

### Individual Testimonies from Past Pilgrims

“My life will not be the same because of our journey together. I am still processing and will I hope for some time. Thank you one and all.” Carol, Georgia

“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 priests saying Mass each day was great and made this trip so special. The 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, Northern Ireland

“On May 5-17, our pilgrimage to Italy was a grace-filled and joyful profound experience of breathing in the Spirit of St. Francis in Assisi and our Pope Francis in Rome. It was delightful to be with a group of Pilgrims who prayed, sang, and marveled at God's creation in the many beautiful and wondrous holy places we visited. Franciscan Joy was definitely part of this gift package. Pace e Bene to St. Francis Pilgrimages and to Bret Thoman for an excellent work to glorify God.” Sr. Therese Improgo, OSF, San Francisco, California

“Thanks for the wonderful and meaningful pilgrimage trip for my wife and I. Appreciated Bret's kind, patience, super guidance and clear explanations in this marvelous trip.” Dave Lok, Malaysia

“I can hardly find words to tell you how incredibly wonderful our pilgrimage was. It was awakening, as I had hoped, and transformative, as you predicted. Even experiences that for the moment seemed less than I desired were in retrospect just what I needed – just what He knew I needed. Your lovely and humble wife and spirited son added greatly to my enjoyment of the pilgrimage. Alesandro, for me, was right out of the Cimabue fresco. The combination of you and him as our guides was most certainly Providential. I cannot even imagine having made this pilgrimage without the two of you. Living in community for 10 days made me feel very much like an early Franciscan. We saw each other... good, bad, warts and all and I came away humbled and honored to be a fellow pilgrim with such diverse and gifted servants of God, walking in the way of St. Francis. *Molto, molto, pace e bene* to you and yours.” Kathleen, West Virginia

“I would like to say that I enjoyed the pilgrimage immensely. There was nothing I would change. You did a great job! I learned so much more about Francis and Clare. It was truly a spiritual journey --- thankful that I was able to come and see Assisi and meet the Poor Clare sisters and the other pilgrims. They were kind, caring and interesting. I've been sharing the beauty and the various places we visited with family and friends. I hope we will meet again.” Rose Bondi, Pennsylvania

“I have to ask how you do such a great trip on such a small budget. This trip was good...very good. The food was great! The hotels were the best! The basilicas that we saw were beautiful! The guide, Loredana was almost the best; you are the best but she is right there next to you. She gave so much info into the trip. While we were on the bus going from one place to the next, she knew so much about whatever we passed. Andrea, our bus driver, was so good. He was funny and so helpful with the luggage. We did not have to do much at all. I know that I have said so many times that this was a great trip, but it truly was. The people that were on this trip got along so well. Everyone helped each other. You are blessed at what you do and I thank you! God is blessed to have you doing His work this way!” Dot Howard, Georgia

“I had a very beautiful experience in St Mary the Angelus, St Pio and most of all the climax was the splendour and the Glory of God being present for mass with Pope Benedict XVI and

the canonization of the 6 Saints. I am still awestruck! as I never in my wildest dream to have this amazing chance. I am very proud to be a Catholic.” Renee Simon, Singapore

“Thank you so very much for this most memorable week. The guide really helped me to have a deeper appreciation for his beloved friends, Francis and Clare. Each minute of each day was so thoughtfully planned as to bring us more fully into the Franciscan spirit! Bret is truly a treasure and a gift to all who walk with him. With gratitude and love.” Suzanne, Connecticut

“Francis found out his calling by being spoken to by the Holy Spirit. He stripped his clothes in public and started following the path Christ had laid out for him to fix the church. Our beloved guide, Alessandro, discussed multiple times the importance of following the specific path that was set out of us. I think the biggest thing I took home from this trip was a reassurance that I am doing the right thing by pursuing a career path in which I may not make the most money or people may call it a “dying field” and tell me I’ll be replaced by a computer soon, but it is what my heart is telling me to do. I understand that God has given me specific gifts that he may not have blessed others with and I know that using those to the best of my abilities is the path I am supposed to follow. Also I learned that maybe 4 gelatos in a day really is too much.” —Amanda, Franklin, Tennessee

