Reflection on a pilgrimage to Lourdes
Morgan Panzenhagen, May 2011

The weeklong trip to Lourdes was characterized by what I like to call ‘God Moments,’ times in life when you can actually feel God’s presence.

The ‘God Moments’ started before the trip even began. When I received my assignment for the malade (sick person) that I would be assisting in Lourdes, I knew that God had intervened. Catherine, an 11-year-old girl with an undiagnosed condition that had many similarities to Angelman and Rett syndrome, was the perfect match for me. Throughout my time at Boston College, I worked at the Boston College Campus School, a school for children with multiple severe physical and intellectual disabilities. During this work I encountered many children with conditions similar to Catherine’s. I knew that my experience at the Campus School was preparation for an assignment like this.

Another ‘God Moment’ happened a bit later in my trip to Lourdes. I spent a day volunteering at the baths where people come from all over the world to wait in line for hours for a chance to bathe in the Lourdes holy water in hopes of a physical or spiritual miracle. As almost everything in religion, the process of bathing is very ritualistic. My day started with instructions of what my tasks would be. I was teamed up with six other female volunteers from Spain, Italy, and Russia and immediately assumed the next few hours would consist of decoding gestures, wishing I remembered my high school Spanish, and frustration. And I was right. While I had a difficult time understanding the other volunteers and the women I was assisting in the baths, I realized that religion transcends language and culture. We could not understand much of what each other said, but we sang in unity as Ave Maria rung over the loud speakers. The women I helped that day couldn’t use words to communicate their thanks, but rather hugged me in an embrace, pinched me on the cheek like a grandmother, or tearfully smiled and muttered a heartfelt string of words I could only assume were some form of an expression of thanks.

While there were many more ‘God Moments’ perhaps the most meaningful was the time I spent with Catherine, my malade, and her mother. When I initially met them I assumed that their trip to Lourdes was for the purpose of healing. However, over dinner one night, her mother shared with me her real reason for coming. She described to me her fear that one day when she is not around there will be no one to care for her daughter. She was afraid that there weren’t people that would accept her daughter and love her for who she was. At that moment, I couldn’t shake the feeling that this was my purpose on the trip. While this trip offered many spiritual revelations for myself, the greatest revelation was that I could be a part of someone else’s.

For the last four years of college, I had spent time getting to know kids just like her daughter at the Campus School and understanding the hardships and beauty in caring for children with severe disabilities. After dinner, Catherine, her mother, and I went for a walk. At one point Catherine began to become inconsolably fussy. Eventually, we got her out of her
stroller and held her as she stood. Still, she wasn't having any of it. Her mother grabbed her under her arms and I grabbed her by the feet and we gently rocked her. Immediately, Catherine began to giggle and laugh. Her mother and I were relieved and began to laugh ourselves. Our trip together was filled with many more silly moments like this. As we said our goodbyes at the end of the trip, her mother hugged me and said, “My question has been answered, there are people in this world who will care for my child.” This was the greatest ‘God Moment’ of them all.