty M., Georgia

“It was a wonderful experience to be able to obtain the Plenary Indulgence for my mother. I did not realize that one could do that for a deceased loved one. Every story of faith, that each Friar or Sister shared from their heart and soul kindled the fire of Franciscan spirituality in my soul. Thank you for the opportunity to learn and grow so much in just a few days.” Ken & Nora W., Georgia

“I, too, am now doing the prayers three times a day. I know I am ‘different’ since the trip. It has made me feel more peaceful, more connected to God and to the communion of saints. I don't think I could begin to choose the best or least great of our trip. Thank you and your family, for your dedication to this great work.” – Helene Ward, Georgia

“As I close my eyes and remember our pilgrimage, I rejoice in the Franciscan joy, the peaceful moments and the wonders of God. I am filled with peace in the quietness of nature at Soffiano being in complete abandon sitting still in His Presence. This fills me up, and I feel strong and peaceful to take on each and every day. *Pace e Bene*” – Rosa Marroquin, Georgia

“You three special guides modeled for us true Franciscan spirituality. That also is one of your strengths! Thank you. The memory and experience of our pilgrimage is impacting our life daily. We are finding or making time for extra reflection. We are inspired by remembered parts of Father’s homilies and Cricket and Bret’s meditations. We are joyfully sharing our unique travel experiences with neighbors, friends, and family. This very affordable trip which offers fascinating destinations of interest to any Catholic wanting to explore our roots and get off the beaten path; it left us inspired and elated. While our expectations were more than satisfied, we came away hungry for more.”

“I’m already planning on going again next year; I can tell you that I’m not the same Secular Franciscan that I was before the pilgrimage. I pray that it’s not the euphoria of the moment; I don’t think it is.” – Joanita Nellenbach, North Carolina

“Thank you so much for an awesome experience. I truly valued the spirituality you offered and the relationships that you have with the religious in the areas we visited. This was an experience that no other tour group I’ve traveled with has been able to offer. May the Lord continue to bless you and your family as you continue this wonderful work. Peace!” Amy V., Georgia

“I want to thank you personally for a most uplifting pilgrimage. It was my first and it really meant something to me. Thanks again and give my regards to your family.” - Phyllis Panuska, Georgia

“I can see that you have your heart into sharing the riches of Italy with your brothers and sisters in the USA. Your spiritual reading was well thought out and I can tell they were from your heart. I hope that we can keep in touch. You are a warm and loving person and I wish you well in your Apostolate. You put a lot of thought into the itinerary. The highlight was the countryside and the day with the nuns. The Marches were great. I’ve been to Italy two times before, but this is the trip I will remember. We experienced things that other tours/pilgrimages don’t have. The low point was going back home. I think I’ll spend more time in prayer.”

“Just to know that I have walked where St. Francis and Clare walked was, is, a great feeling. The nuns and friars were great – the entertainment was excellent. I thought it was very brave for the priests to do Mass in English especially for the first time. They all did great. We felt very welcomed in Italy. You had a big part in that because you are an excellent interpreter. We were with some very nice people. Thank you!” Dominic and Carol P., Ohio

“This was a wonderful refreshment for my faith. I learned more about Francis and Clare. Now I feel closer as a follower of Jesus and Francis. The leaders and whole group were accepting and fun. The itinerary was great with enough variety and beautiful countryside/settings.”

“The itinerary was a good balance between prayer time, visits and personal time. The most meaningful experience was having seen and walked in the places where Franciscan spirituality began.”

“I have only positive things to say about the pilgrimage. You touched on all the senses. The scenery on all the places we went to were spectacular – we give thanks to the Lord for that. The food provided was scrumptious. The entertainment was so wonderful and Mass in Italian was so pleasing to the ear and to the heart. Last but not least I liked to be able to be and see where St. Francis and St. Clare lived and understand their spirituality to us as SFOs. To touch what they touched, to walk where they walked was so, so heavenly. Being at the Holy House most of all is something I will never forget. I felt

welcomed and embraced in the Virgin Mother's arms. I would recommend this pilgrimage to everybody to come see, feel, hear, taste and touch the spirituality and love of all the people in all the places we have seen. Thank you so much and God bless you and your family always." Bob

