

The Threads That Connect Us

A background companion for Tim's 50th Birthday Pilgrimage



Kraków · Assisi · Rome

Every place we visit carries extraordinary stories of human courage, ambition, conviction, discovery, and sacrifice. But what makes them enduring is how lives touch other lives—sometimes across continents, sometimes across centuries, often in ways nobody could have foreseen.

Across Kraków, Assisi, and Rome we will meet people who transformed ideas, challenged institutions, preserved memory, or simply cared enough to pass something along. Their stories are magnificent, unsettling, moving—and surprisingly personal. They are not isolated chapters of the past. They are threads that reach into our own world.

For Tim, whose friendship brought us together, and for the connections this journey has yet to create.

DEDICATION

For Tim

On the occasion of your 50th birthday



Happy 50th birthday, Tim!

With gratitude for your friendship, admiration for the life you have built with Michelle and your five children, respect for your business success and your contributions to the broader community, and appreciation for the care with which you have imagined and organized this remarkable journey.

May the days ahead bring discovery, laughter, reflection, and the kind of memories that continue to connect lives long after the trip itself has ended.

Thank you for bringing us together—and for inviting all of us into the next chapter!

For Tim, and for all of us

A companion to the journey Tim has so thoughtfully imagined.

Tim has done the important work: bringing people together and giving us an extraordinary itinerary. These pages are intended to add a little texture to that experience—not to replace his schedule, our local guides, or the discoveries that can only happen on the road.

We have deliberately written for curious travelers who may know little about these places. Expect stories, small historical surprises, some difficult truths, and occasional questions without right answers. The religious sites are part of the history; what they mean spiritually is for each traveler to discover—or not.

Dates and stops follow Tim's itinerary as circulated in October 2026. Details may change; his itinerary remains the practical source of truth. Historical scenes invite imagination, but no invented dialogue is presented as fact. Legends are labeled as legends.

As we travel, look for the threads connecting seemingly distant lives: a teacher and a student, an ordinary worker and a world leader, an artist and an audience, two friends and a movement. Notice belonging, learning, friendship, power, memory, work, and influence nobody intended. The question is not simply what happened here, but who carried its consequences forward—and who might carry ours.

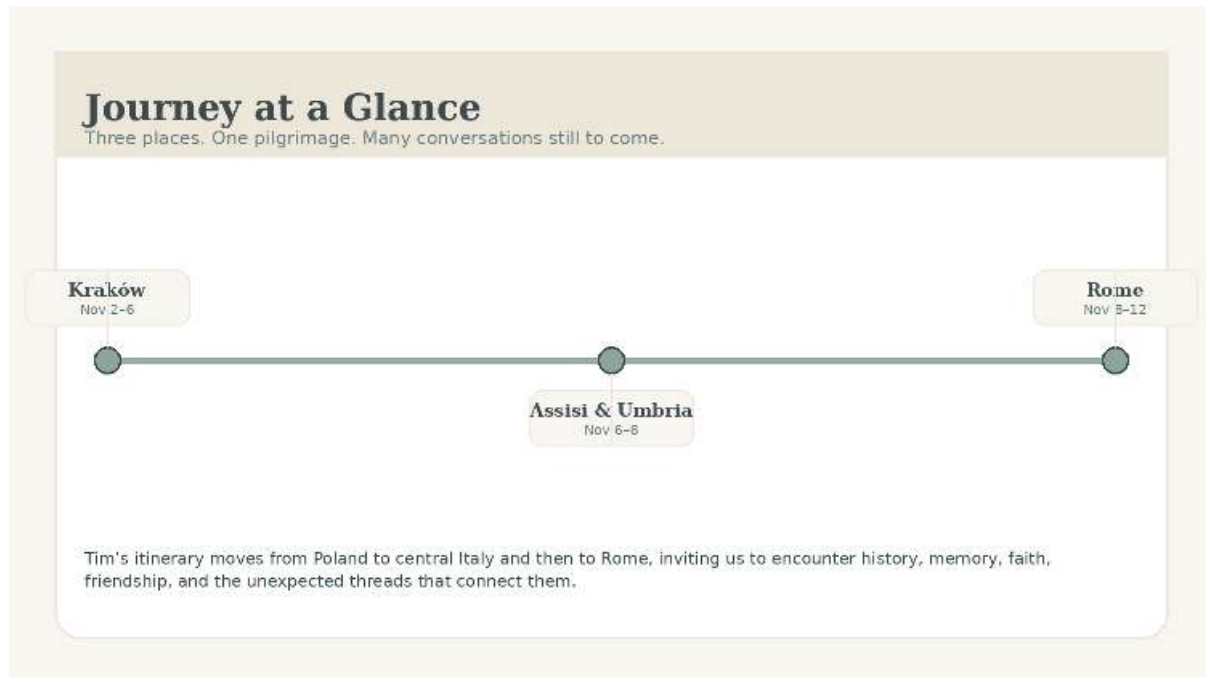
A WAY TO USE THESE PAGES

Read a chapter on the way to a place, return to a story over dinner, or ignore the book entirely when real life is more interesting.

OUR JOURNEY

Three places, countless connections

A loose route through the places on Tim's itinerary.



POLAND

Kraków → Łagiewniki → Podhale and the Tatra foothills → Auschwitz-Birkenau and Harmęże. A kingdom, a university, a proud mountain culture, two intertwined 20th-century lives, and a day dedicated to memory.

ASSISI & UMBRIA | November 6–8

Assisi → Bevagna → the Umbrian vineyards near Spello. The medieval lives of Francis and Clare meet a contemporary teenager, extraordinary frescoes, and an ancient landscape shaped by growers and artisans.

ROME | November 8–12

St. Peter's → the great basilicas → Forum and Colosseum → San Clemente → catacombs and St. Paul Outside the Walls. A city where one century is often literally built upon another.

One chronological peculiarity worth enjoying: our journey begins in medieval streets, goes back toward classical antiquity, and keeps arriving in the present.

WATCH THE THREADS

Recurring themes: belonging · learning · friendship · power · memory · work · unexpected influence.

A country whose story reaches back much farther

Before there was a Polish state, there were communities, trading routes, forests, rivers, and peoples whose lives made this land.



Poland at a glance.

Kraków and Wawel — illustrative rendering inspired by the historic cityscape.

