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Bishop Jacques Habert of Bayeux-Lisieux, France, censes a reliquary holding relics of the saint in the Basilica of St. Thérèse in Lisieux, where 9,000 people attended a ceremony Oct. 1, 2023, the feast of one of the Catholic Church's favorite saints. The ceremony officially opened the so-called Theresian celebrations held Sept. 30-Oct. 8. (OSV News photo/courtesy Sanctuary of St. Thérèse of Lisieux)

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St. Thérèse of Lisieux, long one of Pope Francis' favorite saints, teaches Christians "the little way" of love, self-giving, concern for others and complete trust in the mercy of God, the pope said in a new document.

"At a time when human beings are obsessed with grandeur and new forms of power, she points out to us the little way," he wrote. "In an age that casts aside so many of our brothers and sisters, she teaches us the beauty of concern and responsibility for one another."

Published Oct. 15, the pope's letter is titled, "C'est la Confiance," the opening words of her phrase, "It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love."

The papal letter is subtitled, "On confidence in the merciful love of God."

"At a time of great complexity, she can help us rediscover the importance of simplicity, the absolute primacy of love, trust and abandonment, and thus move beyond a legalistic or moralistic mindset that would fill the Christian life with rules and regulations and cause the joy of the Gospel to grow cold," the pope wrote.

In the letter, the pope explained that he chose not to release the document on her feast day, Oct. 1, or the 150th anniversary of her birth last Jan. 2 or the 100th anniversary of her beatification, which was celebrated in April, because he wanted to "transcend" those celebrations and emphasize how her life and writings are part of the "spiritual treasury" of the church.

Francis has spoken often about his devotion to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who also is known by her religious name, St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, or as St. Thérèse, the Little Flower, because she described herself as a little flower in God's garden.

But there is another flower connection as well. While still archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis told journalist Sergio Rubin in 2010, "When I have a problem I ask the saint, not to solve it, but to take it in her hands and help me accept it, and, as a sign, I almost always receive a white rose."

And the pope closed his new exhortation with a prayer: "Dear St. Thérèse, the church needs to radiate the brightness, the fragrance and the joy of the Gospel. Send us your roses! Help us to be, like yourself, ever confident in God's immense love for us, so that we may imitate each day your 'little way' of holiness."

Although she died at the age of 24 in a cloistered convent, her passion for sharing the Gospel through her prayers and example led Pope Pius XI to declare her patroness of the missions in 1927, and her writings led St. John Paul II to proclaim her a doctor of the church in 1997.

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"In the heart of Thérèse," Francis wrote, "the grace of baptism became this impetuous torrent flowing into the ocean of Christ's love and dragging in its wake a multitude of brothers and sisters. This is what happened, especially after her death. It was her promised 'shower of roses.' "

The "little way" of St. Thérèse is a path to holiness anyone can follow, the pope said. It is about recognizing one's own smallness and trusting completely in God's mercy.

"This is the 'sweet way of love' that Jesus sets before the little and the poor, before everyone. It is the way of true happiness," the pope said.

In place of a notion of holiness that is individualistic and elitist, one "more ascetic than mystical, that primarily emphasizes human effort," he said, "Thérèse always stresses the primacy of God's work, his gift of grace," trusting that he would bring her to heaven one day.

Even in speaking about the Eucharist, her desire to receive Communion took second place to "the desire of Jesus to unite himself to us and to dwell in our hearts," the pope said. "Her gaze remained fixed not on herself and her own needs, but on Christ, who loves, seeks, desires and dwells within."

In his exhortation, Francis focused on St. Thérèse's reflection of St. Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ with each part or member having a role to play in the functioning of the entire body.

But she did not see herself as the foot or the ear or the eye or the hand, as described in First Corinthians, the pope said. "In the heart of the church, my mother, I shall be love," she wrote.

"This heart was not that of a triumphalistic church, but of a loving, humble and merciful church," the pope wrote. "Thérèse never set herself above others but took the lowest place together with the Son of God, who for our sake became a slave and humbled himself, becoming obedient, even to death on a cross."

Rediscovering love as the heart of the church can be "a great source of light" for Catholics today, Francis said. "It preserves us from being scandalized by the limitations and weaknesses of the ecclesiastical institution with its shadows and sins, and enables us to enter into the church's 'heart burning with love,' which burst into flame at Pentecost thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit."

"It is that heart whose fire is rekindled with each of our acts of charity," he wrote. " 'I shall be love.' This was the radical option of Thérèse, her definitive synthesis and her deepest spiritual identity."