"The pilgrimage provided me the opportunity to deepen my faith while enjoying the beautiful people and countryside of Italy. Even though I had been to several of the places before, I left with a much greater understanding of St Francis and St Clare as a result of the wonderful spiritual talks and discussions. I would definitely go on another pilgrimage again!" – Linda J., Georgia

"Thank you for the wonderful pilgrimage to Italy. I love the country and plan to return someday. I really appreciated the spiritual side of the trip and feel spiritually renewed after the trip. Thank you for your prayers and good luck with your next group." – Stacie S., Georgia

"Thank you for all your prayers and hard work in making our pilgrimage so meaningful and successful. I really appreciate all that you did for us and can't stop talking about all the "sights" and powerful places of catholic Christian worship walked by such great saints of the past." – Barbara U., Georgia

"Thank you for this trip. Bret was great even with those of us who had a hard time keeping up. His knowledge of the area is a strength. The pilgrimage was very well run and the right price. The highlights were the Franciscans who gave talks, the fact that it was very much a personal experience, and the private Mass with the Bishop. Your booklet was well done. The best part of the whole trip was enjoying the people and the sights and not worrying about the little things. Spiritually going to the chair of Peter and saying the creed and reaffirming my faith in Christ and His Church changed me and strengthened me to try to live the life My Lord expects. I am now saying morning prayers and sometimes evenings and even night times. What a blessing!" – Debi R., Georgia

"I liked staying in convents or monasteries and all the places we visited were very meaningful to me. Two of my favorite places were visiting with the Capuchin friars and the Poor Clare Sisters. It was an awesome experience seeing their dedication and devotion towards their vocation and the simple way of life they have. They do not need anything else but God. The entire trip was well done, well organized. Bret did a tremendous job trying to accommodate everyone, which is sometimes difficult. Bret was able to resolve any problems immediately. People should go on one of these pilgrimages to experience the grace of God in all those holy places. The pilgrimages will give you that desire to get closer to God even more. I recommend it to anybody. The price is great. In fact, a couple of friends sounded very interested to go with me next trip. It is a great spiritual experience." – Ines, Georgia

"Thank you for a wonderful experience of faith and love. You do a truly great work in God's kingdom. I thoroughly enjoyed every part of the pilgrimage. I want to keep in touch, and be able to hear about your wonderful family, and your future endeavors.

Thank you is not enough for a life changing event. God bless you, and your family. Gratefully, Marie”

“This pilgrimage was a very unique spiritual experience for me because our pilgrimage director was very knowledgeable about the area that we visited and he (and family) participated in the pilgrimage with us. We had enough time to really experience the life of Assisi and the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare. For me, St. Clare really came to life and became a real person to me, so I felt that I was able to bring her home with me! Our time in Rome was fascinating and we had a very knowledgeable guide there. This trip was unique because we not only had a wonderful pilgrimage, with Mass and prayer in very special places, but we had the time to be able to really experience every place that we went. It was a wonderful time and a great experience!!!” – Maggie, North Carolina

“In June of 2004 my 98 year old mother died. I had a very difficult time with that. I never achieved complete closure. Her life long dream was to go to Italy where her parents and grandparents were born. When this pilgrimage to Italy was announced I knew I had to go. While there I carried my mother in my heart to all of the many beautiful places that we visited. As a result of this spiritual journey I came home with renewed spiritually and also a sense of peace with the dying of my mother, finally the closure that I was desperately looking for. Thank you, Bret, for being part of this for me.” Georgia

“This trip is a very authentic following of Francis and Clare who followed Christ. In San Severino the singing sisters’ joy, dedication and hospitality were wonderful as well as the joy/passion of the brothers at Renacavata. Your selection of highly spiritual tour sites was good. The trip was a very powerful spiritual journey at a reasonable price with a better selection of special out of the mainstream sites, which was better than expected - we had been to Assisi before this was very good in comparison. The slow-paced journey allows one to learn about/meditate on Francis/Clare. It is most economically priced and provides clean, suitable accommodations and very good food. Appropriate readings are done at each sight so that the pilgrim can be immersed in Francis’ life, thoughts and beliefs. Time is provided for both individual prayer and communal worship and sharing.” – Tom and Marianne, North Carolina