Long before Poland appears in written accounts as a political state, its territories were inhabited over millennia by successive prehistoric communities. In antiquity, peoples associated with the Przeworsk and Wielbark archaeological cultures lived in parts of today's Poland, amid wider exchanges involving Germanic, Celtic, Baltic, and later Slavic populations. Archaeology tells a rich story of settlement and movement, but these cultures should not be simplistically equated with modern national identities.

From the early Middle Ages, West Slavic communities consolidated regional strongholds and networks. In 966 Duke Mieszko I accepted Christianity, tying an emerging Polish polity more closely to Latin Christendom. Bolesław the Brave was crowned king in 1025. Centuries later, the union with Lithuania developed into one of Europe's great political commonwealths, with an elective monarchy dominated by nobles.

Then came an extraordinary rupture. In 1795, after successive partitions by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, Poland disappeared from the political map. Imagine a family looking out at the same fields and neighbors, while the country to which they belonged had ceased to exist as a sovereign state. For 123 years Polish identity survived without independent Polish government.

The loss of statehood did not mean the end of Polish culture. Writers, families, teachers, musicians, and communities helped sustain it. Independence returned in November 1918 amid the wreckage of World War I. The challenge of rebuilding a nation from territories formerly governed by three empires was immense.

A nation, it turns out, can be more than the lines drawn around it on a map.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

If your children could inherit only a few things about your family or community, what would you most want them to carry forward?

Independence, invasion, and the long road to 1989

In the lifetime of a grandparent, the country was remade more than once.

The restored Polish republic lasted barely two decades before Nazi Germany invaded on September 1, 1939. The Soviet Union invaded from the east on September 17. Occupation brought mass murder, forced labor, cultural destruction, and the Holocaust. About three million Polish Jews were murdered, alongside millions of non-Jewish Polish citizens who died during the war and under occupation. Jews had been part of Polish society for centuries; their near-destruction tore apart communities whose histories had long been entwined.

Victory over Nazi Germany in 1945 did not bring full freedom. Poland remained in the Soviet sphere, ruled by a communist government. In 1980, striking workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk—among them electrician Lech Wałęsa—built the independent Solidarity union. Their insistence on representation and dignity helped create a movement far bigger than a workplace dispute.



Negotiations and partially free elections in 1989 opened the way toward democratic government. The outcome depended on thousands of people and institutions, not on any single hero.

An American connection

Tadeusz Kościuszko, a Polish military engineer, joined the American Revolution and designed defenses at West Point when it was a strategic Hudson River fortress—not yet the academy many Americans know today. Holding that bend in the river helped protect a vital corridor from British control. The United States Military Academy was established there in 1802. Kościuszko later led an uprising in Poland in 1794. His remarkable transatlantic life connected two struggles for self-government; in his American will he expressed a wish that assets be used to free and educate enslaved people, although the plan was never carried out.

A DATE WE WILL SHARE

November 11 is Polish Independence Day. We will be in Rome that day.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Who are the people—famous or unknown—who made it possible for us to live as we do?

A medieval city with a long memory

Enter the square as a merchant might have done in the late 1400s.



Picture carts rolling into Kraków's vast market square. Cloth, salt, and other goods change hands; bells punctuate the day; strangers negotiate in different languages. The market square was laid out following the city's charter of 1257, and the Cloth Hall still recalls the commercial energy that made the city rich.

On Wawel Hill, rulers conducted affairs of state and worshiped in the cathedral where Polish monarchs were crowned and buried. Nearby, the Jewish community of Kazimierz developed its own vibrant religious and cultural institutions. Kraków was never one single story: it was royal court, commercial crossroads, intellectual center, and meeting place of faiths.

UNESCO recognized the historic center in 1978, among the very first World Heritage inscriptions. Remarkably, the old street plan still makes historical sense underfoot. Here it is easier than in many cities to imagine the centuries overlapping.

Keep an ear open

Every hour a trumpeter sounds the *hejnał* from St. Mary's Basilica. The abruptly unfinished tune is explained by a much-loved story of a medieval guard shot while warning the city of an attack. Enjoy the legend—but distinguish it from documented history.

LOOK CLOSER

At Wawel, compare political and religious power on the same hill. In the square, imagine the noisy work of trade rather than a postcard scene.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Which familiar places in our own lives quietly carry generations of other people's stories?

The student who moved the Earth

In 1491 an 18-year-old arrived to study the heavens.



Nicolaus Copernicus enrolled at Kraków's university with his brother Andreas. Founded in 1364, the institution had become known for mathematics and astronomy. Its scholars wrestled with planetary models inherited from antiquity, enriched by generations of scholars across Europe and the Islamic world. Among the learned figures associated with this environment were astronomers Albert Brudzewski and Jan of Głogów.

Ordinary experience seems decisive: stand still and watch the Sun cross the sky. Copernicus proposed instead that Earth rotates and moves around the Sun. His 1543 work, dedicated to Pope Paul III, appeared with an unsigned prefatory note by theologian Andreas Osiander describing heliocentrism as a calculating hypothesis rather than necessarily physical truth. Copernicus was not forced by the Church to recant; the famous confrontation over heliocentrism belonged more directly to Galileo's seventeenth-century experience in Rome, another city on our route. Across generations, the question became larger than astronomy: what happens when evidence challenges an inherited picture of the cosmos?

Copernicus did not complete a degree at Kraków. Evidently a university can give a student tools that matter greatly, even if the final diploma comes from somewhere else—or never arrives.

One delicious irony: the university that helped form Copernicus did not immediately adopt his revolutionary model. Institutions sometimes educate the people who will later challenge their assumptions.

LOOK CLOSER

If we pass the Collegium Maius, picture scholarly life before printed textbooks were abundant: lectures, copied manuscripts, instruments, and arguments over what the sky was doing.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Who has helped us question something we once considered obvious?

A city still making its future

Kraków is not a museum that happens to have residents.



Kraków's medieval facades are not the walls of a museum. Today students at Jagiellonian University and other institutions share its streets with researchers, software developers, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, musicians, and pilgrims. Technology firms and business-services employers link the city to international networks; laboratories and universities connect it to new knowledge. Its next chapter is being written in classrooms, workplaces, and neighborhoods as surely as its earlier chapters were written in the royal court.

That growth creates recognizable choices: how to provide housing, improve mobility and air quality, manage tourism, and protect the life of neighborhoods. The city's history is a resource, but its residents are not historical exhibits. Kraków still has difficult decisions to make about its future.

