
Shrine of Lourdes. The mission of the new Rector Msgr. Dumas: “The Pope calls for pastoral care and to minister to popular piety”

(from Lourdes) From the heat of North Africa to the cold temperatures of the Pyrenees. The circles of smoke emanating from his pipe are a sign of presence amidst the icy lanes of the Shrine of Lourdes. It is the presence of the ship's captain ready to welcome and listen to the shipwrecked on board. Msgr. **Olivier Ribadeau Dumas**, a priest from the Paris diocese, assumed his post as Rector of the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes on October 1st last year, appointed by Bishop Antoine Hérouard, Apostolic Delegate for the French Shrine. The Rector is currently working on the preparations of the celebrations for the World Day of the Sick, February 11. Some 15,000 pilgrims are expected to attend. The program features various moments of prayer that include the prayer at the Grotto to the anointing of the sick, the Procession aux flambeaux, and the international Holy Mass presided over by Msgr Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization. Some talks will be given by Msgr. Dumas himself.

Can you tell about your appointment to Lourdes?

I served as Secretary General and spokesperson of the French Bishops' Conference for six years. I then obtained a sabbatical year to go to Algeria, to Oran, to help the bishop and visit the religious communities. Until, through the Apostolic Delegate of the Shrine, the Pope called me to serve as Rector here in Lourdes. It was totally unexpected and a great grace for me. Indeed, Lourdes is the place where the Gospel is truly lived like an open book.

Every evening I can say that I have seen wonders, because Lourdes is the place of encounter, that stems from Mary's apparitions to Bernadette. Thenceforth, many other encounters ensued, such as the one between the sick and those who accompany them, between the young and the old, between priests and lay people, between peoples of different nations.



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Lourdes is the only international city, in every Country there is a church dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes and a reproduction of the Grotto.

Lourdes is the only place where everyone is embraced, including the poor and the sick. It' s the place for the healing of bodies and hearts.

Lourdes is impossible to imagine without them, because here one finds peace. The sick are not only those who are physically ill, but also those wounded in their hearts and the sinners. Fraternity under the banner of charity is authentically experienced here.

What is your mission at the Shrine?

I am the Rector of the Shrine and it is my responsibility is to ensure that pilgrims are welcomed in the best possible way.

The Pope set three important goals for the Shrine: first, to welcome everyone and, in particular, the sick and those people wounded by life, followed by development and support of popular piety.

Here we see the faith of simple people touching a rock or drinking water, holding a lamp. It shows a faith-of-heart that is not uttered but lived out.

The third dimension that I am committed to is fostering the international dimension of the Shrine. People come here from France, from many European countries, with increasing numbers of pilgrims from Asia, from Brazil. We need to reflect on the significance of the message of Lourdes for a person from Rio de Janeiro or Seoul. It will be my duty to do this with the chaplains who are here and with the employees of the Shrine.

This year's theme for the shrine is the Immaculate Conception. How are you experiencing it?

It's an existential theme for me. It's the development of God's mercy which was manifested in Mary in a preventive way and which we have in a curative way. I believe it is important to be able to rediscover innocence after healing from sin, through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and to stand before the Grotto and ask Our Lady to help us walk with her. This theme is experienced internally, with no great theories. We will develop it with the signs of Lourdes and also with conferences on this subject to help people understand what it means. And with an emphasis on forgiveness offered by God to each one of us.



I saw him a few months ago, we talked about Lourdes, this Shrine is important to him. The concern of Pope Francis for the Shrine of Lourdes is for me a meaningful support. He is deeply interested in popular piety, in the possibility for people to live the faith and to be embraced.

Before your arrival, the economic situation of the Shrine was raised by various parties. How are you handling this aspect?

I am in charge of the Shrine and I understand that there are over 300 employees who live off their work here, so we must have the money to pay them. But the most important thing is the pastoral mission that I have received.

The purpose of the Shrine is not to make a profit, but to have the money to expand its activity: welcoming the sick, the mission of the Shrine for evangelization purposes.

Those who come here as visitors must leave as pilgrims and those who come as pilgrims must leave as missionary disciples.

Filippo Passantino