“I really do not have the words to describe what is in my heart since we have begun this pilgrimage until now. I have been near Peter and Paul, even while they were martyred for their love for our Lord. I have walked where Francis walked. I have prayed where Francis prayed. There is much to mediate on. I know the fruits are there. I have such joy because I know these fruits are not just for me but for all who came in this journey with me in spirit. The way you treat others so kindly is my inspiration to do the same. The patience you demonstrate in your wonderful but (has to be) sometimes very difficult work and ministry is very inspiring as well. It is so neat how the pilgrimage people are still meeting together. That has been a surprise to me. The things I have learned and seen on pilgrimage still continue to teach me and I hope that I am growing from it. I am very drawn to Assisi. Selfishly, I think of all the places I missed and long to be there. But my mind sees so clearly all that I did see and experience. I will never look on a San Damiano Cross the same again since the pilgrimage. Jesus' face is different than the replica's. I

feel a closer connection to our saints than I did before. How can I thank you enough?! There just is no way, no words. Praise always to our Lord Jesus Christ!” Sheila G., Georgia

“When I signed up for this trip it was because I chose St. Francis as my confirmation name when I became Catholic, and I wanted to see and know more about St. Francis. Little did I know or expect that it would be a journey into the very depth of my soul. There were moments on this trip when I felt as though my soul had left my body and was on a very spiritual plane, for example when receiving communion at the grave of St. Francis and when Fr. Joseph anointed me with oil at the monastery of St. Clare. This trip was a 100% more than I could have imagined. And the bonding and fellowship of our members on this journey was something I never have experienced in this long life of mine and was the frosting on the cake.” Dee, California

“It would never have been possible for us to intimately come to know this part of Italy, enhance our knowledge of the history of our Church, and build community with fellow parishioners without a reliable, comfortable place to stay throughout the pilgrimage. We were free from worry over how to pick a hotel, and research places to stay. The food was excellent in taste and abundance, the hospitality welcoming and supportive. We could not have asked for more. It is impossible to return to leading the life we led prior to the pilgrimage to Assisi. Our lives are forever altered as a result of the outstanding, prayerful experience we shared with our guide and fellow pilgrims. As a result of our experience, we will turn to prayer and seek spiritual guidance when faced with the challenges of our busy lives in the USA. We look forward to building a more peaceful, prayerful, Christ-centered way of life. The pilgrimage empowered us with the tools to accomplish this goal. While our guide had created a perfect itinerary, his flexibility in the face of the widely diverse personalities and physical limitations of our group allowed for individual needs to be met. Bret is an extremely flexible and personable human being, and we want to commend him for going ‘above and beyond’ in order to serve our group. Even though weather turned cold and wet, the pilgrimage continued – it seemed as though nothing could dampen our journey! It is impossible to single out one highlight. Each experience was integral to the whole. We were a group of humans in search of answers to deep questions and we were supportive of one another in that quest. The context provided helped us seek out and find the answers we needed. The experience was rich in its simplicity. To have prayerful support, to be able to share the liturgy of the word with our pastor and with one another, to witness first-hand the simple example of the Franciscans and Poor Clares – all of this and more made of the entire pilgrimage journey a profound and rich experience.” Bob and Evelyn, California

“Our experience on the pilgrimage was greater than our expectations. We felt connected with our group and we developed a closeness to everyone and came away feeling like we had new brothers and sisters to walk with us through this life. It helped to deepen our faith and have a better understanding of our patron saint – St. Francis. It was such a pleasure having Bret as our guide and he does a fantastic job of giving you a true spiritual experience... he’s very organized and knowledgeable and we would definitely go on another pilgrimage with him,” California

“The depth of knowledge and living example of the tour director helped to make the pilgrimage more interesting, spiritually rewarding than I thought possible. I hope to make lasting changes in my daily life based on the spiritual renewal of this pilgrimage. It felt great to get away from the world and spend quality time with Jesus, the Saints, and new Catholic friends.” California

