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## *Wonder*

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*  
by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener, Canon for Mission**

It didn't start out as wonder. Not at all. It started out with leaving the dank youth hostel where we'd wolfed down stale corn flakes after spending another restless night on mattresses that reeked of mildew and bore the holes of hastily extinguished cigarettes. When we finished our breakfast and got up from the table, our legs stuck to the vinyl seat cushions like we were at a fish camp in Lower Alabama in late August.

I had come to this place as a captive of sorts. I wanted to stay in the Basque country, leaning over the hotel balcony drinking wine at 11 a.m., pretending I was an "It Girl" in some Hemingway novel. But my traveling companions were devout Roman Catholics, and I was the group's only halfway fluent French speaker. So we went to Lourdes.

Lourdes was all that my smug little Anglican self had imagined. The shops were filled with plastic nativity scenes, statues of Mary in every shape and size, and, of course, the requisite bottles for carting away holy water from rows of spigots lined up at the shrine.

I brought a book with me so that I could read while my friends filled their bottles, while they kneeled beneath displays of cast off crutches bearing witness to those for whom this place had been an answer to prayer. I brought a book so that I wouldn't have to participate in what I was sure was mostly superstitious sap.

After a few hours, it came time to go. Finally we could get on the train and leave this place. I turned around to find my friends. It was then that I saw them: the faces. All the faces. Faces of young and old, rich and poor, faces of every race and nationality. Faces of emaciated middle-aged men held up by their ninety-year-old mothers, faces of babies cradled by fathers who were hardly more than children themselves. Faces, so many faces, and all of them turned so hopefully toward this tiny grotto in this tiny village with all those tiny plastic Mothers of our Lord. Now maybe it was just the glow of the late afternoon sun, but those faces were lit with an unfathomable beauty. It was an amazing and moving sight. So moving, in fact, that I felt an immediate and inexplicable urge to get some of that water myself. Racing towards the nearest spigots, I turned one on full blast, dousing myself from head to toe until I was soaked.

The capacity to be swept up by unexpected love, truth, or beauty is one of life's greatest gifts. It's a spiritual gift, really, one we pray for each time we celebrate a baptism: "Give [the newly baptized]... a sense of joy and wonder in all God's works." In all God's works! Not just the bucket list works, but the more pedestrian ones, too. The works we never imagined would catch our attention, much less knock us off our feet. The ones we glimpse in the long checkout line at the grocery or seated next to a shrieking toddler on an airplane or trudging along the path we walk everyday trying to get in our 10,000 steps. The ones we experience when the puny little seeds we planted in the spring yield a summer tomato so delicious it's hard to know whether the liquid running down our chin is juice or tears. The ones we feel when, at the end of a long, discouraging day (month, year, decade?), we fall into the arms of a friend who says simply, "I know." They may not seem like much at first, these little moments of wonder, but I'll tell you, some of them have saved me. They have brought me back from the brink of despair. They have offered respite from cynicism.

They have given me strength to keep going in the face of things I was sure would undo me. They have allowed me to relinquish the need for strength and to trust that God would carry me. May we all know such moments. May we all know such awe.

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