“Assisi. I haven’t stopped talking about it. God’s directive to Francis to ‘Go build my church’ was carried out, albeit initially in the form of stone and mortar, but ultimately leading to the conversion of many, who saw Francis’ and Clare’s example of spreading the Gospel and sharing the Peace of Christ with all they came in contact with. It was evident as we walked among these stone buildings and cobbled streets, and felt the joy and Peace living there. It was evident inside the tiny little church under the Dome of San Maria degli Angelo, which lovingly protected the little church during a devastating earthquake, and where the monks and friars, even today, can be seen in deep and all-encompassing prayer, and who no doubt live in awe of the life of the saint in whose footsteps they walk daily. The Peace can be felt even by non-Catholic friends, who during conversations about Assisi gush over the warmth and beauty felt when touring under the Basilica in the presence of the tomb of St. Francis. The hills of the medieval town of Assisi, the smiles of the Nuns, as they happily served us our meals...the rosaries in the rose garden, the soccer game! And the children. Something holy came over these kids, as we all spent 3 days contemplating the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare, walked their paths through the streets, churches, the Cathedral, the Basilica, and learned of the trials and tribulations they faced working amidst the poorest of the poor. ‘The Privilege of Poverty’ Francis called it, and so he must’ve felt it, as he begged our Lord for even greater suffering upon himself, so that he might grow in holiness and spiritual strength. Little did he envision the spiritual impact he would leave on us, hundreds of years later. If I don’t get the occasion to make that trip again in the flesh, I will make it many times over in my heart.” Maria Walden, Aviano Air Force Base, Italy

“Bret, I received your program on helping us with our personal pilgrimage. I appreciate all the detail and wealth of information! You are so helpful and we thank you immensely!! We both look forward to our trip and can’t thank you enough for your expertise and prompt attention.” Sharon, Oregon

“First of all I want to thank you for arranging gluten free meals for me. I had no problems with it while on the trip. Eduardo was amazingly knowledgeable. He went above and beyond arranging a guide for us in Florence, and getting us to Ovieto on Corpus Christi in time for the parade. He made sure we were taken care of. The guide in Rome, too, went above and beyond for us. On our free afternoon she came with us to Trevi Fountain, Spanish Steps and the Pantheon. It was her 25th anniversary, yet she gave us the gift. I gained perspective and a better connection with the

universal Church, as well as the historical church. I learned more about St. Francis of Assisi, Clare, and the Poor Clares. The sisters were delightful. So joy filled. I was struck by the simplicity of life Francis, Clare and the sisters lived, their humble abodes. This was in contrast to the opulence of the churches in Rome. It seems both have their place. The beauty of the cathedrals reflects a portion of the beauty of the Heavenly Kingdom. All in all it was both educational and enjoyable, and I made some new friends among the 7 who were not from our parish. They enriched our experience, and we became one group. For me this was the trip of a lifetime. I am very pleased it was a pilgrimage, and not just a tour. May God continue to bless you through St Francis of Assisi.” Sue Geeser

“Our pilgrimage trip was everything we had hoped for and more! Thank you for your ‘background work’ in arranging everything. I appreciate all that St. Francis Pilgrimages did in organizing that trip and continue to be spiritually nourished by the memory of it. Seeing TV coverage of Pope Francis at World Youth Day (one of the priests in our parish made the trip to Brazil) and in St. Peter's Square at the recent Vigil for Peace, I now feel a deeper personal connection to Assisi and the Vatican, as well as to the faith that unites all of us. The guides were both great and helped immensely in our understanding of the people who live there, the saints who had lived there, and the history of the region in general.” Dwight and Sue Theall, Texas

“This trip was so much more than a tour. I felt the true spirit of a pilgrimage at all times. It was so good to be totally immersed in history and teachings of the Church. Each day brought a special blessing. Walking through Rome and Assisi made me feel even more appreciative to be counted among the faithful. Thank you again for a wonderful pilgrimage. Every day was so special! I feel so blessed that I was able to be a part of it.” Margaret, Georgia

