News
Religious Life



Pilgrims participate in a prayer vigil May 16, 2025, before the centenary of canonization of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in the sanctuary named for her in northern France's Normandy region. (OSV News/Courtesy of Olivier Valentin, Sanctuary of St. Thérèse in Lisieux)

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Catholics in Normandy commemorated the 100th anniversary of St. Thérèse of Lisieux's canonization with three days of solemn celebrations May 16-18. These included a live broadcast of Pope Leo XIV's May 18 inauguration Mass on giant screens in the Basilica of St. Thérèse in Lisieux.

The famed French saint, affectionately known by devotees as "The Little Flower," born Thérèse Martin, died of tuberculosis in 1897 at age 24, after nine years of religious life at the Carmelite convent in Lisieux. She quickly became the object of astonishing devotion, far beyond the borders of France. Beatified in 1923, she was canonized in Rome on May 17, 1925, by Pope Pius XI, who proclaimed her patroness of missions in 1927.

One hundred years after her death, in 1997, Pope John Paul II declared her a doctor of the church.

Fr. Emmanuel Schwab, since 2023 rector of the Sanctuary of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, oversaw the organization of the festivities. "They were designed to be widely open to an audience unfamiliar with the church," he told OSV News. "The entire city got involved, and activities were planned to appeal to everyone, regardless of their age, level of faith or religious practice."

On May 16 in the evening — a procession carrying the relics of St. Thérèse on a horse-drawn cart traveled through the streets of Lisieux, followed by several hundred people.

"We took (the relics) out of the Carmelite convent and brought them to St. Peter's Cathedral, where Thérèse used to go to Mass with her family," Schwab explained. "Thérèse's relics always stir up a lot of emotion and fervor."

The procession then made its way to the sanctuary's basilica, where pilgrims participated in a vigil of prayer late into the evening. Built between 1929 and 1954, in a neo-Byzantine style, the basilica can hold up to 3,000 pilgrims and welcomes nearly 1 million visitors a year, according to the Lisieux Tourist Office. It is particularly busy around Oct. 1, the liturgical feast day of St. Thérèse.

On May 17, St. Thérèse's reliquary was displayed on the esplanade of the basilica in the presence of a large crowd, while some of her writings were read and accompanied by hymns and chimes.

Bishop Jacques Habert of Bayeux-Lisieux presided over the solemn anniversary Mass, together with other bishops of Normandy. It began with the reading of the homily that Pius had delivered in Rome during the Little Flower's canonization Mass in 1925.

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Throughout the weekend, visitors, pilgrims and curious onlookers participated in activities related to the life and spirituality of St. Thérèse. They were able to make a jubilee pilgrimage and go to confession, but also take part in treasure hunts for children, guided tours of the wax museum, and help build a large structure out of Lego-style building bricks.

In places where St. Thérèse lived, such as her home — called "Les Buissonnets" — people who were dressed in late 19th-century costumes welcomed visitors and helped them immerse themselves in the atmosphere of everyday life in Lisieux in St. Thérèse's time.

Among the speakers who took part was the great-grandson of architect Louis-Marie Cordonnier, who was commissioned to build the basilica, which Pius wanted to be "very large, very beautiful and built as quickly as possible!" Schwab said.

"All the popes of the 20th century took a keen interest in St. Thérèse," Schwab pointed out. He said people of Normandy have felt really proud since the election of Pope Leo, knowing that his paternal grandmother was born in Normandy in 1894.

For Habert, there is still today a "mystery" surrounding the fact that St. Thérèse has always attracted a lot of attention, in addition to the enormous success of the book

"Story of a Soul," which combines her autobiographical accounts and her spiritual testament.

"When I walk across the square in front of the basilica in Lisieux, I am always struck by the number of people who clearly are not used to going to church," he said. "They have heard about Thérèse, are interested in her, and want to come in and light a candle. It is a kind of attraction that is beyond our understanding. Many Carmelite nuns lived holy lives."

Habert told OSV News that Thérèse would not "be one of the founders of great orders" and "her death was a completely private event — yet she very quickly attracted crowds of people, and Pope Pius X called her 'the greatest saint of modern times,' even before she was canonized."

"During World War I, many soldiers, both French and German, testified to their devotion to her and the graces they had received through her intercession," Schwab added. "And since then, enthusiasm for her has not waned."

For the rector, it is the "little way" of Thérèse that explains her enduring success. "When we talk about love, it attracts everyone, in every age," he said. "In her writings, it is striking to see the constant attention she paid to God's action in her life. She perceived God's love and mercy directed toward her, and wanted to renounce her own strength in order to make herself available and dependent on God's love. This way of seeing things was very original in her time, when a more severe conception of God as judge of the living and the dead was widespread. She had an astonishing spiritual freedom."

"Humanly speaking, it is quite incomprehensible that such a short, laborious, and even difficult life, and one that was so hidden, have aroused so much interest," Habert concluded. "But what we see is that Thérèse placed God's love at the center of her life. Clearly, this continues to bear fruit today."