Look across the centuries and the thread is unmistakable: a city that once brought merchants and astronomers together now draws engineers, researchers, and international teams. Questions change, but curiosity and human exchange remain central.

A small local surprise

Kraków also claims a dragon. In the legendary tale, the beast below Wawel Hill is defeated not by a heroic knight but by a clever trick involving a sheep stuffed with sulfur. The dragon statue near the castle even breathes fire. Some cities build their identity around kings; Kraków wisely makes room for a dragon too.

AT THE TABLE

Try pierogi, of course. And listen for stories about kremówka—cream cake associated with the young Karol Wojtyła. Food is often the most approachable family archive.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What parts of our past strengthen our ability to imagine the future?

Two Polish lives that unexpectedly converged

One was a little-known nun; the other a factory worker who became pope.



Faustina Kowalska entered religious life with limited formal schooling. She worked in ordinary convent roles and recorded spiritual experiences in a diary. She died of tuberculosis in Kraków in 1938 at age 33. Her message, centered on mercy, might easily have remained known mainly to her community.

Karol Wojtyła came to Kraków to study in 1938. War interrupted the life he might have expected. Under Nazi occupation he worked in a quarry and at the Solvay chemical factory, while continuing clandestine religious studies and participating in underground Polish theater. Later as Archbishop of Kraków, he supported the investigation of Faustina's life and writings.

Wojtyła did not know Faustina personally. But while serving in Kraków he came to know her religious legacy and the debate surrounding her diary through clergy, the local community, and later diocesan inquiries. The Catholic Church restricted promotion of certain forms of the devotion in 1959; the restriction was lifted in 1978. As pope, John Paul II canonized Faustina in 2000. Her story traveled not by a direct handshake between two famous people, but through notes, witnesses, interpreters, and institutions.

This is how influence frequently works: one person leaves something behind; others question it, preserve it, interpret it, or bring it to a new audience.

LOOK CLOSER

The Divine Mercy image at Łagiewniki is the later, widely reproduced version by Adolf Hyła, not the first painted image made in Vilnius in 1934.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Which people have quietly shaped our lives—and whose lives might we be influencing without realizing it?

A life interrupted—and redirected

Before the pontiff, there was a student who loved the theater.



By 1941 Karol Wojtyła had lost his mother, brother, and father. Working during wartime occupation, he was not living the life a promising university student might have imagined. His participation in the Rhapsodic Theatre was also more than recreation: Polish language and culture were being deliberately suppressed.

He became a priest in 1946, a bishop in 1958, Archbishop of Kraków in 1964, and pope in 1978. His public influence extended far beyond religious ceremony. His 1979 return to Poland helped embolden a society increasingly prepared to organize in public, while Solidarity and many other forces challenged communist rule. His teaching helped reshape global Catholic life, and his unusually visible outreach across religions and countries gave the papacy a more international presence. He contributed to the changing moral and political climate of the Cold War; credit for its end belongs to many people and developments, not to one pope.

In Kraków, people remember the informal encounters at the window of the Archbishop's Palace, where he spoke to crowds below. In Rome in 1981 he survived an assassination attempt; the cassock from that day is preserved at the shrine we plan to visit.

After the 1981 assassination attempt, John Paul II visited his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Ağca, in prison in 1983 and spoke with him privately. He publicly offered forgiveness. What else did the conversation seek? Some writers have suggested that the pope hoped to understand whether others were behind the attack, but the private exchange has never established a definitive answer. Was this an encounter about mercy, a search for answers—or both? The record leaves room for readers to consider the question without treating speculation as fact.

A city window and a damaged garment tell more about the human being than a list of offices ever could.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

At the Archbishop's Palace, find the famous window. At the shrine, consider the distance from the factory worker's life to the global figure whose clothes became a historical object.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

When have unforeseen circumstances changed the direction of our lives—and who helped us navigate them?

Highlanders with a strong sense of themselves



Podhale and the Tatra foothills

South of Kraków, the mountains shape more than the skyline.

The Podhale region sits beneath the Tatra Mountains, home to the Górale highlanders. Their culture is known for distinctive music, clothing, woodwork, pastoral traditions, and a strong regional identity. For centuries, mountain life demanded practical knowledge of weather, animals, seasons, and neighbors. Self-reliance mattered; so did cooperation.

The wooden architecture associated with the Zakopane region uses bold rooflines and carved decoration. Folk costumes are not simply tourist uniforms; they can mark local belonging, celebrations, and inherited craft. Highlander music often features powerful string playing and brisk rhythms that sound quite unlike the polite soundtrack of a museum.

Our day includes time with local hosts, a cooking workshop, dancing, and thermal waters in Szaflary. It offers an encounter with contemporary people carrying old traditions into new settings—not a reenactment of a vanished culture.

Beneath the Szaflary area lies a different kind of inheritance: geothermal water. Rain and snowmelt can circulate deep underground through permeable rock, warm under the region's geothermal gradient, and return through drilled wells. The nearby Podhale basin is known for geothermal resources associated with deeply circulating waters in sedimentary and carbonate rocks. The steaming pools are not fed by volcanic magma; they are a very tangible encounter with the Earth's slow underground processes.

The food tells stories, too

Pierogi are stuffed dumplings with many regional and family variations. Moskole are griddle-cooked potato flatbreads associated with Podhale. Ask our hosts not just how they make them, but who taught them. Recipes are often genealogies disguised as lunch.

A USEFUL QUESTION FOR OUR HOSTS

Which tradition did you love as a child, and which one are you most determined to pass on?

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What skill, recipe, or habit did we inherit from someone—and have we passed it along?

A place that resists easy words

This chapter intentionally changes the tone.

Auschwitz was established by Nazi Germany in occupied Poland in 1940, initially incarcerating mainly Polish political prisoners. It expanded into a vast complex of concentration camps, forced labor sites, and killing facilities. Auschwitz II-Birkenau became a major center of the Nazi genocide of European Jews.

The Nazi concentration-camp system existed before the policy of systematic extermination of Europe's Jews took its most lethal form. Auschwitz opened in 1940 as a concentration camp in German-occupied Poland; its functions later expanded to forced labor and industrialized murder. The Nazis coordinated what they called the "Final Solution," the genocidal project to murder European Jews. Auschwitz II-Birkenau became one of its principal killing centers. This history is not an anonymous force of nature: governments, officials, transport systems, guards, and collaborators made the machinery possible.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum estimates that approximately 1.1 million people were murdered at Auschwitz: around one million Jews, approximately 70,000–75,000 non-Jewish Poles, 21,000 Roma and Sinti, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and thousands of others. These are people, not merely statistics: each had a name, relationships, routines, unfinished plans, and a life beyond the circumstances of their death.

