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The Pope in Lourdes, August 14 and 15

On his eighth visit to France, John Paul II has gone to Lourdes to inaugurate the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception.

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The Holy Father's connection to Lourdes began with an absence. Because of the attempted assassination on May 13, 1981 in St. Peter's Square, he was unable to preside at the International

Eucharistic Congress held at Lourdes in July 1981. This shrine had been chosen because of its Eucharistic significance. St. Pius X saw Lourdes as “the most beautiful throne of the Eucharist.” That congress is memorialized this year by a sheaf of wheat mounted on a large cross.

The Pope was able to visit Lourdes two years after the congress, August 14 and 15, 1983, something he held in his heart for many years, as he said at the time. The trip to Lourdes gave him “an indescribable joy. The memory of this feast of the Assumption will be one of the most beautiful ones of my life.” One can suppose that the Pope’s present visit 21 years later brings that same “indescribable joy” to the Holy Father and the pilgrims gathered in Lourdes.

The Pope has gone to Lourdes for the feast of the Assumption in 2004 to

observe the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. He sees it as an occasion to reaffirm our faith by contemplating this unique privilege of Our Lord's Mother. His pilgrimage inaugurates yearlong celebrations of this anniversary in the very place where the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous in 1858 as though to confirm the proclamation Bl. Pius IX had made four years earlier.

The dogma was proclaimed in the papal bull, "Ineffabilis Deus" on Dec. 8, 1854.

For more information on the present trip to Lourdes, see the Vatican website, *www.vatican.va*.

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