“My experience on this pilgrimage was one of renewal and rejuvenation. A cradle Catholic with 15 years of Catholic school under my belt, I knew a great deal about various theologies and doctrines of the Church. I still attend Mass regularly, but my life has become overshadowed by all the ‘noise’ that exists in my daily routine. By coming on this pilgrimage, I was able to walk in the footsteps of saints, both living and deceased and was reminded that God calls each of us to a life of peace and goodness (*pace e bene*). Learning about the lives of these saints among my fellow Christians, I truly felt a part of the community of saints. This pilgrimage allowed us to see places one would not normally have the privilege to see on any other trip to Italy. This pilgrimage helped me re-center my life around God and be reminded what is truly important: this life is only a precursor to eternal life. In the end, God calls each of us to love and to thereby lead others to Him.” Heather Yopp, Georgia.

“I saw Jesus in Bret and the Sisters, monks, and friars, brothers and felt the love of Jesus. I feel grateful and blessed to have had this experience.” Georgia

“I tend to get wrapped up in day-to-day affairs – work, church on Sundays. Coming here I came to realize the sacrifices made for us to practice our faith. It is a serious commitment keeping Jesus at the center of our lives. This trip has reawakened by faith. Fr. Bailey was awesome! – down to Earth, easy to talk to and Great homilies!”GEORGIA

“Spending time with the Friars and sisters, seeing face to face, sharing their stories and what brought them to serve the Lord and see how happy and peaceful they are was truly a beautiful experience. If only I could have even a small portion of their peace in my own life. I am going to try very hard to work on this! Thank you for a beautiful spiritual time in Italy.” Patty M., Georgia.

“I have been thankful to be a part of this pilgrimage. We have seen so many holy places that have not only been a wonderful history and religion lesson but also a spiritual journey of a lifetime. What made it so nice is being able to take it all in without having to worry about the details. Bret does an outstanding job of taking care of the details. He also has contacts and friends that got us wonderful meetings with Friars and sisters and allowed us to share meals with them. He is very knowledgeable of these areas and shares info with us. Thanks for all your effort you put in to making these tours so great. You have made it totally worry free for me!” Nancy, Georgia.

A Pilgrim’s Song
By Linda Monitello, SFO

St. Francis dances joyfully, skipping and jumping in circles, atop his stone sarcophagus. His simple grave is out of place in the center of the elaborate basilica. He is jubilant, for he is joined by souls called to his brotherhood, knights in the army of the Lord. For the members of the Franciscan Order work as One, under One Rule, as that part of the Body of Christ that defends and upholds the Bride, the Church. “Welcome to the Order,” he sings to me. “Let me show you my home.”

I stare into the eyes of the priest sitting across from me, seeing Christ so clearly in him. I openly tell him my sins. He looks into my eyes and reads my soul. “My daughter,” he replies in broken English as he smiles broadly, “you are filled with the peace of God. You are to live your life in the words of Mother Theresa – you will do many small things with great love. This is the fulfillment of your soul’s purpose.” Then he suddenly reaches behind him and produces a book. “Do you have this book?” he asks. Yes, I reply honestly. It’s the Compendium of the Catholic Catechism. “Good,” he answers. “It is my job to translate this book for my people. We are building a school for young and old alike to learn the catechism in my country. Please pray for me and for my people in this endeavor. Teaching the catechism to others is of primary importance to keep our faith alive. This is also true for you. Do you understand this?” “Yes, Father” I happily reply, because I already have known this in my heart. As I leave the confessional, I am flying, but then I suddenly feel a little foolish. In seeing the Lord so clearly in this priest I had forgotten his earthly title, and I realized I should have called him Your Excellency, because he is an Archbishop.