We should also remember that Auschwitz was operated by Nazi Germany, not by Poland as a nation. Its location in occupied Poland has sometimes obscured that essential distinction.

The exhibits and preserved structures exist because survivors, witnesses, historians, and custodians worked to protect evidence. Their work allows visitors to encounter historical reality, not simply an abstract warning.

There are places where remembering is a moral responsibility. Preservation cannot guarantee that atrocities will never recur, but confronting the evidence makes denial and indifference harder. To remember is to acknowledge individual human lives—and to take seriously the consequences of allowing people to be systematically stripped of rights and humanity.

BEFORE ENTERING

Follow the Memorial guide's instructions. Give yourself permission to be quiet. Photographs, where permitted, should never turn the suffering of victims into scenery.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What responsibilities do we have when we inherit memories of events we did not witness?

The scale of what was done here



Birkenau entrance

Understanding the system must never eclipse the people.

At Birkenau, distance becomes part of the experience: the railway tracks, rows of barracks, ruins of gas chambers, and the sheer size of the site. Much of the machinery of murder was designed around the removal of individual choice and identity. People were deported from many countries; families could be separated upon arrival and many victims were killed without ever being registered as prisoners.

Why build major killing facilities in occupied Poland rather than within Germany's prewar borders? Nazi Germany controlled the territory, large Jewish populations lived in or were deported to Eastern Europe, and railway networks enabled deportations from across the continent. The regime also established killing centers at other occupied Polish locations. These were German Nazi camps on occupied Polish soil—not "Polish camps." The geography reflects occupation, logistics, and genocidal policy, not Polish national authorship.

Numbers help establish the historical scale but also threaten to overwhelm our capacity to imagine a single life. An abandoned shoe, a name on a document, or an account preserved by a survivor may make the reality more comprehensible than a large figure.

It is important to resist uncomplicated lessons that make the site serve our personal growth. The victims did not suffer so that future visitors could become better versions of themselves. We come to learn, to remember, and to face evidence of choices made by perpetrators, bystanders, resisters, and those trying to survive.

Careful attention is itself a form of respect.

HISTORICAL DISTINCTION

Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau were parts of one larger complex, but they had different structures and roles. Our day includes both.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

How do we keep an individual human life visible when history presents us with numbers beyond comprehension?

Prisoner 432 draws what words could not hold

Marian Kołodziej returned to memory through art.



Marian Kołodziej was among the first Polish prisoners transported to Auschwitz in June 1940. His camp number was 432. He survived and became a successful theater and film set designer, creating worlds for audiences rather than recounting his own ordeal.

For nearly fifty years he said little about his experience. Following a serious stroke in 1992, he began producing intricate drawings that confronted memories of the camp. The work grew into an installation known as *Images from Memory: Labyrinths*, now displayed in Harmęże. The Auschwitz Memorial describes his work as a deeply personal reckoning with the past.

There is a striking human connection here: a person who spent his professional life helping stories appear onstage eventually turned his craft toward a story he had long been unable to tell. The drawings are not illustrations of a textbook. They are a survivor's testimony in a language he found possible.

A viewer should resist treating the images merely as technical feats. They are the result of one person struggling to communicate what he had witnessed.

At the end of these difficult pages, recall the warning of German pastor Martin Niemöller, who later reflected on the danger of keeping silent as the Nazis targeted one group after another. Versions of his "First they came..." statement differ, but its moral challenge remains: when persecution spreads and witnesses choose silence, who will be left to speak?

LOOK CLOSELY

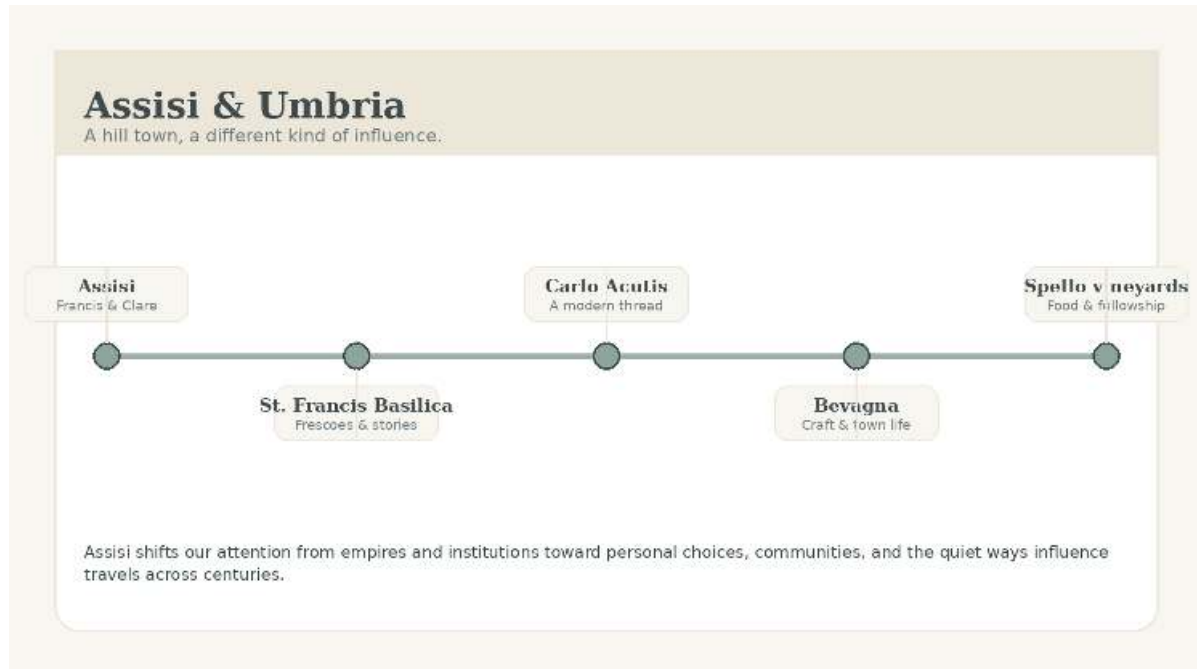
Notice the accumulation of faces and figures, and the physical density of the drawings. The exhibition does not ask for a quick glance.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What do we owe to people who take on the difficult work of preserving testimony for generations they will never meet?

