This year again, for the 137th time, men and women religious of the Assumption accompanied thousands of pilgrims to celebrate the feast of the Assumption in Lourdes, among whom there were some 900 sick or handicapped participants. A more than 100-year-old tradition, the National Pilgrimage continues to draw crowds to the feet of the Virgin of Massabielle, to the school of the humble visionary, Bernadette.

Since 1873, the date of the first pilgrimage to Lourdes organized by the Assumptionists, this annual rendez-vous has taken place except during the two World Wars. But to what may we attribute this attachment, so long-standing and so persevering, to the great Marian city, Our Lady of Lourdes?
That the Assumptionists would be the great proponents of pilgrimages at the end of the 19th century is hardly surprising. Were they not founded to stem the rapidly rising tide of indifference and unbelief with an even greater love of Jesus Christ and a public affirmation of his divinity? It is engraved in their genes. Already gifted with a sense of organization, they took advantage, among other things, of the new means of transportation like the railroad and large passenger ships. Very quickly they were on their way to La Salette, Lourdes, Rome, Jerusalem, veritable adventures of faith with Fr. Picard, of legendary stature, at the forefront. But did Fr. d'Alzon support this initiative and this apostolic direction? Did he become a faithful pilgrim to Lourdes himself?

It must be said that his extremely solid Marian piety did not push him quickly to the sites of apparitions. He didn't visit La Salette till 1858, twelve years after the apparitions, Lourdes till 1868, ten years after Bernadette's encounter with the Virgin, recognized as authentic in 1862. "I asked for true holiness, humility, a sense of faith, and zeal," he wrote on August 16, 1868, the day after his first stay in Lourdes. "I gave myself the pleasure of being locked up behind the grill that protects the grotto from the public for nearly four hours. You see that I had the time to pray for my friends."

Certainly, the pastor of Lourdes, who was to become his friend, gave him this permission. From this first visit, he became a regular at Lourdes: "If I could, I would favor this devotion because, unlike La Salette, Lourdes brought me I can't say what aura of peace, trust, and hope that I will be converted someday."

He held to his word and until his death in 1880 his interest in Lourdes would not diminish. The "National" is still fully alive. It is renewed annually with its great family and popular tradition. Thanks to the generosity of a number of benefactors and to the selflessness of deeply committed laymen and laywomen, the effort known as "Mosaïque" allowed 450 persons who would not have been able to undertake such a voyage with their families, for lack of financial resources, to discover together this evangelical oasis which Lourdes is. During this year of the bicentennial of his birth, how happy Fr. d'Alzon would have been!

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