Reflection on a Pilgrimage to Lourdes
Colleen Nuzzolese, May 2011

Traveling to Lourdes, a holy and sacred place, with the Order of Malta was an absolutely incredible experience. The pilgrimage was the perfect fusion of peace, power and prayer, and a journey on which I could very tangibly feel God's presence and God's healing power.

As part of a “pod,” I worked very closely with Christopher, Gregory, Suzy, a malade (person who is sick) and her caregiver. Both Sr. Teresa, the malade, and Sr. Veronica, her caregiver, are nuns in the order of the Sisters of Charity and lifelong friends. It was so humbling to be with them and share this experience together. Through many conversations with Sr. Teresa and Sr. Veronica I realized how important it is to walk with each other, share with each other, strengthen relationships with each other as we continue to seek God.

One moment that will stay blazed in my memory forever occurred during the mass of the Anointing of the Sick. There, hundreds of people gathered in a small chapel, and the caregivers and pods assisted the malades to sit next to each other at the front of the Church. Sr. Teresa was next to Matthew, a teenage malade with mental and physical disabilities. Sr. Teresa worked with children and young adults with mental and physical disabilities throughout her vocation; now she no longer works, as she is retired and focusing on managing her deteriorating health, but this moment again shed light on her calling. From pews back, I witnessed Sr. Teresa so beautifully, so genuinely, interact with Matthew. They engaged in true conversation, Matthew in his comfort zone, and Sr. Teresa alive with the Holy Spirit. It was truly a glimpse of God’s grace. It was incredible to see the "sick" ministering to the "sick," and I was struck by the realization that we are all sick, we are all broken in some capacity, and we all needs God's grace, God's healing power. We all have a cross, we will all fall, and with God's grace we will all get back up, too.

Several other significantly holy moments occurred at the sacred Grotto, where Mary, the Virgin Mother, appeared several times to St. Bernadette in the 1800s. The Grotto is a place I have learned about and loved all through my childhood as my family has a deep devotion to Mary. The scene of the Grotto is just magnificent; it is pure serenity. There is a presence, an aura, an ambiance of holiness about the Domain. Several nights, members of the Order and I would journey to the Grotto when all was quiet, to be in the presence of a tangible Spirit and pray; in those moments, it was just me, God, Mary and all of the intentions and intercessions of thousands of other pilgrims. In front of the Grotto is an enormous candelabra type structure where candles of people’s intentions are always burning. Here, I was reminded of God's promise and of His light that will dispel all darkness. Here, I found hope, we experienced the power of prayer, and I felt connected to the others as one body of Christ.
As one body of Christ, I shared in another truly sacred experience when the international Order of Malta celebrated mass. 35,000 from the United States, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and several other countries all gathered in one place worshipping one God and believing in one Eucharist. It was almost overwhelming to be in the presence of so many people from all over the world, from all different walks of life, who also believe in the one true God. From different contexts, different languages, different experiences, different races, different families, different cultures and different continents, all were gathered for the same God, bringing to light the many parts of the one body of Christ.

Several other moments and experiences in Lourdes remain with me as indescribable. I feel eternally grateful for the experience and continue to love and pray for all of those sick and suffering and all of the intercessions through our Lady of Lourdes.