A hill town, a different kind of influence

November 6–8: from the landscape of medieval Italy to the lives of two remarkable young people.



Assisi and Umbria at a glance.



Assisi and the Basilica of St. Francis

The road from Rome into Umbria crosses a landscape shaped by many older societies. Ancient Umbrian peoples lived here before Rome extended its control; the Romans left roads, walls, temples, and civic structures. Assisi itself—Roman Asisium—developed beneath what would become a medieval town of steep streets, churches, merchants, and rival political loyalties. Its visible beauty carries centuries of rebuilding rather than one frozen medieval moment.

Medieval Assisi grew within a world of independent communes, competing noble families, trade, and religious ferment. The hills that now appear peaceful witnessed alliances and conflict, prosperity and insecurity. The Francis and Clare stories emerged not in an isolated devotional setting, but in a turbulent society where wealth, status, poverty, and authority were actively contested.

Here the story turns from states and political power toward personal choices. Francis was born to a prosperous merchant family around 1181 or 1182. Clare came from a noble family. Both stepped away from expected paths and became central to a movement that spread far beyond their home town.

It would be easy to write this as a tale of two lone visionaries. But what made their actions consequential was a growing circle of companions, supporters, donors, critics, artisans, patrons, and successors. Even radical simplicity needed a network of relationships to travel.

Centuries later, the town became associated with Carlo Acutis, a teenager raised in the age of websites and smartphones. We will meet a surprising conversation between the medieval and digital worlds.

A LANDSCAPE TO NOTICE

The same countryside offered livelihood to farmers, merchants, monasteries, and artists. Look for how towns, fields, and roads depend upon one another.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

How much of a person's influence comes from individual conviction—and how much from the people who gather around it?

The merchant's son who changed direction

Not a flawless figure from stained glass, but a young man who made an expensive choice.



As the son of a prosperous cloth merchant, Francis had reason to expect a comfortable future. Tradition describes youthful ambition, extravagant spending, military adventure, imprisonment during conflict with Perugia, and a gradual transformation. Accounts written by followers can blend memory, reverence, and symbolism, so particular episodes deserve historical caution.

One celebrated episode places Francis before a crucifix at San Damiano, where he believed he was being called to repair the church. He first understood the task literally: rebuild a damaged chapel. Over time it came to signify a broader renewal of religious life.

At the small chapel called the Porziuncola, inside today's great Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, his growing community took shape. Eventually Francis's movement influenced religious practice, social imagination, literature, and art across Europe.

What makes him interesting is not merely that he abandoned wealth. His choice created relationships—with companions, with people living in poverty, and with institutions that were challenged by his example yet later helped spread it.

The Franciscan movement remains a worldwide reality today. Friars, sisters, lay Franciscans, and associated organizations serve in education, pastoral work, health, poverty relief, and care for creation. They do not all live or work in identical ways, but they show how one medieval decision became a many-century network of institutions and relationships. Francis could hardly have foreseen the variety of lives his example would touch.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

At St. Mary of the Angels, pay attention to the contrast: a vast basilica built around one tiny chapel. At San Damiano, imagine the physical work of repair before the larger meaning became clear.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What modest action have we taken—or might we take—that could become the beginning of something larger?

The woman who would not relinquish her vision

The story of Assisi cannot be told as Francis's story alone.



Clare of Assisi came from a prominent family. Inspired by Francis, she left a socially expected path in 1212 and entered a form of religious life centered on poverty and community. With other women she developed a community at San Damiano.

For years Clare defended a demanding ideal of corporate poverty. She negotiated with church authorities to protect the community's distinctive way of life. In 1253, shortly before her death, papal approval was given to her Rule—an extraordinary accomplishment by a woman in a period when formal religious structures were overwhelmingly governed by men.

Clare's influence emerged through leadership, persistence, and relationships among women who chose a shared life. Her story also reminds us to notice who is absent from simplified historical accounts. When a movement becomes famous, whose contributions are less often named?

Clare's community also endures. The Poor Clares, a contemplative order of women, live in monasteries across the world, continuing a tradition of prayer, shared discipline, and simplicity. Clare should not be retroactively labeled with a modern political identity she never claimed. Yet the historical fact is striking: a woman in thirteenth-century Italy persisted in negotiating her community's way of life and left a rule and institutional example that outlived her by centuries.

At the Basilica of St. Clare, look beyond the monument toward the practical challenge of sustaining a community through decades of daily decisions.

AN OVERLOOKED CONNECTION

Francis and Clare did not found identical institutions. Their communities developed in dialogue, with different structures and constraints.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Who has held a community or institution true to its purpose through patient, unglamorous work?

How pictures carried stories before mass literacy



Francis renouncing his father's wealth

The frescoes of Assisi are about art—and communication.

At the Basilica of St. Francis, image cycles helped people encounter sacred stories regardless of their ability to read a book. Consider the famous fresco traditionally attributed to Giotto showing Francis renouncing his father's possessions. Look at his furious father, the young man standing stripped of ordinary protection, and the bishop covering him with a cloak. The scene makes a conflict over money, status, family, and conviction visible in a single moment. Scholars debate the precise authorship of the cycle; the power of its storytelling is unmistakable.

The exact attribution of some scenes, especially those traditionally assigned to Giotto, continues to be debated by art historians. That uncertainty adds interest rather than diminishing the achievement. Art is made through workshops, assistants, techniques, and traditions; our habit of assigning a masterpiece to one genius can hide the collaboration behind it.

Literacy in medieval Italy varied enormously by time, place, social class, and gender; there is no responsible single percentage for everyone in Assisi. For many visitors, pictures carried narratives that written pages could not. They still do: centuries later, we can stand before a fresco and read its emotions before we can read a word of Latin.

The buildings themselves became a language: colored surfaces, stone, scale, and sequences of images helped visitors understand a story with their bodies as they moved through space.

One legacy of Francis is that his life helped supply artists with a new range of vividly human subjects—encounters, gestures, tears, animals, and everyday moments.

LOOK CLOSER

Watch for expressive faces, meaningful hand gestures, and the use of buildings to organize a scene. Ask yourself: what would a medieval visitor know immediately that we need a guide to explain?

