I had high expectations for what the pilgrimage would mean to me personally, based both upon what I had read and on conversations with past participants. Those expectations were far and away exceeded. The opportunity to visit beautiful and serene areas of Italy (Assisi, LaVerna, and Greccio) with such historic significance, and to spend time in Rome and Vatican City, was wonderful in and of itself. But the way in which we did it – as part of a community of believers led by such extraordinary and knowledgeable clergy – made the experience a transformative one for me.

From the beginning, I felt incredibly blessed to have been selected to go, especially given my short tenure (just under a year) at the university. I set out with the intention to learn as much as I possibly could about St. Francis and St. Clare and (as a non-Catholic) more broadly about the Catholic faith. Beginning each day with mass, held in various historic and notable locations, was a very powerful experience for me. It was both spiritually uplifting and educational, as I gained knowledge about Catholic rituals/practice by being an active participant (“learning by doing” . . . as we encourage our students to do!). The time away, to prayerfully reflect on difficulties I have been facing at home with an aging and ailing parent and associated family dysfunction, was truly what I would call a godsend. It refreshed my soul.

In my day-to-day work, I have opportunity to visit with students individually and in groups, and to weave the idea of “vocation” or “calling” into those discussions. What I have taken away from the pilgrimage experience is a stronger sense of the call on St. Francis and St. Clare’s lives and the way they pursued that call “stone by stone.” I have already talked to my colleagues in the Exchange about how we can share stories of Francis and Clare through various means (our website, in our presentations, in individual meetings) with students from all faith backgrounds, as there is much to be learned by their example. The pilgrimage experience will also make me a more effective advocate for our program and focus in my interactions with employers and community leaders.