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The Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, presided at Mass for the Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady at the Sanctuary at Lourdes as part of celebrations marking the annual French National Pilgrimage to the shrine.

Over the past few months, people around the world have had to adapt to a different way of living, working and praying because of the Coronavirus pandemic. But it didn't stopped the annual French National Pilgrimage to Lourdes.

On Wednesday, the 147th pilgrimage began with Holy Mass in the Church of St Bernadette. Organised by the Assumptionists, the four day pilgrimage had as its theme: 'Going to the Source of Love.'

Because of social distancing restrictions, this year's event was smaller than usual - with just 500 pilgrims taking part in person. Fr. Vincent Cabanac, director of the French National Pilgrimage, explained that despite the difficulties regarding the pandemic, this was a "rendezvous" they didn't want to miss. And many thousands of others were able to be part of the pilgrimage virtually, via radio, television and the internet.

Although COVID-19 changed the format of this gathering, there was still a rich array of events over the course of the four days. The programme includes the recitation of the Rosary, concerts, processions, vigils and testimonies.

For health reasons, and to respect physical and social distancing, bathing was not possible at the Sanctuary. But Fr. Cabanac points out that in a symbolic gesture, people were able to come to the baths and wash their face and hands in the Lourdes water.

At the invitation of the organizers of the national pilgrimage, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin visited the Shrine at Lourdes to preside over Mass for the Feast of the Assumption on August 15. He had been invited to the shrine before the coronavirus outbreak.

This was the Cardinal's third visit to Lourdes since he became Vatican Secretary of State. In 2017 he visited the Shrine as Pope Francis' representative for World Day of the Sick; and in 2018 for the St. Francis de Sales Days.

Fr. Cabanac said: "It is a very important sign for us that the Cardinal visits. The Cardinal is giving a strong message of prayer not only for France but for the world, presenting his intention

here in the Grotto of Massabielle."