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What stories are we helping preserve today—and in what form will future generations encounter them?

A teenager and the strange speed of modern influence

The web is literal this time.

Carlo Acutis was born in London in 1991 and grew up in Milan. He enjoyed computers and used his technical skills to build an online catalog of accounts of Eucharistic miracles. He died of leukemia in 2006, only fifteen years old. His remains are in Assisi, which became closely associated with his story.

Picture Carlo in Milan, a teenager at a computer, collecting reports that had circulated in monasteries, paintings, local traditions, and testimony across centuries. In Lanciano, Catholic tradition tells of a monk confronting doubt during Mass; in Bolsena, an account describes blood appearing on a consecrated host and later inspiring a famous Vatican fresco. Siena preserves an account of consecrated hosts stolen in 1730 and recovered. These are religious claims and treasured traditions, not supernatural events established by historical or scientific proof.

Carlo was canonized in September 2025. His story invites a fascinating comparison with medieval Assisi: Francis's influence traveled through companions and manuscripts over generations; Carlo's material could cross borders electronically almost instantly. Technology changed the speed and reach. The underlying mechanism—one person's attention inspiring someone else's—remained recognizable.

Carlo died in 2006, but the stories did not stop being gathered or retold. In Legnica, Poland, a reported incident involving a consecrated host in 2013 was investigated, and the local bishop authorized veneration in 2016. It is a vivid posthumous example of an ongoing tradition, not a claim that Carlo personally catalogued it or that it is conclusively the very latest account. Medieval frescoes carried stories on walls; a teenager used the web to bring similar stories to a global audience. How might our own technology carry what matters to us beyond our lifetimes?

We will hear about Carlo from Monsignor Anthony Figueiredo, whom Tim has arranged for the group to meet.

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION

The Catholic Church's interpretation of Carlo's life belongs to its religious tradition. The facts of his age, technical work, and early death can also be understood as an unusually modern human story.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What can we create or share today that may become useful to people we will never know?

At the table, another kind of history

Bevagna, vineyards, and a story told through craft.



After churches and frescoes, the day takes us through the countryside to Bevagna and wineries near Spello. This is more than a pleasant interlude. Agriculture, winemaking, and the rhythms of shared meals are among the longest-running forms of cultural transmission.

Umbria is known for olive oil, lentils, cured meats, truffles, and wines including reds made from Sagrantino around Montefalco. The details of what ends up in a glass depend on place, soil, the weather of a particular year, and a chain of growers and winemakers.

Think about a simple glass of wine. Somewhere behind it are the decisions of people who planted vines they might never see at maturity, taught apprentices, kept records, invested in equipment, worried about frost, and invited others to their table. The result is a landscape of relationships as much as a beverage.

Tim's itinerary includes Bevagna, Cantina Dionigi, and dinner with paired wines at Cantina Tini. This is precisely the sort of evening when the best historical question may be asked of the person pouring the wine.

ASK A LOCAL

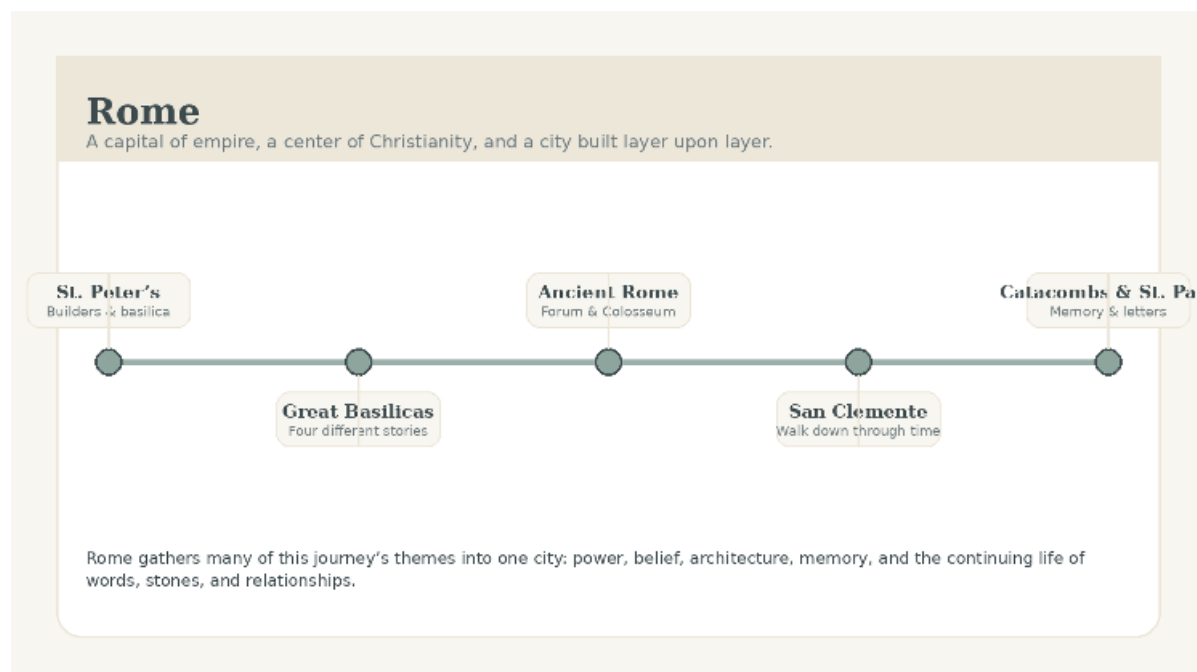
What has changed most in your family's work over one generation—and what has not?

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Which of our happiest memories began around a table, and who made those gatherings possible?

Rome—the city that helped shape the world

An empire’s capital, a center of Christianity, and a place whose ideas still inhabit our lives.



Rome at a glance.

For centuries, Rome stood at the center of an empire spanning Europe, North Africa, and parts of Asia. Alongside Greece, it supplied major elements of the intellectual and institutional inheritance often called Western civilization—though that inheritance also owes much to many other cultures. Modern visitors walk past ruins, but the more surprising legacy is all around us in government, law, language, architecture, and religion.

Consider three living legacies. First, the Roman Republic developed offices, a Senate, civic duties, and debates about divided power later studied by modern constitution-makers; it was not an inclusive modern democracy. Second, Rome governed enormous distances through provinces, taxation, roads, courts, and communications—administrative problems states still confront. Third, Roman legal ideas about property, obligations, inheritance, and citizenship helped shape later civil-law traditions. The specifics changed, but the questions persist.

