

Trip to Lourdes inspires St. Joseph's emergency department head

As head of the emergency department at St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson, Dr. Gail Cunningham has always worked hard to show compassion to her patients. A recent trip to Europe has inspired her to take that empathetic care to a new level.

Cunningham worked as a physician volunteer for the Knights of Malta April 28-May 4 in support of their mission to help sick people from around the world who make pilgrimages to Lourdes, France. The "malades" converge on the site where the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous in the mid 19th century. Suffering from ailments of all kinds, their goal is to find physical or spiritual healing and to deepen their connection to God.

During her pilgrimage, Cunningham accompanied malades during Masses and visits to the Grotto of Lourdes. She helped transport them in special carts and was available whenever medical assistance was needed.

"I think the experience made me feel a greater sense of partnership with God in taking care of my patients," Cunningham said. "I think it's made me realize we are all malades in one way or another. We all have our needs, and there are lots of opportunities to be healed in many ways."

Dr. Cunningham was inspired by the dedication shown by caretakers. Among her group were 35 malades ranging in age from 5 to 80. They were accompanied by 260 companions and caretakers.

"Some people have a lot of physical needs," said Dr. Cunningham, who attends Mass at Stella Maris in Timonium, Sacred Heart in Glyndon and the chapel of her hospital. "I'm there for a week, but their companions are with them day in and day out. You see the love and support they are providing and it's just so beautiful."

A highlight of the pilgrimage was giving encouragement to an 11-year-old girl with a

blood disorder who was nervous about bathing in Lourdes water – a devotional practice that is believed to bring physical or spiritual healing. Cunningham was also overwhelmed when a woman with stage four breast cancer sang the Ave Maria with heart-felt sincerity.

“I can’t describe how beautiful that was,” she said.

On the last day of the pilgrimage, Cunningham and her group attended an informal Mass in the basement of their hotel. The homilist said all are called to be extensions of Jesus’ hands.

“He prayed as we left that we would be that extension,” Cunningham said. “There was not a dry eye in the room.”