I sit on the dirt floor of the small cave, my knees against my chest because the space is small, my head resting against the ceiling. My stomach is empty but my heart is full. My legs are tired from the hour’s climb straight up St. Subasio, but I feel strong. St. Francis and his beloved brothers once occupied this cave to spend time in prayer. It doesn’t serve as much shelter, as there are openings at both ends that allow the cold, damp wind to funnel through. The space is anything but quiet – it is filled with the sounds of the surrounding forest: the rustling trees, the whistling wind, the buzzing insects and the singing birds. I become One with God’s creation around me as I fall into deep contemplation. Time stands still. I start to pray fervently for my brothers and sisters, the people in the world below. For we can pray and do penance for others, healing the wounds in the Body of Christ. “Welcome,” whispers St. Francis, “to my life.”

I kneel before the San Damiano cross in awe. This is the very same cross that came alive for St. Francis. Our Lord became flesh, instructing Francis to rebuild the church. It took many years before Francis realized that this was a spiritual assignment and not a physical one. I gaze at the presence of Christ, exposed in the monstrance placed directly below the cross. “Here I am for you as well,” says the Lord, “to give you the same command.”

The incorrupt body of St. Clare lies behind a glass case, her face long and harsh, her nose sharp and pointed. Her beautiful blonde curls – her femininity – sit in a glass box across the room, tonsured over the years of her life. They serve as a reminder of her detachment from the things of this world. I never understood what a determined, strong woman this saint is until this moment. She received approval from the Pope while she was on her

deathbed, approval to live the radical life of the Gospel to which Christ had called her. No one understood how an order of cloistered sisters could live in absolute poverty, owning nothing, relying completely on God's grace to provide for them through the kindness of others. "Remain steadfast," she says to me. "Do not waiver or look back. Live the life you are called to live with all your might, for you alone know what God has called you to do."

I am drawn into a large church to attend Mass. My fellow pilgrims have scattered in search of food, but I know where to find it. After receiving Eucharist, I am drawn to follow others into a small house in the center of the church, to thank the Lord and to pray to St. Francis. I am overcome by the Spirit and fall to the ground. A peace settles over me as I prepare to stand. I leave the church overwhelmed to find my friends. As I listen to our guide describe to the others what they are about to see when they enter the church, I laugh inside. I had just been inside the Portiuncula, the Little Portion, St. Francis' home – a holy place. I had just inadvertently received a plenary indulgence. I quickly gave it away to another soul, my Franciscan spirit not allowing me to keep it.

I hold my breath as I squeeze into a tight crevasse in the side of Mt. LaVerna. I know that St. Francis used this place to pray. The sun suddenly shines down on me through the crack, reminding me of Christ's presence around me, within me. For a moment I become One with the living stone, the Cornerstone. I draw deeper into Francis' thoughts. Above me is the chapel marking the spot where St. Francis received the Stigmata, the wounds of Christ. It's a holy place filled with centuries of lingering prayers, for we all have the same inward desire deep in our souls to join our Lord Jesus Christ on His cross.

I lie in the grass, feet bare, the land sloping steeply below me, a grove of olive trees clinging to the earth at my feet. I rest my head on the base of one of the trees, surveying the valley below and the mountains of the Marches region all around. The Poor Clares had prepared a great feast inside, likely sharing their food supply for the week. This is the charism of the Order – to spend your time in both contemplative prayer and in the service and hospitality of others. I did not join the group because my soul was already full. These beautiful women had just shared evening prayer with us, inviting us behind their iron gate to sing the psalms and canticles with them. Their pure, angelic voices surrounded us, lifting us into heaven's realm. As the sun sets, I watch the larks flying in front of me. They flap their wings wildly as they struggle to fly against the steady wind that has started to gust between the mountains. I watch as, one by one, the birds stop their futile struggle, stretching out their wings to form perfect crosses, letting the wind that is God's breath take them where it willed. "This," says St. Francis, "is the message you are to take home."

I fall to the floor and bury my head in my hands in front of the glass case holding the body of St. James of the Marches. This great man started the movement of Conventual friars in the Order, along with St. Bernardino of Siena and St. John Capistrano. Many people had attempted to kill him for his beliefs and strong preaching, but they were unsuccessful. He even drank poison and survived, fulfilling the Gospel promise that not even snakes can harm the Lord's disciples. "Pray fervently now," he says, "that a new

soul will join the Order through your example, a companion to accomplish God's work with you." And as a young friar places Eucharist on my tongue – Eucharist consecrated on top of the glass casket of St. James – The Lord promises me that my prayers will be answered. I will wait patiently, because I know that the Lord is not bounded by the precepts of time.

