

THE PILGRIM'S COMPANION: SHARING THE FRANCISCAN JOURNEY

CONGRATULATIONS!

Celebrating 50 Years of Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs!

September, 2022



Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs got its start in 1972 when three friars began offering guided pilgrimages to prayerfully visit the places of St. Francis and St. Clare.

FIFTY YEARS LATER THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

In celebration and gratitude for Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs, throughout this upcoming year, FPP staff will be sharing special memories from pilgrimage. **You can join in the celebration, too!** Send your pictures or a moment for which you are grateful and we will publish them in the newsletter.

*What you hold,
may you always hold.*

*What you do,
may you always do and
never abandon.*

*But with swift pace,
light step, and
unswerving feet,
so that even your steps stir*

*up no dust,
go forward securely,
joyfully and swiftly,
on the path of
prudent happiness*

This month, our pilgrim leader reflection is from **Sr. Mary Elizabeth Imler, OSF**, who has been on the FPP staff for almost 20 years and has walked pilgrimage with healthcare leadership, veterans, virtually, and with AFCU staff and faculty. Read on as she shares from the heart some of her Franciscan story and gifts of encounter on the pilgrim journey.

There is so much good and grace in these 50 years of journeying together. Please join us as we (re)discover the graced moments along the way.



THANK YOU for your support of Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs!

May we walk this year, and many more, as companions on the journey.

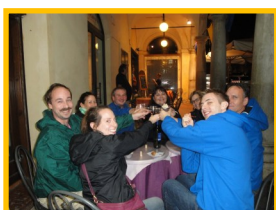
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From: 2nd Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes



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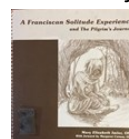
For more information on **Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs**, please call us at 414.427.0570 or visit our [website](#)

About our featured writer:

Sr. Mary Elizabeth Imler, OSF, Vice President for Mission Integration and Ministry at the University of St. Francis, Joliet Illinois, leads pilgrimages, is a retreat leader, [lecturer in Franciscan spirituality](#), and has served in congregational leadership and as sponsor for health care institutions. Sr. Mary Elizabeth, affectionately known as *sme*, is the author of *A Franciscan Solitude Experience* and *The Pilgrim's Journal*. A self-directed retreat using the journal as a guide is offered through the [Portiuncula Center for Prayer](#). She is a Franciscan Sister of the Sacred Heart, a Lover of community, but above all a Lover of Love continually seeking God in the harmony of creation's song and in the silence of contemplation.



"The very heart of the Christian life is being converted into the fullness of that image and likeness of God in which we were first loved into being."



Sr. Mary Elizabeth Imler,
*A Franciscan Solitude Experience and
The Pilgrim's Journal*

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Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present

By Sr. Mary Elizabeth Imler

Jubilare Deo! Fifty years is a pretty long time for a program to keep running strong. The Franciscan Pilgrimage Program celebrates just that and has given praise to God on each adventure. The theme is "Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present."

I wasn't around when this all started but I have had the privilege to be mentored as a pilgrim guide by one of the founders, Fr. Roch Niemier, OFM. He taught me that a pilgrimage is simply a prayer with our feet. And as we say in our Mission Statement "focusing on the spirituality of place in order to nurture an encounter with Jesus Christ," with the One Francis and Clare fell in love. These graced pilgrimage moments take us beyond our comfort zone into spaces not imagined but rather longed for. And as we know so different than a tour, the destiny isn't really known ahead but is felt with certainty when encountered.



It happened for me the summer between my sophomore and junior year in college. All three of my summer jobs dried up. So my sister and I purchased a Eurail pass, a cheap round trip ticket, a minimum of cash and two big jars of peanut butter. We traveled long rides over eight hours, cheaply to sleep on the train waking up to tour the next day in different place. And then one day the train pulled into the little town of Assisi. I didn't know much but the place drew me in like nowhere else. I didn't know what to see but just followed the crowds. It felt like a homecoming for my tired feet and hungry heart. After that trip my decision was to travel to only one country and culture at a time. The choice was Italy. Now after over a mix of twenty pilgrimages I haven't moved away from the original plan. I offer here a few stories where that special feeling from an encounter in Assisi has happened for others.

On a first Assisi pilgrimage, a young pilgrim shared that while sitting before the original San Damiano Cross all his senses felt alive as never before and the feeling stayed with him all week.

From a virtual pilgrimage, one Sister shared how she could actually see the places in her mind's eye while listening to the sources. She laughed during the reenactment of Francis' stripping watching a young novice play Pietro and an elderly classmate his wife. Later at dusk they went outside and walked down a hill guided by the Legend how Clare left the city at the tender age of eighteen only to shiver recalling her own flight some sixty years earlier. And such a delight to actually taste gelato in the evening celebrating her renewal to the life she chose!

A military pilgrimage is very special. I will never forget Fr. Conrad inviting the pilgrims to share the story of their own "scars" after recounting the stigmata of St. Francis atop LaVerna. One said he never spoke about the Purple Heart he received until that moment safe in the company of those who have your back. He understood Francis wanting to hide those wounds.



A tall quiet Vietnam veteran helped us find the site of Francis' battle. We taxied to the structure of Collestrada on the hill and could only say somewhere toward Perugia in the valley was where Francis fought. We all quietly gazed over the plane when suddenly this pilgrim began to walk out into the field slowly at first as if pulled by something. Then quickening his pace until finally he dropped militarily on one knee. We finally caught up with him. I carefully placed my hand on his shoulder as he seemed to be crying. Eventually he spoke, "The battle was here. The earth is still weeping!" He led us in a prayer for peace in that moment.

There have been several leadership pilgrimages with Felician Services, Mayo and others. Each time one or another pilgrim shares how much they learned through the telling of Clare's leadership role. Not knowing much of our CoFounder's contribution, they take away the strong yet gentle virtues of our sister, Lady Clare.

Recently, I have had the opportunity to lead the AFCU pilgrimages. Many participants come skeptical at first for a variety of reasons but led by grace slowly the depth of our Franciscan tradition begins to make sense. Understanding the theology that complements the spirituality and stories they have heard in their institutions helps them become real believers in the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition. Though Francis was not educated in a formal sense, they are deeply touched and grateful for his wisdom and the many scholars from Duns Scotus to Luca Pacioli. There is much the Franciscan tradition offers in *haecceitas, fraternitas, minoritas*, etc.

I trust you can read between the lines of these brief stories for they are "secrets of the great King" and words struggle to translate all that lies deep within. Take a contemplative moment to remember your own special encounter. Recall it with certainty that you have been touched by grace even if you cannot wrap words around your God-grace. Give thanks for this is a time to celebrate what you hold and treasure that which is "spirit and life." Praise God! Jubilate Deo!

Mille grazie to the FPP for such goodness! sme