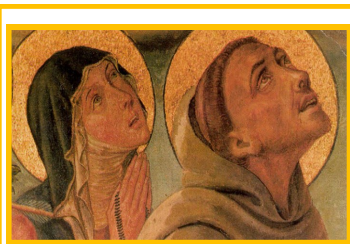


THE PILGRIM'S COMPANION: SHARING THE FRANCISCAN JOURNEY

CONGRATULATIONS!

Celebrating 50 Years of Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs! *Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present*



Who
are You,
O God
and
Who
am I?

-St. Francis

[Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs](#)



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



It is October, the month we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis. This month, many of our Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities (AFCU) and other Franciscan organizations revisit stories of the life and passing of St. Francis of Assisi. On the eve of St. Francis' Feast Day, we celebrate *Transitus*, where we mark with prayer and story his passing from this earthly life. We may celebrate the Feast Day with a Prayer Service or Mass, and several schools even have a blessing of the animals. Some, like my own Cardinal Stritch University, reach out in a day of service to the community. We all continue to add to the Franciscan story by our lived values.

What does it mean to be Franciscan? Pilgrimage helps us to understand. Recently, I met up with Father John Cella, OFM, Director of Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs since 2005. He discussed what pilgrimage means for him and what he sees at the heart of it all. His remarks make up this month's reflection.

Fr. John references Father Roch Niemier, OFM, one of the early founders of FPP. Below is a short excerpt from his book, *In The Footsteps of Francis and Clare*—which is its own beautiful pilgrim journey.

As we move through the coming months, may we have, as Roch writes, "the mindset of the pilgrim... open to discovery, receptive to the movement of God's grace; willing to be changed and to accept the call to holiness."

Peace and Good,

Mary Beth Wisniewski;

Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs, AFCU Outreach

Excerpt from: *In the Footsteps of Francis and Clare* by Father Roch Niemier, OFM

"It seems to me that in certain respects there is not a great difference between the thirteenth and the twenty-first centuries. During the lifetime of Saint Francis there was a burning hunger and desire for things of the spirit, for sound spirituality, for the experience of God. Francis was able to respond to those hungers in a way unmatched, perhaps, by anyone since, and he awakened those hungers in the hearts of others. In our time there is clear evidence of the same kind of desires in peoples' hearts. They are searching for paths that open them to the realization of their spiritual yearnings.

Places have their own power, one that evokes meaning, direction and spirit. When we visit them thoughtfully we can experience the presence of those who have been there before us; we can sense something of their spirit...By choosing to allow ourselves to enter as deeply as possible into the spirituality of a place, we can release the spiritual energy that can draw us deeper into the mystery of God. This is where God touches our lives. This is where we begin to sense the presence of God and some of the hunger within begins to be filled."

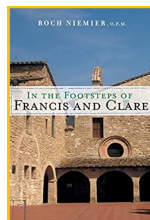


Fr. John Cella



Fr. Roch Niemier

"Perhaps that is what our hearts are seeking: holiness. By holiness, I mean a call to a wholesome, genuine and fully committed life based on gospel values... (with) love and compassion that reaches out to people anywhere. This is the source of joy."
Fr. Roch Niemier



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Recognizing God in Our Midst

By Father John Cella, OFM



For me, pilgrimage starts out with God. *Everything we do is about God.* Each year, at Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs, we have an annual staff meeting. We begin these meetings by giving thanks to God for bringing us here. We recognize the gifts of pilgrimage are not from us but because God brings us and the pilgrims together. That's an awesome feeling and experience.

I find the same experience of God in parish work when I'm out celebrating mass. I look out and I see the people there. I know who's having a hard time with a relationship or finances or health issues. But also I see the good stuff, like people getting excited about a new baby or an upcoming wedding.

And it's God bringing us all together. For me it is a blessing to experience and be part of that and to see God at work.

That is one of the things about the pilgrimages I see happening to the pilgrims. It is very humbling and very edifying—The fact that you know God works through these people and touches them in ways that I could never do. It's not about the staff or me—although the staff is great and can offer wonderful information—but it is God touching their hearts as they touch the hearts of the pilgrims. I find that is the most important part of pilgrimage.

As I look back on the founding of FPP, I joined FPP in 1999. Roch Niemier was the one director that most people talk about. He was the second director and he had a passion for Assisi. He loved Assisi. His assistant John Wojtowicz was also excited about and loved Assisi, and they had a passion for learning about St. Francis and St. Clare. What I remember is they were on fire for the pilgrimage, and they wanted to make sure that it was a good solid program. I was the one who, in one sense, humbly speaking, opened it up to many different areas while trying to maintain the same passion. You continue to see that passion in the staff—they love what they're doing.

I remember the early times when the staff would get together—we began with a staff of 7 or 8 people. In those days, religious men and women, who comprised the staff, didn't have regular jobs. They were pretty much like freelancers so they could do four or five pilgrimages a year. They enjoyed it and had the excitement to learn. I still remember sitting there with them, and they were all very much infused with Franciscan spirituality and new discovery about Francis. Myself, I'm a mathematician and a lawyer. I'm looking at them and saying to myself, 'that's different than me.' I brought to them a certain level of organizational skills and they've maintained their passion. St. Francis said, at the end of his life, "I have done what is mine to do; may Christ teach you what is yours." We each respond personally to the call. I depend on certain people on staff to maintain the passion because I don't have it the same way they do, but I know how to organize and keep Franciscan Pilgrimage Programs going.



I remember one time I went to Assisi. It was in those early days, and I was kind of lost. I remember going to San Damiano. There was an old friar who had a hunchback. He had a wicker basket with some prayer books in it. He was inviting people come in to pray. And for a moment, the old friar looked up at me, and I looked at him, and I saw Francis.

That moment actually goes back to the idea that it's not about Francis, it's not about Clare; it's not about you or me. It's all about God; and this little friar was pointing me to God. That's one of the things I hope our staff does for our Pilgrims. They don't say "look at me, look at Francis," They say, let's use these people to look at God and to appreciate who God is in their life. I think that's the most important thing about pilgrimage. At the end of the day when people come home from pilgrimage it's nice if they know more about St. Francis and St. Clare, and spirituality, and charism but, I hope, more than anything else, they learn a little more about God and their relationship with God. That's the bottom line.

On pilgrimage, the first thing I do when I get to Rome is go to Saint Peter's Basilica and just look out at night time and imagine myself as one of millions who come to pray. The last thing I do when I leave Rome is go back to the same place and spend a moment in prayer thanking God that everything turned out well.

