

Pilgrim Scholars

By John Stegeman



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At a Franciscan high school
in the Midwest, students
combine academic rigor with
Franciscan spiritual values,
culminating with a pilgrimage
to Assisi.

AT ROGER BACON HIGH SCHOOL, located in Cincinnati, Ohio, students in the Assisi Scholars Program don't just study Franciscan history and spirituality; they literally walk in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare.

Part honors program, but with elements of student leadership and community building, the intense academic initiative culminates with an all-expenses paid pilgrimage to Assisi and Rome. Along with the pilgrimage, Assisi Scholars, as they're called, deliver academic capstone presentations on a wide range of topics. This year, graduating participants presented on such diverse subjects as the importance of physical and mental health among high school students, film criticism, and the impact and implications of social media.

"It is a community of learners. That is what we want to cultivate," says Julie Vehorn, dean of academics at Roger Bacon and head of the Assisi Scholars Program. "We are helping these students develop community with each other so that they are challenging each other to not just do the easy thing.

"They are challenging each other and pushing each other, but they're also there to support each other so that when you get that first B on a test, or God forbid the first C you've ever gotten in your life, you've got a friend who is there to tell you: 'Do you know what? It's going to be alright.'"

But Bs and Cs aren't common grades among Assisi Scholars. In fact, students are expected to maintain honor roll status each quarter throughout the rigorous program.

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BECOMING AN ASSISI SCHOLAR

Most students who become Assisi Scholars begin in the freshman honors program, taking advanced classes in English, math, social studies, and science. Most of them enjoyed academic success prior to high school.

Madison Schildmeyer, a junior and Assisi Scholar, was one of the top students at St. Clement Catholic School.

"I would say that since we did accelerated reading trophies in kindergarten, I've been pretty competitive," she says. "I was actually the salutatorian of my grade school and my cousin was valedictorian." Vehorn said students like Schildmeyer are watched as freshmen to see if they will be a good fit for the program. Those who qualify may apply to become Assisi Scholars beginning sophomore year. Others will go on to participate in Roger Bacon's standard, highly regarded academic program.

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"There's not a specific requirement for a number of activities or a number of leadership opportunities, but we definitely want the students in the program to have that well-rounded experience," Vehorn says. "Generally, these students tend to be the students who get involved without being prompted, but we definitely want to support them in participating."

STEEPED IN THE FRANCISCAN CHARISM

Roger Bacon High School exists in a competitive environment. The Archdiocese of Cincinnati boasts 23 Catholic high schools, many of which are in competition for students with Roger Bacon. School President Steve Schad says the Assisi Scholars Program helps Roger Bacon stand out in the crowd.

"The Assisi Scholars Program has been a game changer for Roger Bacon," says Schad. "It allows us to attract the best and brightest students and not only

provides them with a stellar education that opens doors at the collegiate level but reinforces our Franciscan charism in a concrete and relatable way. To walk in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare [on the pilgrimage] is a life-changing experience they will take with them for the rest of their lives. No other honors program can match the educational, spiritual, and emotional impact of this program."

Schad noted the school has sent 195 students on the Assisi pilgrimage over its 10-year run. "We really believe in our Franciscan charism and have put the resources of the school behind this program," he adds.

STUDY, SERVICE, AND SPIRITUALITY

Assisi Scholars like Schildmeyer and senior Josh Becker are shining examples of how students in the program balance the rigorous schoolwork with a slate of extracurriculars.

Becker competes on the Roger Bacon Spartans' varsity bowling team and has participated in the robotics club. He belongs to the school's spiritual life student team and cochairs its God Squad, which assists with student

ROGER BACON: PHILOSOPHER, SCIENTIST, THEOLOGIAN



The high school is named for Roger Bacon, a renowned and learned Franciscan friar from the 1200s. Considered a polymath, Roger Bacon was a notable philosopher, scientist, and theologian. Assisi Scholars follow in his footsteps as well-rounded students.

"I think we instill in students a curiosity so that [they] are asking questions," says Julie Vehorn, dean of academics at Roger Bacon and head of the Assisi Scholars Program. "Roger Bacon was asking some crazy questions for his time. Now we have lasers, but back then they didn't, and people kind of thought he was way out in left field when he was talking about how light bent and all that. I would hope that we are instilling in our students the curiosity and a willingness to go beyond just getting the easiest answer or the most obvious answer and to really dig into what are the questions that we don't have answers to yet—to do some investigation and engage in the gray area."



Father Mark Hudak, OFM, celebrates Mass at Roger Bacon High School's Dauwe Fine Arts Center. The school was founded in 1928 and takes its name after the famous Franciscan philosopher and scientist from the 13th century.

liturgy and other prayer pursuits. "I really like being able to interact with people who share my faith beliefs and being able to kind of build each other up," says Becker of his role in God Squad. "It was a fun way to do something good for the school and put some fun into tasks that could end up being mundane."

