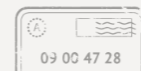

PILGRIM'S TRAVEL COMPANION

August 27 - September 9, 2025

A JOURNEY OF HEART, HEALING, & HOPE
WITH FR. JC MERINO



The Final Day

What does it mean to reach the “final day” of a pilgrimage? On one hand, it carries a sense of completion — the end of walking, the last step taken on holy ground. But spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically, the final day is not about endings, but about **transitions**. The journey outward through roads and shrines turns inward toward the deeper shrine of the heart. What we have seen with our eyes, touched with our hands, prayed with our lips, must now live within us.

Saint Paul, writing to the Colossians, exhorts: *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving”* (Col 2:6-7). A pilgrimage ends, but discipleship continues. The final day means carrying the grace of these days back into the ordinary rhythm of life, so that home itself becomes holy ground. For me, this pilgrimage with Papa has been both heavy and luminous. Heavy because of weakness, waiting, and uncertainty. Luminous because every struggle was met with small resurrections: every breath regained, every step toward healing, every smile, every sign of God’s nearness — even rainbows stretched across the sky. It has changed me by teaching me that love is not about rushing ahead, but about walking at the pace of another, even if that means slowing down, even if that means standing still.

For you, dear fellow pilgrim, perhaps this journey of hope, healing, and heart has also changed you. Perhaps you discovered that faith is not just in the mountaintops, but in the rocky climbs; that prayer is not only in churches, but also in tears, laughter, and silent waiting. Perhaps you realized that hope is stronger when it is shared, healing is deeper when it is communal, and heart is fuller when it beats with compassion. I have learned that a heart, however imperfect - when it beats with love, is stronger than anything (even death).

The Psalm sings today: *"The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love"* (Ps 145:8). This is what it means to come home: to be rooted in the mercy of God, to let His steadfast love reshape our homes, our families, our parishes, our very selves.

And the Gospel today reminds us that Jesus, before sending His disciples out, withdrew to the mountain to pray (Luke 6:12). The final day is our moment of prayer before being sent. It is a day of choosing to return not as tourists with souvenirs, but as pilgrims transformed, bearing the imprint of grace.

So what kind of pilgrim have you and I become? I pray we are pilgrims who know how to walk lighter, because we carry less of ourselves and more of Christ. Pilgrims who walk with open hands, not clinging but offering. Pilgrims who come home not with finality, but with an everlasting beginning — one in hope, one in healing, one in heart.

From Franciscan Footsteps to Eucharistic Mission: *Assisi*

September 8, 2025



Day 13: The Final Day

The dawn in Assisi feels like a blessing – a soft light spilling over hills that have cradled saints and seekers for centuries. This morning, we enter the Basilica of St. Francis, a masterpiece of faith and art where the very walls breathe the spirit of the humble saint who taught the world to find God in creation and poverty. Here, we celebrate Mass, joining the chorus of pilgrims who have knelt in this sacred space, hearts open to transformation.

Our pilgrimage continues to the Church of St. Clare and San Damiano, a quiet sanctuary where the first sisters of the Franciscan order gathered. It was here that St. Clare, with a heart aflame for God, built a community rooted in prayer, simplicity, and radical trust. The stones whisper her courage, her tenderness, and her unwavering love – a legacy alive in every step we take.

Next, we pause at St. Mary of the Angels Basilica, where the humble Porziuncola chapel, cradle of the Franciscan movement, invites us to return always to the heart of the Gospel: mercy and joy.

Then, we will visit the Santuario Della Spogliazione, the resting place of Blessed Carlo Acutis, a modern witness whose devotion to the Eucharist reminds us that holiness is for every age, and that grace flows through the digital as well as the divine.



St. Carlo Acutis

Carlo Acutis (1991–2006) is a modern-day witness to the power of the Eucharist and a shining example of holiness for the digital age.

Though born in London and raised in Milan, Carlo chose Assisi as his spiritual home, and it is where he is now buried and venerated.

Born on May 3, 1991, Carlo was a typical teenager who loved computers, video games, soccer, and animals—but what set him apart was his deep love for Jesus in the Eucharist. He attended daily Mass, prayed the Rosary regularly, and practiced acts of charity, especially toward the poor and marginalized. From a young age, Carlo had a profound sense of God's presence and the call to live a holy life in the modern world.

Carlo used his passion for technology to evangelize, creating a website cataloguing Eucharistic miracles from around the world. His goal was to help people rekindle faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. He once said: "The Eucharist is my highway to heaven." He died of leukemia at age 15 on October 12, 2006, offering his suffering for the Pope and the Church.

Carlo had a special love for St. Francis of Assisi, whose simplicity, poverty, and Eucharistic devotion inspired him. Before his death, Carlo requested to be buried in Assisi, saying: "I want to be buried in a place that reflects my love for God and for the Eucharist."