“*Dominus det tibi pacem* (May the Lord give you peace). On behalf of the OFS St. Leo Ibaragi Fraternity in Tokyo, Japan, this worthless servant wishes to express our heartfelt gratitude for your companionship and patience with us during all the way of our pilgrimage to Assisi and Rome. The pilgrimage organized by Br. Bret was over but all Franciscans are actually the pilgrims journeying toward the kingdom of God with the two major missions: one is to proclaim the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ to the end of the world and the other to rebuild His house that is falling into pieces. I always remember you and pray for you, not for your prosperity and success in business but for your perseverance in faith and growth in Franciscan Spirituality. In return, please pray that Emma and I will live "the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who made Christ the inspiration and center of his life with God and people (OFS Rule #4)." With fraternal greetings in Jesus Christ and St. Francis of Assisi.” Br. Joseph Yamada, your little servant. Tokyo, Japan

“We were inspired by what we learned of the lives of the saints that we encountered on the trip, as well as the beautiful monuments of faith, the cathedrals and basilicas. Our time in Assisi and Rome, together with the side visits, couldn't have been better. The drivers were very friendly and very helpful and we really enjoyed Donatello and Claudio. You couldn't have picked better guides for us; Eduardo and Loredana were wonderful, knowledgeable, kind and considerate. We were fortunate (thanks to Eduardo) to have the services of Carla in Florence. She took some of her own time to show us around and because of her we saw things in Florence we probably would have not seen otherwise. She was so very accommodating and we were all very appreciative. To sum it up, we were very well taken care of! Thank you, Bret, for the trip of a lifetime. Everything was wonderful and inspiring. We learned so much and enjoyed every minute of it. The pasta wasn't bad, either :)” Mike and Michele McGeeney, Missouri

“I couldn't be more pleased with the way the guide prepared and proceeded with each step of the

pilgrimage. I experienced being 'in the mystery' and 'in the know' abundantly. Being close to God was nourished by the itinerary itself, prayer and by the information provided at each site. Times of reflection were important to allow the Lord to speak in and even through silence. And more exciting still is how I continue to feel blessed in daily life now that I am back home. I thank you from the bottom of my heart." Mary Beth Radke, Massachusetts

"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!" Paulyssia, Guam, USA

"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. Bret Thoman is very knowledgeable about the local history and the history of the area to make it an enjoyable ten days. A trip I would highly recommend to anyone who wants a very different and enjoyable experience." Wayne Hutmacher, Canada

"The pilgrimage was highly enlightening and very well organized, and it expanded our love to each other in the spirit of St Francis." Fr Jose Gloria Rodriguez, OFM, Tokyo, Japan.

"Trust God, leave all your troubles behind, and remember that faithfulness is more important than success!" Susan Quek Beng Neo, Singapore

"I had such a grace filled time myself. Of all my pilgrimages, this time I brought the least baggage, bought the least stuff, and came back with this feeling of most blessings. I feel a stillness inside of me – like the Lord is still there, and I have to make sure He stays. And thinking back, I do not even remember what I bought on previous trips, shows me how insignificant they were, to what I went to journey for. Thanks, Bret and Katia, Iacopo too, for all your help in making this most memorable for us. Is this so much to wish for? I wish that we could all go back again together... We continue to pray for each other." Victoria, Astoria, NY

"This has truly been the most amazing experience of my life- the guide was so wonderful. His knowledge of each important stop along the way has been such an experience- one I will remember always." Carmel Vaughn, Georgia

"Earlier this week, I was sitting with several parishioners who traveled to Rome and Assisi (and more) with you – probably five years ago. We were talking about everything...The pilgrimage you led has had a profound effect on me and anyone from that trip who I have had contact. You may not realize, or may need to be reminded, that what you do is to provide us with an encounter with God...and his big family. Being raised in the United States, the sight of the Vatican, the Pope, saints in basements of churches, Assisi, Laverna, Gubbio, Loreto. It is a Catholic heritage we have so longed for. There are very few events in life that a group can talk about five years later and relive the joy and drama of the ten days. We, in fact, become part of the history and life of the Church. It touches our souls. Thank you!" Mary Smith, Georgia

"A pilgrimage is a journey of body and soul, the outer and inner person. Bret Thoman and his team of guides, drivers, Italian contacts, and family members facilitate the whole complexity of experience, leaving the pilgrim free in mind and heart to receive each manifestation of grace. My husband, John, and I came to this pilgrimage on the cusp of a new life--marriage to each other in our seventh decade. This pilgrimage was a Passover for us: an intensification of our love and commitment, a revelation of the tasks yet to be done and to be surrendered, a deepening of our

prayer, contemplation and service. Bret fosters the graciousness of God by his impeccable planning. He makes it all seem simple and effortless. Bless you, Bret, along with your family and all the other beautiful people you gave us the opportunity to meet.” Christin Lore Weber, Oregon