People in wheelchairs surround us, women in white dresses and veils pushing them. They have come for a miracle to Our Lady of Loreto. I quietly pray for each person I see, praying that they understand that the healing most of them will receive will be in their heart. As I enter the small stone house sitting in the center of the basilica, I again fall to the floor, because the Blessed Virgin Mary is so strongly present within this, her childhood home. I pray for healing, not for myself but for others in Christ's body who are in need, for the pains of one are felt by all. I eventually regain my strength enough to stand and thank our Blessed Mother profusely for her assistance in leading us closer to her Son.

My heart sings as I race down a small path, down the side of a mountain. I know that this is exactly what St. Francis and the other brothers did. We had just finished Mass and an elaborate supper prepared by the postulants in a remote hermitage, a place used as a retreat house for the friars. Silence is observed most of the time so that they can hear God speak to them more clearly. But today there is joyful chatter and laughter as the friars of the First Order jubilantly host their Third Order brothers and sisters. I will learn later that the path I found was the ancient road that led more than 50 saints and Blesseds to and from this remote place of prayer. As I run, the road takes a sharp turn and plunges downward. I half wonder if I will trip on one of the many stones that jaggedly jut out of the path, but I know that I won't. I screech to a stop in a pile of leaves as the ground temporarily levels off, laughing so hard that my voice must have carried for a mile, because I'm not sure that I ever felt my feet touch the ground as I flew down the mountain.

I walk the streets of an ancient Etruscan city deep underneath St. Peter's Basilica. I am overwhelmed that such a place still exists. The doors lead inside crypts where the bodies of believers, their families and their free slaves are buried. The 2,000-year old plaques indicate that we are nearing the burial place of St. Peter. After following the path inside one of these chambers, we are led to a hole behind a red wall, where the bones of St. Peter are visible in plastic containers behind the glass. Everyone present falls into silent prayer. "You are a disciple," he says. "Go out and boldly proclaim the name of the Lord to the world. Don't be afraid." And I can imagine St. Francis adding, "Yes, and sometimes use words."

I sit across from my pastor, trying to find words to describe my recent journey. He asks me, "What is the single most important thing that you brought back?" That answer is easy. "Our group of pilgrims did everything together, as one family. The experience of the group was far more important than that of any single individual. We each tried to place the needs of the others first. This required patience and understanding. I felt comfortable knowing that we could place the needs of others first yet we wouldn't miss

anything along the way, because it is in giving that we receive. I felt assured that the Lord would give each of us the experience that He planned.” It’s the way the journey of life for each of us is meant to be – the realization that we are truly One Body in Christ, each with different gifts and perspectives but with One Heart, One Purpose – One People living in praise of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My walk in the woods, a pilgrimage to Assisi, Loreto and Rome.

By Judy Haupt, SFO

I spent 12 glorious days visiting and praying in the places St. Francis lived and prayed. We were able to celebrate Holy Mass each day and pray morning and evening prayer together. The first 4 days were in Assisi. We were in St. Mary of the Angels Basilica (The Porziuncula) for the Transitus with about 3 thousand others. It was so moving to be in prayer with thousands in the place where St. Francis left this world near the Porziuncula.

We began the tour of the Basilica of St. Francis with a visit to the tomb of St. Francis. Quiet prayer at the tomb of St. Francis was an emotional experience and I prayed to the faithful companions of St. Francis buried there, Rufino, Angelo, Masseo and Leone, to help me follow him more faithfully in my Franciscan journey.

In the Basilica of St. Clare, we had time for prayer and silent contemplation in front of the San Damiano Crucifix, then at the Carceri and La Verna where St. Francis received the Stigmata. It was humbling and overwhelming to be where in the places where St. Francis spent time in prayer.

I was sad to leave Assisi but soon found a new and powerful peace in the remote places in the Marches, the “Land of the *Fioretti*”. On the way, we visited the Capuchin Friars of Renacavata in Camerino. They told us the history of the Friary then invited us to join them for evening prayer and a delicious meal.

