News
EarthBeat
Statue of Our Lady of Lourdes nestled in side of cliff; flood-waters obscure gathering space.

After river flooding had forced the temporary closure of the famous grotto at the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in southern France Sept. 7, 2024, the grotto was cleaned and was reopened, with no pilgrimages canceled. (OSV News/courtesy Lourdes Sanctuary)

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Lourdes, France — September 9, 2024
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River flooding forced the temporary closure of the famous grotto at the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in southern France. The shrine complex remained open to visitors. A morning Mass, however, was canceled Sept. 7 at the major Catholic pilgrimage site, which has experienced several major floods in recent years.

"Sudden rise in the waters of the Gave de Pau flooded the Grotto and the Sanctuary," the sanctuary stated Sept. 7 on X, formerly known as Twitter.

A notice on its website Sept. 7 similarly read, "Flooding. Sanctuary doors remain open. Information on site," with a photo showing the grotto partially submerged in water. Livestreamed video from the grotto on the afternoon of Sept. 7 indicated that

the flood waters had receded, as it showed water from the adjacent Gave de Pau river rushing along, but contained by, a berm in front of the grotto's plaza as workers used machinery to clean the area.

Later that day, the shrine released a statement saying that the grotto had been cleaned and was reopened, adding that no pilgrimages had been canceled. "The emergency flood protection plan has proved its effectiveness," the statement read. "Celebrations will resume at the usual times, in all the Shrine's basilicas and places of worship."

After Sept. 8 Mass in Papua New Guinea, Pope Francis said: "Our thoughts are with the shrine of Lourdes, which has unfortunately been hit by a flood."

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes is a 130-acre shrine complex that includes 22 places of worship, including three basilicas. The Gave de Pau bends sharply around the shrine, skirting the grotto on the sanctuary's north side. According to La Croix, a French Catholic media outlet, hundreds of pilgrims have been evacuated from their hotels.

"The city is frequently subject to flooding and has adopted procedures related to this risk," La Croix reported in French.

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The grotto is the site where 14-year-old St. Bernadette Soubirous reported 18 visions of Mary in 1858. Mary called for prayer and penance, and requested a chapel be built at the site. Mary identified herself as the "Immaculate Conception," the Catholic dogma that Mary was born without original sin, which had been formally defined only four years earlier by Pope Pius IX.

Around 6 million people visit Lourdes annually, including pilgrims seeking healing in Lourdes' baths, which contain water from a spring Bernadette discovered during Mary's apparitions. While thousands of healings related to the waters have been reported, about 70 have been confirmed by the special medical commission permanently working at the shrine.

The option of full immersion at the shrine's baths was recently restored following its suspension during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fully opened baths were a draw for

the record number of pilgrims — 7,000 — who participated in the annual Assumption pilgrimage to Lourdes in August, with thousands more attending the Aug. 15 feast day's outdoor Mass at the shrine.

The Sept. 7 statement letting people know that the grotto was cleaned and reopened after the floods also said that "Water infiltration in the swimming pools requires a complete clean-up and a check of the facilities, resulting in a postponement of the reopening by a few days."

The low-lying grotto has experienced major flooding in recent decades. Flooding in October 2012 caused about $3 million in damages.

Flooding the following year, in June 2013, was much more extensive: The river rose 15 feet, flooding the grotto and other holy sites, including the sanctuary's Basilica of St. Pius X, which is largely underground.

Flooding was also reported in September 2014 during a record-breaking rainfall.

On June 13, 2018, the river rose nearly 10 feet and flooded the grotto, but the sanctuary's flood defenses helped to prevent damage and protect the spring, and the grotto was reopened the following evening.