Reflection on a pilgrimage to Lourdes
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“This is going to be a life-changing experience for you, girls. I know everyone keeps telling you that, and I can’t explain it, but I promise it will be. You’ll see when you get there.”

Georgia, Christy, and I smiled and agreed with Tom, a well-known knight in the Order of Malta, although we truly had no idea what we were getting into. Every person I had met so far in the few short hours spent at the airport told me I was in for a life-changing experience. In the months leading up to Lourdes, I got a lot of questions from friends and family about what the trip exactly was, what my job was as a nursing student on a religious pilgrimage, and why Lourdes was so special. Considering I didn’t know much about it besides the amazing miraculous stories and information on the Order of Malta’s website, my shortened response was, “All I know is it’s going to be a life-changing experience; I’ll have to tell you about it when I get back!” Truthfully, I did not know what to expect and was overwhelmed with anxiety and exhaustion from school and exams leading up to the trip. I can’t say I was prepared for the combination of nursing final exams, a once-in-a lifetime experience in Lourdes, and the excitement of meeting so many new amazing people, all in the same week! Ten hours of flying, two hours of sleep, and fifty introductions later, we had arrived in Lourdes. I was surprised to feel my lingering apprehension drifting away within the first few hours as I continued to feel more and more a part of the Order of Malta family.

I had met my malade, Joanne, at the Newark airport before boarding the charter jet to Lourdes. Joanne is a beautiful, loving mother of four suffering from ALS, a progressive neurodegenerative disease that slowly inhibits its victim’s ability to speak, walk, and move, although their mental functions stay in tact. Her 23-year-old daughter, Sadie, and husband, Brian, were able to attend the pilgrimage, too. They are two of the many people who act as Joanne’s hands and caregivers in every aspect of life. It has been Joanne’s dream for years to attend this pilgrimage, and fortunately, she and her family were sponsored by a generous couple who were inspired by her story. I was fortunate enough not only be paired with Joanne, but also to spend every minute of the pilgrimage with this special family, which resulted in unforgettable life lessons and a bond I will always cherish. Whether we were attending morning mass in one of the gorgeous basilicas, participating in the incredible Anointing of the Sick ceremony, praying at the original grotto that Mary appeared at, or going to the miraculous Baths, Joanne did it all with a smile that got bigger and brighter as the week went on.

The Baths are small tubs filled with the infamous Lourdes holy water originally “founded” by Saint Bernadette under Mary’s guidance. They are the main reasons that people all over the world pilgrimage to Lourdes. It is well known that after exiting into the Bath, the water somehow dries off your body almost instantly. Many pilgrims have been physically or emotionally healed from dipping into the Baths, or simply gained a sense of renewal, revival, and spirituality. The look of pure elation on Joanne’s face when she emerged from the Bath was a moment I will never forget. I half expected her to suddenly start walking from her wheelchair! The glowing joy radiating from her smile and her sudden ability to lift her head a little bit higher than usual proved to me the power this holy water can have if faith in God is present.

Joanne has surpassed the average time frame of one to five years of life given to an ALS patient after diagnosis, as she has been suffering from the horrible disease for about six years. Her speech is completely gone except to a few inaudible groans that somehow Sadie could understand perfectly, and she is confined to her wheelchair as her muscles continue to
deteriorate. Sadie and her two sisters are the only three people who can interpret what their mother says, which we all viewed as a small miracle from God. It is truly incredible watching them laugh and have a conversation, while everyone else in the room just stares open-mouthed, wondering how it is possible for such easy understanding between the two. After the trip, although Joanne’s ALS did not magically disappear and she was not able to suddenly walk or talk again, there was a clear change in her spirit and personality which was apparent to anyone that knows her. Sadie and the entire family have recently reported that the progression of her disease has noticeably slowed.

My trip to Lourdes was full of mini-miracles and amazing life lessons. I feel beyond fortunate to have been able to have this experience, and I will never forget the people I met there or everything I saw and participated in. I still keep in touch with Sadie and a couple of the malades that were on the trip, and they are all in my prayers every day. I will never forget the lesson of unconditional love that Joanne and Sadie’s relationship taught me, and the picture of all of us in my room is a constant reminder that with strength, love, God, faith, and family, you truly can live life to the fullest.

When I said goodbye to everyone at the airport, Tom gave me a hug and said, “So, what did you think?” My response? “This was the most life-changing experience I think I’ll ever have.”