“We had a very enlightening experience and almost overwhelming with all the sites that we were able to visit and learn about and pray at. Spending time with the nuns and the friars was so very memorable. They were so hospitable and spirited! Thanks once again.” Wanda & Les, Illinois

“Our trip was a wonderful experience and will help guide us through our remaining years on earth.” Joe O’Brien, Georgia

“Thank you so much for all you have done for our pilgrimage. I was very lucky that I would be able to join the pilgrimage. May the Good Lord shower all the blessing to you & your family.” Josie Mananguete OFS, Tokyo, Japan

“It was by God's will that each of us was called to journey together and it was His grace that worked through each of us. Bret, your organization and grasp of how God works in pilgrimages is obviously His gift to you and that is what you share with us. Thanks to you and to all for being part of God's work. What a joy!” Fr. Richard Wise, Georgia

“I wanted to add my personal thanks and appreciation for the guide’s 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’s and Clare’s 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. Bret’s 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. Bret and Katia were, in other words, the perfect hosts and spiritual companions. Thanks for a journey we will never forget, and may God bless you both in your work.” John Doherty, Virginia

“Thank you so much. My children, friends and of course my employer is asking ‘How's our pilgrimage and if I enjoy it’?, I told them, spiritually I've really loved it... not enjoy, but very very happy because I have the chance to see all the places in Blessed Francis life and Rome and The Vatican , I thought it's only in the book where we still read and studied every 1st Sunday (The Francis Trilogy) that I can see or imagine everything that's in the book, comes to reality. Thank you so much again... it's been a wonderful experience. Looking forward to another pilgrims like this in the near future. May Our Lord God give you all the blessings and guidance in doing this again.” Sr. Jo Velez, Tokyo, Japan

“Thank you all for a very special 11 days. I felt like a part of a great family. We prayed together, laughed together and enjoyed the special moments we shared. Thank you for allowing us to be part of it.” Barbara, Illinois

“The Pilgrimage was much more than we expected. Having traveled as tourists to many places we found the emphasis place on the faith was an added ingredient which was missing on our previous trips. The content and guides did an excellent job in combining the history and the development of the Church in very perilous times for the followers of "The Way". We believe that your contributions and availability were a significant contribution to the success of the trip. The group has continuously extolled the value of the trip to anyone the even hints at any interest.

I might even suggest that a pilgrimage in all probability might be in the future (next year) for the parishioners and friends of St. Francis.” Joe & Shirley O’Brien, Blairsville, Georgia

“Many years ago, I experienced just one day in Assisi, during a pilgrimage to Rome. I was in some way struck by the spirituality and peace there and wanted to stay. It was only in recent years that I made an attempt to retrace those steps but in more detail, to see more of Umbria and to visit places related to the St Francis story. For a long time I could only find tours of a day in Assisi from Venice, or Florence or Rome, or jointly with Fr Pio etc. Eventually, I found the website of St Francis Pilgrimages. Among the offerings was this trip to Assisi and Rome, with seven days in Assisi and district. It matched all my needs and included being there on the feast of St Francis. The actual pilgrimage itself, from solemn moments in the church of San Damiano, to the joyful sisters in San Severino, and everything in between, lived up to all my expectations. Sincere thanks to Bret Thoman and his team.” David Walsh, Ireland

“I really enjoyed the tour. Assisi is just beautiful. Our accommodation was excellent, with great food. We found the guides were very good and patient. I got so much out of seeing and learning about St Francis, and the places he lived.” Vicki, Australia

“The spirituality was a wonderful experience. Joanita inserted prayer and meditation whenever she could. Daily mass in a variety of locations added to our experience. The itinerary was wonderful and well laid out. Seeing the Pope in Assisi was amazing. Being able to have mass everyday was a gift that made the trip very special, and spending quiet time reflecting on Mt. Laverna.” Shelley, Canada