Yet Rome also demonstrates that a city’s meaning can change even when the stone remains. A building once devoted to one ritual can become a church; columns are reused; roads remain useful; ruins become models for artists.

Our itinerary moves between ancient Rome, the first Christian communities, medieval and Renaissance art, and contemporary religious life. Keep asking what each generation preserved, altered, or misunderstood about the one before.

A HELPFUL PERSPECTIVE

“Ancient Rome” covers many centuries. Julius Caesar, the Colosseum, and the first Christian basilicas belong to different chapters, not one simultaneous scene.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What have we inherited that was created for a purpose very different from the one it serves today?

The building and the builders

A grand basilica is the result of centuries—and thousands of hands.



The present St. Peter's Basilica rose largely between the 1500s and 1600s on the site of an earlier church traditionally associated with the burial place of the Apostle Peter. Its scale can make it seem as though one mind created it. In reality, Bramante, Michelangelo, Maderno, Bernini, patrons, stonecutters, laborers, engineers, and innumerable others shaped the building through changing plans and generations of work.

Michelangelo took charge of the design at an advanced age and profoundly shaped the dome. Gian Lorenzo Bernini later designed the great elliptical colonnades of St. Peter's Square, visually gathering visitors toward the basilica. The building is a monument both to religious aspiration and to the extraordinary coordination of human skill.

Construction began in 1506, before Martin Luther's challenge to the Church. Financing the enormous project was one factor behind indulgence-preaching campaigns to which Luther objected in 1517. The Reformation had numerous theological, institutional, and political causes; St. Peter's did not single-handedly cause it. Still, the irony is extraordinary: raising funds for a basilica meant to embody spiritual continuity became entangled in a rupture that reshaped European Christianity. Even the grandest acts can produce consequences their authors did not anticipate.

From the dome, if weather and access allow, look across the modern city. The view reminds us that the Vatican is not an isolated world; it sits inside a living metropolis continually reshaped by people with ordinary needs.

No one present at the earliest Christian gatherings could have pictured this complex architectural and historical legacy.

LOOK CLOSER

Find the differences between Michelangelo's immense dome, Maderno's long facade, and Bernini's theatrical square. They represent different people solving different problems.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Which achievements in our own lives look individual from the outside but were really made possible by many others?

Four churches, four different stories

The word “basilica” is older than the Christian buildings we visit.



The four major papal basilicas tell four distinct stories. St. Peter's links the apostle traditionally buried here with Renaissance vision, Michelangelo's dome, papal authority, and the costly rebuilding whose financing became entangled in Reformation history. St. John Lateran is Rome's actual cathedral, seat of the pope as bishop of Rome; its Constantinian origins recall Christianity's move from periods of persecution toward imperial favor.

St. Mary Major carries the centuries-long growth of devotion to Mary. Its fifth-century mosaics make early Christian stories visible, linking us to what we saw in the painted narratives of Assisi. St. Paul Outside the Walls recalls the traveler and letter-writer whose missions helped Christianity reach people beyond its earliest Jewish communities and across the Mediterranean.

Together, these buildings trace a remarkable transformation: a movement arising in a province of the Roman Empire eventually established a far-reaching institutional center in the empire's former capital. The stone is impressive; the changes in human relationships and beliefs are greater still.

Look for older pieces of stone and mosaic embedded in later structures. Reuse is not always evidence of neglect; sometimes it is how a civilization stays in conversation with its past.

A USEFUL CORRECTION

St. Peter's is not Rome's cathedral. St. John Lateran is.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What traditions do we honor because we understand them—and which ones do we follow simply because they were handed down?

A day among ambition, engineering, and spectacle



Roman Forum and Colosseum

Walk into the Forum as if you had an errand to run.

Imagine a Roman citizen coming to the Forum to settle a dispute, hear news, conduct business, or watch a political procession. What looks today like a scatter of columns once functioned as the busy center of public life. Roman power was not an abstraction: it required roads, taxation, law, food supplies, labor, and a system for governing a sprawling population.

The Colosseum, inaugurated in 80 CE, was a brilliant engineering achievement—and the stage for public combat, animal hunts, and violence. The Roman satirist Juvenal later mocked a populace he believed had traded serious civic concern for “panem et circenses”—bread and circuses. He was criticizing public disengagement, not issuing an emperor’s command. Panem et circenses. Have you seen anything like this lately?

At the Circus Maximus, crowds watched chariot racing at a scale that makes modern sports rivalries feel familiar. Human appetites for competition, shared identity, and drama are not new.

At the height of its power, imagining the end of Roman dominance could have seemed almost impossible. Yet the western imperial order fragmented over centuries, with 476 CE often used as a symbolic endpoint; the eastern Roman Empire continued for nearly a thousand years afterward. Rome’s political form changed, but many of its institutions and ideas endured. Which things in our world seem so permanent that we struggle to imagine them changing?

LOOK CLOSER

At the Forum, try assigning a purpose to each ruin—government, commerce, commemoration, worship—rather than seeing one undifferentiated pile of antiquity.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

How do we judge achievements that combine real ingenuity with troubling human costs?

Walk down through time

This church offers perhaps the clearest metaphor for Rome.



Enter the present Basilica of San Clemente, whose upper church dates mainly from the 12th century. It is beautiful enough to stand on its own, with mosaics and a floor of intricate stonework. But below it is a fourth-century church. Descend further and you reach remains of a first-century Roman urban landscape, including a space later used for worship of Mithras.

The levels were not assembled for modern tourists. People built, repurposed, damaged, repaired, and covered earlier structures as the city changed. Subsequent excavators made the layers visible again. Walking downward is like moving backward through a family album whose pages were once glued together.

This is not only a story of buried bricks. The Slavic missionary Cyril, associated with the development of a written Slavic literary tradition, died in Rome in 869 and was buried at San Clemente. An eleventh-century fresco in the lower basilica, depicting an episode involving St. Clement and Sisinnius, preserves important early Italian vernacular writing. In the nineteenth century, Irish Dominican Joseph Mullooly helped recover the older church. Mission, language, rediscovery: different centuries speak to one another in the same rooms.

A place can outlive its original purpose and still matter. More intriguingly, each generation believes it occupies the present; only later do its choices become an archaeological layer.