Balancing academics and extracurriculars can be "a challenge, probably in the way it's supposed to be," Becker adds. "It can be a lot at times. There are times when I have to make sure that I'm prioritizing school-work before most things, especially if there's a lot of it. I have to keep myself organized and make sure I'm getting things done, preferably ahead of time so that I'm not doing them at the last minute."

Schildmeyer plays volleyball, serves on the student senate, and is social chairperson of Roger Bacon's Community Outreach Board. The board provides students with opportunities to volunteer in a variety of efforts, including assisting poor families in the school's neighborhood, peer mentorship, participating in the March for Life, and other monthly service opportunities.

Schildmeyer's favorite community outreach activity is assisting with the food pantry at nearby St. Clement Catholic Church, her home parish. She volunteers three hours a month, helping stock shelves or assisting patrons with gathering their groceries.

"It's just a different type of experience because you're actually working with people in your community and you're seeing the actual difference that you're making," she says. "Everyone's honestly so nice. I've met the people that come to the food pantry, and they remember my name. They're so nice to me, and it's just . . . it's different because it is that hands-on service and you're seeing the impact that you're having."

"I feel like I've always been a born leader, and so I always have wanted to join groups with people," she adds.

A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Despite the challenges of balancing school, sports, clubs, and a social life, both Becker and Schildmeyer say they can always count on their peers in the program for support.

“At this point, [I know] pretty much everyone in our grade, but the people that I’m closest to and that I know the best have been Assisi Scholars,” says Becker. “I would consider pretty much everyone in there a friend. We all kind of chat and just talk about various things, whether it be school or just in general, just laugh or joke about stuff.”

Schildmeyer agrees. “Some of my best friends are in the Assisi Scholars Program, and I feel like they have become some of my best friends because we have

in a way. I didn’t know much at all about St. Clare.” The pilgrimage helped Becker gain new insights into “exactly how [Francis’] life played out and how he got to where he was.” The impact of the pilgrimage and the program clearly continues to resonate with him. In recognition of his strong faith and connection to the Franciscan charism, Becker received the St. Francis Award at graduation.

One moment that stood out to Becker was their visit to La Verna, a site on Monte Penna where St. Francis

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classes together,” she says. “It’s definitely helpful to have that track that we’re on because everyone’s kind of doing the same thing, and so you can help each other out. If I need help, I know I can go to probably anyone within the program and be like, ‘Do you understand this?’ ‘Can you help me with this?’ And I think anyone would help me out.”

WALKING WITH FRANCIS AND CLARE

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“They’ve made it through this program, they’ve made it to senior year, and they get to go walk in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Clare,” says Vehorn. “It’s just a really special opportunity. It is a pilgrimage, not just a trip. It’s not a tour. It’s not something where you go and you are walking at a breakneck speed through 20 sites a day.

“There’s reflection time built in, and there is fellowship time built in, and time to take some time away from their incredibly busy schedules to just be with each other and pull together what this experience at Roger Bacon has meant to them before they head off and they go on to college.” Becker returned in March from his pilgrimage. While it was his first time on a plane, he was most excited about seeing historical locations. What he discovered was a new appreciation for St. Francis and St. Clare.

“I knew a good amount about Francis [before the trip],” he recalls. “I’ve been around the friars a lot, and so I think his life really always kind of interested me,

received the stigmata. He said the guides would explain the significance of a location before the visit, adding weight to the experience.

“We climbed up a trail. We got to get all the way up to the top and look out over the whole mountain. It was really, really cool,” he recalls. Becker was also struck by San Damiano. While the church and monastery are known for their connection to St. Francis’ vision, St. Clare resided and established her order there.

“I was really impressed learning about just how she basically was a noble, and she gave up, in some ways, even more than Francis,” Becker says. “She gave up everything because at the time she wasn’t able to go outside because of the way the women were treated. It was like when she gave up that noble life, she also gave up really ever being out again. She was going to be cloistered for the rest of her life. I think that it’s incredible that she made that decision and was able to so radically give up everything and just trust in God.”

Schildmeyer still has a year before her pilgrimage, but she’s looking forward to the temporal as well as the spiritual benefits.

“I love traveling. I have been to Greece before and I really liked the food there, so I think I’m really excited to try authentic Italian food,” says Schildmeyer. “I am just really excited to connect with [the Franciscan Catholic aspect of the pilgrimage] because it’s so historic within our faith. I’m excited to do those pilgrimages and just stand where a saint has been. . . . I feel like you really get to connect to your faith life in that way.” ■

John Stegeman is an award-winning writer and editor with over a decade of experience in Catholic media. He writes on a wide range of topics, often exploring the intersection of faith and daily life. He makes his home in Cincinnati, Ohio, with his wife, Kelli, and four children.



From the Sanctuary of La Verna (top) to the Rieti Valley (below), students in the Assisi Scholars Program at Roger Bacon High School take a deep dive into the world and spirituality of Sts. Francis and Clare while on pilgrimage.