“The pilgrimage was a remarkable experience for me. Joanita, our guides and drivers took care of our every need. Joanita’s spiritual reflections were wonderfully inspiring. Al and I enjoyed our time in Rome, especially visiting the great basilicas. Pace e bene” Joanne, North Carolina

“Bret, we both really enjoyed the trip. We didn't know what to expect since we have never been to Italy or on a pilgrimage before. It was better than expected. The group jelled very well. We all got along really well. Your tour people were super and Joanita did a great job keeping us focused and was very knowledgeable, passionate and helpful about everything. Eduardo, and Loredana (Lori) were very nice people and were very helpful and knowledgeable. You can tell that Eduardo has had a lot of experience teaching. He has a calm and clear way of delivering his points. Loredana is also very knowledgeable and really knows Rome and it's ways and we really needed her guidance around that city. I couldn't picture us doing it without her. Thanks for everything.” Bob, San Jose, California

“God bless you for all your hard work in getting us to Assisi, Rome and the Vatican! You have a good thing going! Congratulations!” Leigh, OFS – Michigan

“Starting out the trip at the Portiuncula was a dream. I loved praying in the little portion chapel. Seeing where Francis and Clare grew up was very nice. Seeing the side of Assisi not frequented by tourists was wonderful also. I loved seeing St. Clare basilica and St. Francis basilica. I loved the time in Assisi. The highlight of which was seeing the Holy Father. An unexpected surprise.” Laraine, Delaware

“I don’t think you could do anything better. The entire trip was well organized. The tour guides were so knowledgeable and helpful. I really enjoyed it.” Rosie Brookner, Missouri

“Thanks for putting together such a great schedule for our family. Elio was absolutely wonderful. He was witty and funny and very knowledgeable about every place we visited. He was a pleasure to be around. This was an experience I will never forget and will reflect upon often. I am sure as time goes on, moments from our pilgrimage will emerge from my memory and I will smile in the middle of what seems to be an ordinary day. Thanks again for such an incredible experience. pax et bonum.” Paulette, Illinois

“Thank you all for making the Pilgrimage a great experience. The guide was well prepped and made the trip effortless for us. Father Richard was very informative and led our spiritual experience with interesting anecdotes and humor that kept our interest. Father also provided insightful feedback to both Marge and I. We thank all the others for sharing their lives with us and made dining a pleasure.” Marge and John Kniat, Lake Wales, Florida

“I had an excellent experience on the contemplative pilgrimage. I will recommend this to all my fellow OFS’s back home in Australia. The pilgrimage has helped deepen my personal relationship with God. A God who sometimes seems non-existent, at certain moments I felt abandoned by God, but although there is sorrow in the night, joy comes in the morning.” John Scimone, Brisbane, Australia

“Fond memories of our pilgrimage ‘in the footsteps of St. Francis’ and the experience of the wonder of God in this particular “moment” continue to live within me. Any attempt to put this “moment” into words fails to express its true impact. I find myself comparing it to the experience of Peter, James and John on top of a high mountain where Jesus was transfigured before them. These three disciples could not speak about it until after Jesus’ resurrection.” Fr. Vincent Fink, OFM, Canada

“We were amazed at all we did and we had a great time. The guide’s enthusiasm, knowledge and spiritual connectedness with Italy and St. Francis really made the pilgrimage a personal experience to always cherish. Besides it was just fun to hang out with the guides and the whole group. Thanks again for all you did to make the Assisi Immersion such a memorable event. I look forward to staying in touch.” Brian Gardener, Charlotte N. Carolina

“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

“I took this pilgrimage to increase my knowledge of my church’s history; and, to “hopefully” obtain spiritual growth. These goals were met beyond my expectations. The pilgrimage provided a strong foundation and appreciation from which both my knowledge and spirituality can continue to grow.” Cece Brassell, Georgia

“We have been a little busy since coming back from Italy. We truly enjoy the pilgrimage and is really a rewarding one. We have been telling our friends how good it was, especially in Assisi, and encourage them to go for your pilgrimage if George were to organise one next year. We like Assisi and Rotondo. We will definitely encourage our friends to go for this pilgrimage if they have a chance. I hope our Asian people, especially Malaysians, attitude and behaviour did not disappoint you. Meanwhile, take good care of yourself and your family and we will continue to pray for the success of your pilgrimages. Hope we can meet again someday.” Gerald and Teresa, Malaysia.