In Loreto, we marveled at the Basilica of the Holy House of Mary, a place of many miracles, and joined our prayers and petitions to Our Lady of Loreto with the many Saints who had visited there before.

I didn’t think that anything could get better until we spent the afternoon and evening with the cloistered Poor Clare Sisters at San Severino. The Sisters drove down to give us an exhilarating ride up the mountain to their convent. Their joyful spirit was infectious. They sang and even told some jokes from behind the grate but the most uplifting time was when they invited us to join them as they sang Vespers. It was like we were surrounded by angels. I could not control my emotions when a dear frail nun took my hand as we were leaving. They prepared our evening meal before sharing a farewell time together in joyful song.

The visit to Vall’Eremita was a test of endurance for the hardy pilgrims who hiked up the steep mountain to an ancient Monastery. (I was not as adventurous and took advantage of a ride up with the Friars.) We prayed with them, celebrated Mass and had silent time

before enjoying an abundant feast they presented. We had several other inspiring stops including the shrine to St. Joseph of Cupertino in Osimo and St. James of the Marches in Monte Prandone.

Leaving this beautiful, peaceful land and arriving in Rome was a jolt to our senses. But we were reminded that St. Francis journeyed to Rome and saw the beggars there also. We toured Rome and visited St. John Lateran one day and concluded our trip in an Audience with Pope Benedict XVI together with thousands of other pilgrims. He sent his blessings to us and our family and friends. Since you are our family, I sent the blessings to you all.

By Judy Haupt, SFO

Well, I'm back from my Franciscan pilgrimage, and have fully recovered from jet lag as well as the non stop go, go of the pilgrimage. I'm very glad I had been walking/hiking quite a bit in the months before I went, otherwise, this 69 yr old body of mine might have had problems keeping up. On the other hand, there was an 80-something in our party that went almost everywhere the rest of us did. She was awesome! It was early to rise in the AM, going all day and collapsing into bed at night.

For those of you who have never been to central Italy, I must say to you, most of what I saw was picture post card type scenery, everywhere I looked. Those that have been to central Italy, know what I'm talking about. It was endless, beautiful, cultivated rolling hills, planted with vineyards and olive groves, etc., large stone farm houses that looked almost as old as the rocks they were made of, winding roads through the Apennine Mountains, medieval towns perched on top of mountains (hills in Colorado), laughing Franciscan nuns and friars wining and dining and singing to us at the convents, monasteries, hermitages, and friaries we visited, huge Italian meals and wine and pasta, etc., etc. One thing you will notice about most Italian towns built on the sides or tops of mountains is that the only flat places are the piazzas. Everywhere else, you are mostly either going up or down. Oh, and the Italians (including the nuns) sometimes drive their little Italian cars through those narrow winding streets like Mario Andretti.

Assisi, situated on Mt. Subasio, and the crown jewel of the medieval towns we visited, was absolutely beautiful. It seemed to me that the major changes since Francis and Clare lived there must have been the glass in the windows, electric lights and indoor plumbing. It was a very unique and enjoyable experience. Of course we crawled all over the Rocca Maggiore castle situated up on top of Mt. Subasio. I had my most spiritual experience at St. Francis' tomb in his basilica. There were over 100 people down there in a large room under the main altar in silent prayer. It was so palpable and awesome, I didn't want to leave. St. Clare's basilica, where St. Clare's tomb is, was so beautiful, and it houses the original San Damiano cross.

San Damiano, where St. Clare had her convent, was very charming. It's just outside the main city gate of Assisi. When the Saracens were about to attack Assisi, they first stopped at San Damiano. Clare frightened the Saracens, turning them back, and saving the city by holding up the Eucharist to them. They ran at the sight of our Lord. The

Saracens couldn't have been much more than 600 yards down the hill (grin) (mountain) from the city gate.

The Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, down in the valley, about three miles from Assisi, was awesome. It houses the Portiuncula, which was the chapel and headquarters of St. Francis' order in the early days. Mt. La Laverna (the name means wintry place), the place where Francis received the stigmata, was aptly named. It was at least 15 degrees colder up there than the valley floor, and windy. It's about 30 miles from Assisi. It's very heavily forested, and it must have been one wild place in Francis' time. There are limestone caves up there where Francis and his boys used to go to get away from it all and pray.

Loreto, across the Apennine Mountains, on the east coast of Italy, in the province of The Marches, was another beautiful city. It used to be a fortified coastal town, built near the Adriatic Sea and some of the fortifications are still in pretty good shape. The center piece of the town, which you can see from quite far away, is the basilica of the Holy House of Mary. Tradition has it that when the Crusaders were forced to pull out of Palestine, they took the house of Mary in Nazareth apart, stone by stone, and shipped it Slovenia, where it remained for three years. They then moved it to Loreto and reassembled it. The huge basilica houses it, fully restored, with an altar inside it for masses. You can receive a plenary indulgence there.

And then to Rome. Of course, St. John Lateran, and the Vatican have to be seen to be believed. They are so awesome, they are indescribable. They've done a lot of digging at the Roman Forum since I was there in 1969. There is a lot more of it exposed than I remember. Those ancient Romans were really great builders. Our lunch at the oldest restaurant in Rome, right near the Forum, was a memorable feast, and included as much wine as we could drink. The service was great, and the restaurant, itself, is a picturesque delight. Many thanks to Bret Thoman, our tour guide, for springing for that feast.

So much happened during the pilgrimage, I'll be processing and absorbing it all, for quite some time to come.

Oh, and the weather, for the most part, was great. Mostly partly cloudy days and 75 degrees or so. If you go during the month of October, be sure and take a light jacket for the mountains and evenings - and just in case - rain gear.

Bret Thoman, SFO, runs the pilgrimage (SFO Pilgrimages) and served as our tour guide. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of Franciscan stories and history, and is fluent in Italian. His Italian wife, Katia, is beautiful and charming. They have a beautiful two year old daughter named Claremarie. Bret and Katia are close friends with the Franciscan friars and nuns in northern Italy. The pilgrimage was very well organized and Bret was constantly on the lookout and cell phone to insure everything happened as planned. At approximately \$2500 for ten days, including airfare, two meals/day, and hotel, the pilgrimage was a bargain - at least \$2000 cheaper than another pilgrimage I looked in to.

By Jim Dikes, SFO

The trip to Italy was wonderful. It was enjoyable and life changing on many levels. The highlights are many. First there was Father Bailey saying Mass every day, starting with the chapel at the tomb of St Peter in Rome. Just watching his face was amazing during this mass. And his sermons were always great. Rome was absolutely amazing, as was St Peter's Basilica. Walking to the top of the Basilica was an experience, and I look forward to returning with much more time to spend. As an American Roman Catholic, raised in the Protestant Bible belt of Mississippi, the overwhelming experience of seeing the St. Peter's gives you real feeling for the worldwide spread of the Catholic Church.

The various Franciscan religious orders were inspirational. I will never forget the young Franciscan nun speaking to us outside the Porziuncula (the original church St. Francis renovated) and her words on St. Francis and peace.

The Sanctuary of Padre Pio was also very interesting, as I did not know much about his life (he is a recent Italian saint famous for bearing the stigmata of Christ). We learned of St Padre Pio's father, who was very poor, earned the money to send his son to the seminary by working in Pennsylvania soon after the WWI. After Father Bailey said Mass and gave his sermon to a packed group including not us but a group of British Catholics also on tour at St. Padre Pio's original church, we received many compliments from them on his Southern sermon style. They told me they could tell we were from Atlanta!

The pilgrimage aspect of the tour was born out not only by the daily masses, and visits to holy sites, but also by the diverse nature of our group with ages from 20 something to 60 something. It was gratifying to see the spiritual interest by the younger tour members, and we enjoyed their company. Our tour guide was a married lay Franciscan, and I strongly recommend anyone considering a trip like this work with a guide such as ours. He was an American, married to an Italian, and his knowledge of the Italian culture and history added a great deal to our enjoyment of the trip.