Lourdes Pilgrimage 2015

While I have many things to thank Boston College for, my trip to Lourdes this past May highlighted two of the most important ones— the growth in my faith, and the growth in my professional nursing practice. I was incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity to live out both of these facets of my life in a truly beautiful place with equally beautiful people. I am forever grateful to BC and the Order of the Malta for allowing me to be part of such a unique experience that I will carry with me throughout the rest of my life.

I was encouraged to take this journey by a close friend of mine, Jenn, who went on this pilgrimage as a student in 2014. Last summer, Jenn and I worked together as student nurses on an oncology unit in Connecticut. She spoke highly of the life-changing trip she recently came back from, and accredited her compassionate and empathetic nursing skills to her time in Lourdes. I was exposed to the awe and wonder that Lourdes instills in its pilgrims through watching her practice nursing, and I became fascinated with the story of Bernadette and Our Lady of Lourdes. I can now finally understand what Jenn meant when she said “you have to go to truly understand the Lourdes miracle.”

In Lourdes, I was introduced to fifty remarkable “malades” (the French word for “sick person”), and over four hundred volunteers who gave their time to participate in this pilgrimage. As a nursing student, we attended medical meetings every morning with the incredibly impressive team of doctors and nurses that came to support the malades in every way possible. I cannot thank this group of health care professionals enough. My nursing education at BC has been nothing short of amazing, but the intricate way the medical team gave such compassionate, empathetic, and faith-based care to each patient in
Lourdes was a miracle in itself. I am grateful to have spent time observing and practicing with these professionals, for I have learned how important it really is to treat the patient as a whole person and not just the disease. Jesuits call this practice “cura personalis,” or care of the whole person. Many of the malades came to Lourdes in the hopes of a medical miracle, something many doctors and nurses might see as scientifically futile. However, this group was able to seamlessly weave modern medicine and faith together to care for the whole person even though medical miracles are seemingly impossible. Despite no medical miracles happening during our time in Lourdes, small miracles did occur for the malades in that many came home with peace and a feeling of fulfillment—something medicine cannot give.

By far my favorite experience in Lourdes was when I worked in the baths. People from all over the world come to Lourdes every year to bathe in the Holy water of the grotto. The nursing students spent each afternoon in the baths working as assistants, helping the several hundred people who visited each day undress and dip into the Holy water. To be involved in such an intensely personal and faithful experience with people who didn’t even speak the same language as me was profound. Several times I found myself becoming emotional after helping women out of the bath who all had a dramatic faithful experience all while holding my hand, a random nursing student from Boston. I was embraced, thanked in Italian, German, French, Spanish, and many other languages I can’t remember, and trusted by complete strangers. To me, this was my Lourdes miracle. People spend their entire lives worshiping God and practicing their religion, hoping to one day make it to Lourdes to bathe in the Holy water and give their prayer intentions to Our Lady of Lourdes. To allow me, a nursing student from the United States, to be a part of many of these
personal and beautiful experiences is profound. I will always remember the last bath I was a part of, where a kind Italian women wept for several minutes after being lead out of the bath. She allowed us to be part of an incredibly vulnerable and personal time for her, something the language barrier prevented me from understanding. However, her trust was something that was palpable, and I have never felt so welcomed, wanted, and loved by such a stranger before. My faith journey has lead me to find God in every day life, and this was my most profound showing of God for me during this trip. It was a beautifully faithful experience for me.

I was moved by this experience and many more during my time in Lourdes. I learned how to be an advocate for my patients and even their family members, and how to address seemingly impossible discussions. I was introduced to truly fascinating people who give their life and their time to making the world a better place, parents of ill children whose kids remain as joyful as the next due to their sacrifices, and malades whose outlook on life has challenged me to change my own. I strive to live with integrity, love, and perspective thanks to this trip. Many of my conversations with the malades of this trip have taught me the important of taking time for your family and loved ones. In our world, it’s hard to remember that when you’re in the thick of things, but I hope to take this lesson with me as I begin “adult life” in just a few short weeks.

Lastly, I’d like to reflect on my experience in my faith. I am in the middle of a long and slow faith journey, one that began with my own family but has fallen on my shoulders now that I’m an adult. I still struggle with faith sometimes, especially in the face of illness. How can God let bad things happen to good people? I am extremely thankful that I was gifted with this chance to experience Lourdes, where I feel that my faith as become more
solidified. While we spent many hours in traditional mass, saying traditional prayers (many that I did not know), where I saw my faith grow was in the observations of people around me. How can something so small, a tiny stream of water, lead to thousands of people visiting each year from around the world? How can people trust strangers in an intensely personal and vulnerable experience of the baths? While I always look for measureable answers, Lourdes has taught me that my faith allows me to fill in the answers that can’t be quantified. Our faith allowed strangers with language barriers to come together, pray together, and help each other as a community. I can only find one answer to how that is possible, and for me, that is God’s work.

Lourdes remains a mystery for me. I still struggle to explain my experience there to my friends and family, yet I can say that it was profound. I hope to be a compassionate health care professional like the ones I was blessed to train under here, one that focuses on the person, not the illness. I hope to continue to grow in my faith in instances outside the church, like my experience in the baths. I know that Lourdes was the beginning of a very long journey for me, and I am forever grateful that I was allowed to be a part of it. I will remember this journey for the rest of my life, and I hope to take with me the miracle and magic that Lourdes has to every person I am lucky to meet from now on. Lourdes taught me to find small miracles in the small French town, and I hope to continue to find small miracles back home. With faith in God, I know that this is possible.