*"Pace e bene!* I want to thank you especially for your very insightful and forthright presentations and witnesses that reflected solid OFS 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

"Thanks for your kind message to us all. I am still, and maybe forever, feeling quite moved by the holiness and beauty of the pilgrimage. Your knowledge, calmness, and spirituality made the journey complete. Each day since returning, I say to myself, 'Last week on this day I was at the convents' or whatever amazing place we were 7 days prior. Thanks for making all of this happen. You are so well suited in every way for this endeavor. Gianluca was a terrific and friendly driver. Peace and all best wishes to you and your family." Karen Banta, Massachusetts

"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

"St. Francis Pilgrimages 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 Thoman. 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

“I have been meaning to write and to tell you what a wonderful and holy experience the pilgrimage was for me, on many levels. Thanks you so much for walking with me/us through the life of St. Francis. Everything about the pilgrimage was perfect. It was great seeing the Holy Father but Rome was my least favorite. I do plan to do it again in the near future. I would like to share it with a friend.” Jude, New Mexico

"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, DLJC

“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, OFS, Ohio

“I had travelled 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 OFS fraternity and other folks I've told about where we were going.” Peter Bekkers, Wisconsin

“The pilgrimage was like someone opened a door into a new space and all the facts and interplay of Francis and Clare's lives came into view. Just being in such mystical places was awesome and inspiring. Visiting the Poor Clare monasteries was certainly a highlight.” Joe Bondi, Pennsylvania

“I thoroughly enjoyed and have been lifted spiritually by the experience. I'm already looking forward to scheduling another, possibly next year. While so many things moved me, there were three in particular that 'hit me hard.' Seeing Pope Benedict, the Crucifix at San Damiano, and the Eucharistic Miracle at Lanciano. How can someone not believe?” Aggie Sheehan, Atlanta Georgia

“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, OFS 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

“This pilgrimage was my third with St. Francis Pilgrimages. When I went on the first one, I thought it was the greatest, but I was wrong. Number two added more spiritual awareness, and this third one brought the ultimate spiritual growth. I looked into the eyes of our Lord on four occasions in the souls I met in various places. I set out on this trip feeling my spiritual cup running low, but I returned home with my spiritual cup overflowing. Thank you.” Dee Dawn, California

“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

“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

"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

"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 Peters 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 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

"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

“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, OFS 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, OFS, 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

“My mom and I would like to thank you and Katia as well as Iacopo for a wonderful pilgrimage experience. I am glad that we were able to thank you during our meeting/gathering last time for helping us in each step of the way and I would like to reiterate our appreciation for your patience, time and assistance. I think my mom and I would not have been able to make it to the pilgrimage without your help. Please know that your support and attention to us during our preparation for the pilgrimage was for my mom and I a sign from God that we ought to join the journey and indeed it was meaningful for both of us. So thank you. I hope we did not make the pilgrimage difficult for you and Katia.” Regards, Dax and Linda, Tokyo, Japan

“I continue to receive blessings from the pilgrimage and want to thank both of you again for that! Much love and peace.” Laura Cleary, Georgia

“Participating in a trip to Italy with St. Francis Pilgrimages afforded us life-changing experiences. Bret and Katia were wonderful hosts, so knowledgeable about Italy, Catholicism, St. Francis, St. Clare and other saints; our tour guide Alessandro was great. We saw and experienced many places that a more secular tourist agency would never have included. The Umbrian countryside was beautiful, the food great, and the shrines, basilica, cathedrals, chapels, etc. were so magnificent. St. Francis was a focal point, but God was definitely the center of the trip. We came away inspired to walk in Christ’s path, renewed in faith and ready to once again take up our own crosses and try to follow. Thank you, Bret and Katia!” Cynthia Jones, Georgia

“The pilgrimage was awesome incredible! Alexandro really made the trip incredible! He is someone to try to be like – he shines his light of Christ so brightly, it’s just awesome! Bret was also great with sharing his knowledge of everything and reminding us of our spiritual purpose of the pilgrimage. Their passion for Christ so brightly shined throughout the trip.” Theresa Jones, Florida.