Carlo is buried in the Shrine of the Spoliation (Santuario della Spogliazione) in Assisi, the very church where St. Francis stripped himself of his worldly garments in an act of radical poverty. His body, displayed in a glass tomb, has become a popular site of pilgrimage, especially for young people drawn to his witness of modern holiness.

Beatified on October 10, 2020, in Assisi, by Pope Francis' decree. He is often called the "Cyber Apostle of the Eucharist" and is the first millennial to be beatified. His example is inspiring a new generation of saints, especially among the youth, to discover the beauty of a personal relationship with Jesus, especially in the Eucharist.

Originally planned for April 27, 2025, during the Jubilee of Adolescents, Carlo's canonization was postponed due to the death of Pope Francis on April 21, 2025, as Church law requires canonizations to be celebrated only by a reigning pope. On June 13, 2025, Pope Leo XIV (the new pontiff) announced that both Carlo Acutis and Pier Giorgio Frassati would be canonized together on September 7, 2025, likely in Rome—marking the first canonization ceremony of his pontificate.

Assisi: A Spiritual Bridge Between Generations

Just as St. Francis re-ignited the Church with a return to Gospel simplicity in the 13th century, Blessed Carlo Acutis is seen as a sign of renewal in the 21st century—proclaiming that holiness is possible, even in sneakers and Wi-Fi. Assisi, the city of saints, now houses both the relics of the Poor Man of God and the Digital Teen Apostle, uniting medieval and modern witnesses in one sacred space.



Tonight, with spirits lifted and hearts full, we journey back to Rome, carrying the light of saints past and present. We gather for dinner, sharing stories, graces and silent prayers, knowing that every ending is but a new beginning.

"To always be closer
to Jesus,
that is my life plan".

~ St. Carlo Acutis ~

Spread
Love

Pilgrim Reflection:

Where has God invited me to build a community of love and faith?

How does the mystery of the Eucharist nourish my own soul's journey?

Tonight, rest deeply. Tomorrow, the world awaits the pilgrim you have become.

Beloved Pilgrims,

As we rise this morning and prepare to return home, our hearts are full—and rightly so. We are not the same people who boarded that first flight. We have walked ancient streets and climbed holy hills; we have stood before tombs that whisper eternity and prayed in chapels drenched in grace. We have broken bread in sacred silence and shared laughter on winding roads. We have carried one another in spirit—through long lines, quiet moments, and unexpected beauty.

This was not just a trip. It was a pilgrimage. A sacred journey of the soul.

We came seeking hope, and we found it—in the eyes of saints who still shine through time, in the tears we didn't expect to cry, and in the prayers we never thought we'd pray. We came with wounds in need of healing, and we were met by a Church that still remembers how to cradle the broken. We came with hearts both hungry and heavy—and we return with hearts awakened and filled.

Now, we go home. Not away from the pilgrimage, but carrying it within us. For the truest pilgrimage continues not in Medjugore, Rome, or San Giovanni Rotondo—but in our kitchens, our workplaces, our families, our parishes. Our mission now is to live as those who have seen and been seen. Let the sacred rhythm of this journey echo in your daily life: Pray more slowly. Walk more gently. Love more freely.

If you feel overwhelmed back home, remember this:

"The Eucharist is my highway to heaven."

– Blessed Carlo Acutis

You are never far from the very Heart that walked with you through Italy.

Thank you for the gift of your presence, your prayers, your openness. Thank you for walking this road together.

May the God of Hope go before you, May the Healer of Hearts dwell within you,
And may the Spirit who binds all things in Love guide you—
Until we meet again on the next pilgrim path.

With all my heart,

Fr. JC Merino

Chaplain, Fellow Pilgrim, Servant on the Journey

BE
EPIC!



Prayer & Blessings for the Journey

Heavenly Father,

Today we turn our faces toward home,
hearts full from the journey You have led us through.
You have walked with us through mountains and valleys,
through holy silence and joyful song.

You have shown us Your face in the saints,
Your presence in the Eucharist,
and Your love in one another.

Thank You for the grace of this pilgrimage—
for every Mass, every mile, every moment of encounter.

Thank You for healing wounds unseen,
for stirring our hearts anew,
and for strengthening our hope.

Now, Lord, bless our return.

Go before us as our Guide,
beside us as our Companion,
and behind us as our Protector.

Keep us safe in travel and faithful in spirit.

Let the light we received on this pilgrimage
shine through our lives at home,
that others may come to know the joy of walking with You.

Mary, Queen of Peace,

St. Francis and St. Clare,

St. Michael and St. Padre Pio,

Blessed Carlo Acutis—

pray for us, as we continue our pilgrimage
until we reach our true home in Heaven.