Renee Wilson Lourde’s Reflection

Upon entering Boston College my freshman year, I questioned if nursing was the right vocation for me. Between the tough prerequisite courses of anatomy, chemistry and the ever famous professional nursing seminar (a small group-seminar where upper classmen remind you that you are doomed for the next four years), I did not know if I would be able to hack it. I remember shedding many tears on the windowsill of my Keyes North dorm room on Newton campus, wondering if I was cut out to be a nurse. Slowly, as the courses transitioned to focus on the nursing profession as a whole and we entered those large, intimidating Boston hospitals, I realized that I had made the correct choice. My passion for nursing lays not only in the fact that we are able to help change someone’s life through technical procedures but also in caring for those in vulnerable situations. As a nurse, we have the ability to serve others daily and provide holistic care on an emotional, spiritual and physical level and that alone drives me in my practice.

The opportunity to travel to Lourdes, France was one that was life changing and as I sit here writing this reflection, I struggle to find the words to explain and capture this truly unbelievable experience. I grew up in a Catholic household. I was baptized, made my first Communion and later Confirmation at age 16, but never truly knew what I was confirming. For me, our weekly religious education classes turned more into a social event than one of spiritual growth. Over the week we traveled to Lourdes, I learned more about my religion and myself. The Knights and Dames of the Order of the Malta, represent a different caliber of people, unlike anyone I have ever met. Each one has a story of either a miracle that happened to them or one witnessed. Their intense Catholic faith and generosity, allow for the “malades” (French word for the sick) to travel on this
Some “malades” travel as a last hope, truly looking for a physical miracle and others come to reinforce their faith in God in search of strength to continue to battle their illness.

Sitting in the Newark airport, I did not know what to expect. The only information I had was from online research about Lourdes and the Order of the Malta. I knew Lourdes was located in the beautiful foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains that the Immaculate Mother Mary appeared in multiple apparitions to Bernadette Soubirous. Mary pointed Bernadette to a stream that appeared and now millions of people yearly come to the healing baths that hold this same holy water that appeared to Bernadette. I knew that I was expected to wear a white dress, black flats, veil, cape and travel to another country with over 200 strangers on a chartered flight. Basically, I knew that I was way out of my comfort zone but vowed that I would be devoted to the service of others and open to any experience throughout the week. As I began to speak with all of the people traveling to Lourdes, they immediately offered their personal stories whether it is about their health condition, what brings them on this pilgrimage or what keeps bringing them back. Although stories were shared, the only thing many could say was “wait and see, words cannot explain this experience.”

The people I talked to were correct; words truly cannot explain this profoundly emotional experience. We witnessed healing outside of the conventional Western medicine practice, where people believed in the power of God to offer strength and inner peace. I saw this first hand, as I sat with my malade’s mother making small talk as we nervously awaited our turn to go in the healing baths. She grasped my hand and told me how much this moment meant for her, as she was going to ask God for strength in order
to support her own son, in his forties battling prostate cancer. We watched hundreds of people go in and out of the baths in wheelchairs, on stretchers and by foot. Each person that went in had a look of nervousness and a little bit of fear but when they exited, there was relaxation across their faces, tears streaming down or in absolute “awe” of what they just experienced. When our turn came, my malade’s mother urged me to go first and made me promise I would wait outside for her. I entered through the curtain where the bath filled with the infamous water was in front of me, as four French women assisted me in. They were the most gentle and hopeful looking people I have ever seen, they allowed time for personal prayers then they offered their own prayers for me in French as they pulled me out of the water and simply said “voila”. Although there were minimal English words spoken, these women who volunteered in the baths had a way about them to convey hope and faith through their five-minute interactions with people from all over the world despite the language barriers.

When my malade’s mother came out, she had a look of relief on her face and all she could say was “that was so cold!” and we both began to cry. No words needed to be spoken about what we had both experienced as we communicated and connected through the tears and hugs. It was in that moment that I truly felt the presence of something higher than me and it solidified why I came to Lourdes. Sharing that moment with this woman who was a stranger to me just yesterday was one of the most profound experiences I have to date in my life. I will never forget the people with whom I traveled, who offered themselves so fully through their own stories and struggles as each person was in search of some sort of healing, even those who were well. During the anointing of the sick mass
one doctor told me something that I will always hold with me, “everyone has their own ailments; you don’t need to be sick to seek out the healing power of God.”