“We continue to feel the blessings and spiritual enrichments from our recent pilgrimage to Italy with you, Katia, Alessandro, and the other pilgrims. Thank you for providing this faith filled opportunity and experience.” Nora Wessling, Georgia

“A journey of overwhelming emotions. Beautiful sights and walking in the steps of St. Francis and St. Padre Pio. A very learned guide and fantastic driver. Great food, and great lodging. Mass at all the churches we visited, taking communion, visiting Loreto, Mary’s House. Going to Rome to see Pope Francis – these are some of the highlights of this fantastic journey. Thank you so much.” Mary Jessie, Georgia.

“Ken and I would like to again, thank you and Katia for your ministry and, even though we had visited before, some of the same places we visited in this pilgrimage, we were blessed to still experience spiritual enrichment and blessings in these places, as well as the other sites that were new to us. Thank you both for your efforts and work in planning this pilgrimage and in all that you did while we were on pilgrimage. You both continue to be in our prayers. If you are in communication with Alessandro, send him our greetings and love, and also our appreciation for his talents, work, and efforts that also helped us to experience the spiritual blessings and experiences during our pilgrimage.” Nora, Georgia

*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Heb 13:16)*

“Bret and Katia truly share what they have when you travel with them on Pilgrimage. Each day brought new experiences and opportunities to see Italy, not as a tourist stopping at the usual sites, but as a true pilgrim traveling in the footsteps of the Saints. Bret, Katia and their friend (and local guide) Alessandro, made each stop along the way come alive! We truly felt the presence and power of the Saints (Francis, Clare, Benedict, James, Pio, Peter, Paul, Michael the Archangel and many others) and Our Lord at each of our destinations. This pilgrimage was a wonderful way to see and experience God’s creation -- the Italian countryside, churches, basilicas, towns, artwork, people, communities and Saints, the Vatican and Rome!! We were present at Pope Francis’ third papal address -- in about row 18, with 50,000 of our closest friends -- unforgettable!! As we traveled on this pilgrimage, it became very evident to me that not only was I on a pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Saints; but I was continuing on my journey toward God. It is difficult at times to put aside distractions of our everyday life, the busyness of work, family, church and other commitments, and the “noise” that we have in our normal routines and lives. Going on Pilgrimage allows us to truly quiet our minds and prepare ourselves as we continue on our path towards God and Sainthood. “We are people of Joy” became the motto for me and several other pilgrims as we looked for peace and happiness to take back with us when we returned home. I feel closer to Jesus, Mary and the Saints as I recall the places that we visited and the Saints that we came to know. The memories of this trip are rich and vivid and will forever remain etched in my heart and mind!!” Bonnie, Georgia

“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, OFS. 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, OFS, Ohio

“The pilgrimage, organized and led by Bret Thoman, OFS, 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, OFS, 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

“I contacted St. Francis Pilgrimages after searching online for Catholic Pilgrimages. From the first time that I contacted Bret until the day we got back from the trip – he was well organized and communicated effectively and efficiently about any questions we had about the trip. Our trip to Assisi and Rome was exceptional! The best part of the trip was spirituality; Eduardo had such a calming presence – he truly added to the trip. The convents were a highlight; I had a “God” moment when the nuns were singing during vespers. If you want a spiritual experience and want to know more about the history of the Catholic church I highly recommend St. Francis Pilgrimages!” Kathleen Dotson, Missouri

“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 OFS or would be OFS 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 time- 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.

“Thank you for all did to make this pilgrimage to Italy special for all in our group. Our guides were excellent!! Not only were they well informed but they went way beyond expectations. I think seeing Pope Francis and Vatican City was a great way to end the pilgrimage. It connected the ancient times and saints with today. It was excellent!!!!!!” Charlene Gabbard, Missouri

“This pilgrimage was grace-filled and spiritually renewing. To walk in the footsteps 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, Oregon

“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! I expected Rome to be the highlight of my trip--and it many ways, it was, with the audience with the Holy Father, the tombs of St. 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 would definitely do this pilgrimage to the hermitages again. We think of Francis as ministering to lepers and preaching to birds, but in the beauty and silence of those places, his communion with God gave him the strength for his ministry among people. Perhaps in the hermitages it was the birds who preached to him. We cannot help but know Francis better if we spend time in the places where he spent half his life.” – 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 OFSs. 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 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.