

DEACON-MARTYR-CHAMPION OF THE 'UNWASHED'!

by

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On August 10/23, the Church commemorates the martyrdom of a true Christian stalwart soul, Holy Martyr Archdeacon Lawrence. St. Lawrence served as one of the seven deacons of Rome, suffering martyrdom, along with his bishop, Sixtus II and other clergy (including deacons Felicissimus and Agapitus) in August of 258. The bishop of Rome and most of his clergy were executed on 7 August with St. Lawrence's martyrdom following in three days. St. Lawrence and the other victims were martyred during the persecution of Valerian.

The Pontiff Sixtus, from the cross
On, which he hung, saw at its foot
His deacon Lawrence weeping sore,
And these prophetic words he spoke:

'Let tears of sorrow cease to flow
At my departure from this life;
My brother, I but lead the way,
And you will follow in three days.'¹

According to St. Ambrose of Milan², St. Lawrence was weeping because he was being left behind:

...his bishop led to martyrdom, began to weep, not at his sufferings but at the fact that he himself was to remain behind. With these words he began to address him: 'Whither, holy priest, art thou hastening without thy deacon? Never was thou wont to offer sacrifice without an attendant. What art thou displeased at in me, my father? Hast thou found me unworthy? Prove, then, whether thou hast chosen a fitting servant. To him to whom thou hast entrusted the [distribution] of the Saviour's blood, to whom thou hast granted fellowship in partaking of the Sacraments, to him dost thou refuse a part in thy death?'

St. Lawrence, the consummate deacon, devout and loyal servant, didn't want to be left out, left behind in the shedding of blood in the name of Christ. He wasn't going to let the bishop 'carry the can' so-to-speak. His was a valiant gesture in the highest true Christian tradition. Pope Sixtus replied that he was not leaving him or forsaking him, and he would follow after three days.³ St. Lawrence's witness epitomises faith in the midst of suffering.

He was also the caretaker of funds and alms distribution in early Rome. He was offered freedom if he would surrender all the wealth. St. Lawrence agreed but stated that he would need some time to 'round up' the 'assets' and evaluate their total worth. The saint had told the Roman prefect that his Church was indeed very rich:

'Our church is very rich,' he said.
'I must confess that it has wealth;
Our treasuries are filled with gold
Not found elsewhere in all the world.'⁴

Imagine the prefect's surprise, and chagrin when St. Lawrence's idea about wealth turned out to be substantially different from his:

He hastens through the city streets,
And in three days he gathers up
The poor and sick, a mighty throng
Of all in need of kindly alms.

...

He sought in every public square
The needy who were wont to be
Fed from the stores of Mother Church,
And he as steward knew them well.⁵

The saint brought the multitude of poor and needy before the temple gate and invited the prefect to go with him to see these "wondrous riches of our God":

'These poor of ours are sick and lame,
But beautiful and whole within.
They bear with them a spirit fair
And free from taint and misery

...

These humble paupers you despise
And look upon as vile outcasts,
Their ulcerous limbs will lay aside
And put on bodies incorrupt,

When freed at last from tainted flesh
Their souls, from chains of earth released,
Will shine resplendent with new life
In their celestial fatherland.

Not foul and shabby, or infirm,
As now they seem to scornful eyes,
But fair, in radiant vesture clad,
With crowns of gold upon their heads.⁶

Needless to say, the official was not amused. Indeed, he was livid, accusing the saint of making him a laughingstock, mocking him and committing a farce. He threatened him with a slow and lingering death, prepared a bed of coals and ordered the saint to ascend the pyre and lie on the bed he deserved. He was to be “trussed up like a chicken and roasted on a gridiron over a slow fire”.⁷

His Christian strength being tested, the saint rose to the occasion:

When slow, consuming heat had seared
The flesh of Lawrence for a space,
He calmly from his gridiron made
This terse proposal to the judge:

‘Pray turn my body, on one side
Already broiled sufficiently,
And see how well your Vulcan’s fire
Has wrought its cruel punishment.’

The prefect bade him to be turned.
Then Lawrence spoke: ‘I am well baked,
And whether better cooked or raw,
Make trial by a taste of me’.

He said these words in jest;
Then rising shining eyes to heaven
And sighing deeply, thus he prayed
With pity for unholy Rome.⁸

St. Lawrence stood up for Christ, never flinching. His was a shining example of faith, courage, steadfastness, loyalty, service. Could we follow his lead? You say that such ‘sacrifice’ is not needed in contemporary society? This might appear to be the case, at present, in the United States. We are indeed blessed to live in freedom when much of the world knows nothing, or little, of it. Yet, even our freedoms may lack enduring permanence.

We should never forget that Christians all over the world are challenged, persecuted and discriminated against by local despots and pagans, many times resulting in their deaths by hideous means. In such times of Christian struggle, let us rely on the Saviour's words- remember and etch them in our hearts:

And I say unto you, my friends. Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.⁹

...

Also, I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him shall the Son of Man also confess before the angels of God: but he that denieth Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God. And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven. And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: for the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.¹⁰

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, *Hymn in Honor of the Passion of the Blessed Martyr Lawrence*, year 405, as quoted in Michael Closs, *St. Lawrence – Deacon and Martyr*, p.2, http://www.deacons.net/Deacons_before_us/lawrence.html .

² *On the Duties of the Clergy* translated by the Rev. H. De Romestin. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 10, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, (1.41, 2.28) about year 391 as quoted at the above web site, p.1.

³ *id.*

⁴ Prudentius, *op. cit.*, p.2.

⁵ *id.*

⁶ *id.*, p. 3.

⁷ St. Lawrence Orthodox Church, *St. Lawrence of Rome*, <http://www.slocc.com/orthodoxy/stlawrence.shtml>.

⁸ Prudentius, *op. cit.*, pp.3-4.

⁹ Luke 12: 4

¹⁰ Luke 12: 8-12