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## Lourdes. Hotels closed down while waiting for pilgrimages. The Rector in dialogue with public institutions: "Restart from the shrine"

The religious articles shops that line boulevard de la Grotte, the street leading to the Shrine, are still closed, as are the hotels. They will reopen only with the arrival of groups of pilgrims. Lourdes reopened to the public over a month ago, but at a very slow pace until now. The economic crisis, following the lockdown to limit the spread of Covid-19, has also hit the city at the foot of the Pyrenees, where, for the first time in history, the Shrine had to close its gates as a result of the pandemic. The lockdown lasted over two months and brought the Shrine's accounts into the red. The estimated deficit stands at eight million Euros. The Rector of the Shrine, **Monsignor Olivier Dumas**, asked for help from the faithful, through their donations, and for financial assistance from local and national institutions.



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The shrine was only partially reopened, as it can only contain a limited number of pilgrims, in accordance with strict health regulations. But "Lourdes without pilgrims is a Lourdes without resources to carry out its mission, to maintain the entire site", which normally involves almost 100,000 volunteers welcoming 3 million faithful and visitors from all over the world each year, including more than 50,000 sick and disabled people. Some of its 320 employees have not returned to work, since there are not enough jobs for everyone. **Online pilgrimage.** In order to reconnect the faithful with Lourdes and ask for their offerings, tomorrow, 16th July, the Shrine will host a global online pilgrimage from the Grotto of the Apparitions. Celebrations, processions and rosaries in 10 languages will be livestreamed for 15 consecutive hours. Sixty artists, doctors, journalists will speak about what Lourdes means to them and the world. "This global digital pilgrimage is an opportunity offered to pilgrims from world countries who will not be able to be physically present in Lourdes this year", the Rector told SIR. The date was not chosen randomly. July 16th is the day of the last apparition of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette, who "on that occasion was not standing in front of the grotto, but a little further away", said Msgr. Dumas. *"It's a symbolic way to enable all those who are distant from the Grotto to come together for a day of prayer and communion. It will also offer the opportunity to appeal to pilgrims' generosity to enable our shrine to survive, which is currently very difficult."*



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travelled to the city in the Pyrenees in mid-June. "We started registrations - he said -. The pilgrimages by plane and bus will inevitably be limited in numbers to protect people's health through anti-Covid measures, in full compliance with all health regulations and safety requirements, but certainly no less involving." Care for the sick. Diella reported that a number of sick persons have already registered for the pilgrimages and, mindful of their health condition, they will be able to participate in full safety." We cannot guarantee the presence of people with very serious diseases or who need large spaces - he told SIR. "However, in the meantime, we are registering pilgrims with less serious diseases who can travel in conditions of safety with guaranteed personal assistance." More time is needed for those with more critical medical problems: "Pilgrimages will continue until December 10th and in the meantime we will ensure that hospitality arrangements are adjusted to their needs." The sick will be received in the La Source hotel, due to reopen with the resumption of pilgrimages, or in the accueil of Notre Dame, a facility provided by the Shrine for those in need of dedicated assistance. The Salus Infirmorum for disabled guests this year will remain closed. "It's a large facility, and we have chosen to organize pilgrimages with a limited number of pilgrims." "*Sick persons who are not particularly vulnerable to the Covid can also be accommodated,*" pointed out Msgr. Dumas. "Given that the diseases pilgrims are affected by can vary in nature and gravity - added the Rector - someone with terminal cancer will not be able to come to Lourdes for the time being, but people with mental disabilities can come to Lourdes, and we want to welcome them also into the ordinary pastoral care of the shrine."



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The health crisis made it necessary to reorganize the presence of pilgrims in the premises of the Shrine, besides implementing anti-Covid-19 measures. In the esplanade the faithful cross a passageway where they disinfect their hands and are invited to wear a mask. Signs indicating safety distances have been placed in front of the Grotto. New directions have also been given for the evening procession aux flambeaux: the people remain where they are while the image of Our Lady is brought to the faithful who hold the candles. *“Lourdes is a safe place,” the Rector said. All safety measures are observed, such as the use of masks and keeping distance between people. The Shrine has been carefully organized to ensure everyone’s safety.* For the time being, pilgrimages mostly consist of individual believers travelling from other parts of the country. “We see more pilgrims arriving day after day,” said Msgr. Dumas, recalling the presence of a group of pilgrims from the diocese of Lille over the past few days, while a delegation of about thirty people from three other French dioceses is expected. “They are not large groups, but a small number of representatives.” Recovery for the city and for the shrine. The revival of the city and shrine involves dialoguing with public institutions and various economic stakeholders. “The French government is aware of the unique situation of Lourdes, the second city in France after Paris in terms of hotel accommodation. It’s a well-known tourist destination. But in the present situation Lourdes is dying,” Msgr. Dumas continued. “The French government cannot allow Lourdes to die and it knows that the Shrine is Lourdes’ engine of development. We are therefore working together with the government, the new mayor of Lourdes and the Department of Occitania region to take joint action. We must develop a project starting with the Shrine”.

Filippo Passantino