Of all the places we will visit, San Clemente may be the most literal demonstration that history is cumulative, and that no generation starts with a blank slate.

LOOK CLOSER

Notice how the temperature, light, and materials change as you descend. History is suddenly physical rather than abstract.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What are we building on foundations laid by people we never met—and what foundations are we leaving to others?

CATACOMBS

Names in the underground city

A place for burial, memory, and community.



The Catacombs of St. Callixtus formed part of a network of early Christian burial spaces outside the walls of Rome. In the centuries before Christianity gained imperial favor, communities arranged burial places, commemorated the dead, and passed along memories of individuals and leaders.

The winding underground corridors, burial niches, and dim chambers can feel genuinely claustrophobic; visitors sensitive to enclosed spaces should know what to expect. These were principally cemeteries, not customary secret hiding places for persecuted Christians. Yet their names, graves, and the Crypt of the Popes bring us close to early communities whose security and status could be precarious. The contrast with the grandeur of St. Peter's is striking.

Small inscriptions can feel particularly intimate. Someone chose a name, arranged a burial, carved a symbol, or returned to remember a loved one. For many early Romans, those gestures were the texture of family loyalty and hope.

Look, too, for the way visual traditions cross religious boundaries. Early Christians adapted familiar Roman images—the Good Shepherd, the seasons of the year, and the phoenix associated with renewal—to speak of care, life, and resurrection. In the Cubicle of the Four Seasons, older artistic language acquires meaning in a Christian funerary setting. Symbols, like people, can travel and change. We omit an unverified recollection of another ancient motif until it can be confirmed on site.

As we visit, the most important question may be less about the underground maze than about the countless acts of care that created and maintained it.

LOOK CLOSER

Ask the guide about inscriptions and symbols; interpretations can change by time and context, and not every marking is a coded secret.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

How do we make sure people who mattered to us remain part of the stories our families tell?

The traveler whose letters outlived him

Ideas travel through relationships—sometimes farther than their authors.



Paul began as a persecutor of the early Christian movement, according to the New Testament accounts, and later became one of its most influential missionaries. His travels connected communities across the eastern Mediterranean. Letters associated with him addressed particular disputes, relationships, beliefs, and practical problems; many became foundational texts for Christianity.

The Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls stands at the traditional site of his burial. Much of the building visible today was rebuilt after a devastating fire in 1823, yet the site continues a long history of remembrance. Rebuilding can itself be an act of continuity.

Consider what Paul actually wrote. To a divided community in Corinth, he spoke of patience, kindness, and the meaning of love—words from 1 Corinthians 13 still read at weddings across the world. In a much shorter personal letter to Philemon, Paul asked that Onesimus, an enslaved man, be welcomed as a beloved brother. He did not explicitly call for abolition of slavery, and the letter has a contested interpretive history, but it brought a specific human relationship into focus.

Paul addressed particular people and disputes, not a future global audience. Yet his letters were copied, circulated, interpreted, and recited for nearly two millennia. The wedding reading is a living example of that journey. Contemporary restorative-justice work, including programs that bring people affected by crime into conversations about responsibility and repair, offers an analogy—not a claim of direct descent—for the dignity and reconciliation questions raised by Onesimus. Can someone be seen as more than the social label attached to them?

As our journey approaches its final dinner, it is worth remembering that the smallest communication—a letter, conversation, introduction, story, or invitation—can connect people who might otherwise never meet.

LOOK CLOSER

Think about the people who built, rebuilt, conserved, and interpreted this site. The building is a collective act across time.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Which conversation or introduction in our own lives led somewhere none of us could have predicted?

The journeys we cannot see yet

A birthday is a milestone; a friendship is a continuing story.

Over these days we have moved among people separated by centuries: a young astronomer and his teachers; a nun and the people who preserved her notebooks; shipyard workers and families seeking a different future; two medieval friends and the communities they helped shape; artists and patrons; builders and their successors; mourners who kept names alive.

Some connections brought extraordinary good. Others carry histories of violence, loss, indifference, or failure. History offers neither a tidy pattern nor a guarantee that influence will be beneficial. It does show, repeatedly, that lives do not unfold in isolation.

Tim chose to celebrate a milestone by bringing friends together to walk through these stories. Some of us arrived already connected; others will leave knowing people we had never met. What becomes of those relationships is not yet written.

Perhaps that is the nicest part of the whole trip: we need not know the eventual significance of an evening, a conversation, or a shared laugh to appreciate it now.

To Tim: thank you for creating the occasion—and for inviting all of us into the next chapter.

ONE LAST QUESTION

Who will we stay in touch with, introduce to someone else, encourage, or simply remember more vividly because we were here?

Where the stories come from

A compact reading shelf, not a claim that any single source speaks for the whole past.

TIM'S ITINERARY: "Tim's 50th Birthday Pilgrimage: Krakow, Assisi, Rome," provided October 2026. The itinerary determines planned dates, stops, hosts, meals, and travel order; it is not a historical authority.

POLAND & KRAKÓW: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Historic Centre of Kraków (whc.unesco.org/en/list/29); Encyclopaedia Britannica, histories of Poland and Copernicus; Jagiellonian University historical materials.

FAUSTINA & JOHN PAUL II: Vatican, "Biographical Profile of John Paul II" (vatican.va/special/canonizzazione-27042014/documents/biografia_gpII_canonizzazione_en.html); Vatican writings and shrine histories, read alongside the historical chronology.

AUSCHWITZ: Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, "The Number of Victims" (auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-and-shoah/the-number-of-victims); Memorial article on Marian Kotodziej, "The Final Additions" (auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/the-final-additions,340.html).

ASSISI: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Assisi, the Basilica of San Francesco and Other Franciscan Sites (whc.unesco.org/en/list/990); Franciscan and diocesan historical materials. Religious accounts of particular events are described as traditions where appropriate.

ROME: Basilica di San Clemente, "The Basilica and the Excavations" (basilicasanclemente.com/eng/the-basilica-and-the-excavations); official basilica and catacomb histories; standard historical reference material.

Editorial conventions: imagined introductory scenes are illustrative, not documented eyewitness testimony. Legends are identified. Some traditional art attributions and devotional claims are matters of interpretation. Planned meetings and visits are subject to Tim's updates. Visual note: the scenic pictures in this edition are AI-generated illustrations, not documentary photographs or faithful reproductions of artworks. Route graphics are schematic and not geographic maps.