Lourdes Pilgrimage 2015: A journey of faith, healing, and love

I did not know what to expect when I applied to the global nursing trip in Lourdes, France. I had researched the trip and talked with past students to learn as much as possible, but I still found myself questioning whether this trip would be a correct fit for me. After I received my acceptance, I was overjoyed and quickly concluded that I was meant to go to Lourdes. In the weeks of preparation and packing however, I could not fully anticipate the impact this pilgrimage would have on me mentally, physically, and spiritually. This trip represented the ultimate culmination of my nursing career at Boston College. Through each clinical rotation, I have been taught the importance of providing holistic and individualized care and the power of a therapeutic presence. Working alongside the doctors and nurses in Lourdes, I was able to care for the whole person, understanding not only their physiological diagnosis, but also the role that religion, culture, and family can play in a patient's life. I was able to be a part of vulnerable, healing, and powerful moments. Lourdes has allowed me to take my nursing skills beyond the bedside and utilize them on a global scale. I could ask for no greater gift than to be able to serve in Lourdes for this nursing global experience.

Our Lady of Lourdes, in the southwestern part of the Pyrenees in France, is one of the worlds most holy and beloved shrines for Catholics. This site holds significance due to the appearance of the Virgin Mary to a poor young girl, Bernadette, on February 11, 1858. At the Grotto of Massabielle the Virgin is said to have appeared 18 times to Bernadette between February 11 and July 16, 1858 saying, “I am the Immaculate Conception.” When visiting the Grotto, Pilgrims behold a Statue of Our Lady of Lourdes with her arms in a prayerful position. At the back of the Grotto, is the miraculous spring that was created on
February 25, 1858 when the Virgin instructed Bernadette to scrape the earth and, "Go and drink at the spring and wash there." Since 1858, the Catholic Church has recognized 69 miracles that have taken place after patients have bathed in the healing springs. Each year, six million visitors journey to this holy site to witness the healing and miraculous powers of Lourdes. My experience in Lourdes took place between April 29-May 5, 2015. I traveled with the American Association of the Order of Malta and 100 malades (French word for patient) and 300 pilgrims. The International Order of Malta Pilgrimage to Lourdes includes members of the Order (Knights and Dames), auxiliary, clergy, physicians, and nurses. The Order of Malta is a worldwide lay, religious order, which promotes the teachings of the Catholic Church and the work with the sick and the poor.

Physically, the days in Lourdes were long and tiring but extremely rewarding. They often began at 7:00 am with morning prayer, followed by medical team rounds, and then a religious procession and celebratory mass. The afternoons were spent working under the guidance of a Madame in the bathhouses, lifting patients, and moving them in and out of the baptismal waters. The evenings would be filled with dinner with the malades and members of the Order of Malta discussing the days events and hearing personal stories of past pilgrimages. The pilgrimage in Lourdes also allowed me to reconnect and further develop my own faith. Through reflection and my personal experiences with patients during the trip, I saw the power of prayer and challenged myself to be a woman for others, living out the Jesuit tradition. I was particularly amazed and moved by the candlelight procession, which took place on the second night we were in France. A statue of the Virgin Mary was carried from the Grotto to the Rosary basilica followed by thousands of pilgrims. The
rosary is said aloud during the procession. Looking out upon the crowd, I was greeted by sparks of light, allowing me to feel at peace and a great sense of hope.

There were numerous life-changing and memorable experiences that I encountered on the Lourdes Pilgrimage. As a nursing student, I had the opportunity to work in the bathhouses, where thousands of pilgrims visit each day to be washed in the healing waters of the grotto. Each pilgrim offers his or her petitions to Our Lady of Lourdes before entering the bath. The ceremony represents healing, repentance, and baptism and it is an extremely emotional and powerful experience for all involved. As a nursing student, I assisted all women into the waters either on foot or by stretcher. I saw firsthand the incredible faith, trust, and hope each pilgrim held within herself. I acted as a support, comfort, and guide to the women entering into the bathhouse. Because I could only speak English and most of the pilgrims did not, I often relied on being a therapeutic presence to provide comfort and support during this transformative experience. It was amazing to connect with individuals on a spiritual level despite their differing cultural practices and language barriers.

The Lourdes Pilgrimage opened my eyes to the power of religion and spirituality. Many of the malades that accompanied us were terminally ill or had chronic diseases. However, they found tremendous relief and comfort in connecting with their faith. For each religious ceremony, members of the Order of Malta and healthcare team would take turns pulling the malades in carriages to the Rosary Basilica. Through each trip I was able to speak with the malades and hear more about their personal story and obstacles they have faced. In particular, I was assigned to care for one malade throughout the week. I spent each meal and ceremony with her learning about her personal story and her choice to come on the pilgrimage. Throughout the week, I had the privilege of meeting dozens of malades
that ranged in ages and experiences. Despite their differing backgrounds and medical histories, the malades and their caregivers were united in their firm faith and connection to God. When speaking with the families, many agreed that the trip to Lourdes provided each patient a sense of relief and comfort from the daily doctor’s appointments, hospital visits, and constant grind of life. I was fortunate enough to be a part of these peaceful moments and experience the beauty and grace of Lourdes.

From this pilgrimage, I became more aware of my own faith and the role that it plays in my life. In addition, I was able to see the importance of religion when it comes to working with patients. As I begin my nursing career, I will forever remember to include a person’s religious and cultural beliefs as a part of their care at the bedside. Also, I found the power of silence and a lasting therapeutic presence to have particular meaning and significance for patients. The simple act of holding a person’s hand or listening to a story can allow a person to feel heard and cared for. Lourdes also revealed that people can find healing in numerous ways. Faith and connection to others can be a powerful source of support and hope to a patient, and greatly improve his or her quality of life. As a nurse, I hope to be a source of strength and hope to my future patients. I am forever grateful for the Lourdes Pilgrimage and I know that I will carry this experience with me for years to come.