

Saint Paul tells us, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever” (2 Cor 9:9). The Psalmist tells us, “Lavishly he gives to the poor, his generosity shall endure forever; his horn shall be exalted in glory” (112:9). Both of these readings were selected for the Memorial of Saint Lawrence, a deacon from the third century when the church was under persecution.

The Emperor of the Roman Empire, Valerian, had little tolerance for Christians. If they did not make sacrifices to Roman gods, then the priests faced banishment. Finding great resistance among the clergy, he exerted more pressure and ordered the execution of Pope Sixtus II and 4 deacons on the 6th of August. Deacon Lawrence was willing to die on that day and begged the pope, “If I distribute the Precious Blood of our Lord at the altar, why may I not offer my own blood this day as a martyr?”

Pope Sixtus II assured him his time of martyrdom would come soon enough.

As a deacon in Rome working directly with Pope Sixtus II, Lawrence held a position of trust caring for the temporal goods of the Church ... serving the poor by providing alms to help them. He was also an archdeacon often serving alongside the pope at important liturgies. Before his death, Pope Sixtus II ordered a distribution of all that was possible to assist the poor.

Soon enough, Deacon Lawrence was taken into custody and asked to surrender the wealth of the church. The persecutors wanted gold and fine jewels. They were not pleased with the biblical response they received. Jesus teaches:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. (Mt 6:19-21).

Lawrence returned three days later with the “treasure of the church” ... the poor and the sick whom he had supported. In turning them over, he spoke honestly from his heart, “Here are the treasures of the Church!” Needless to say, this sat well with the church, but not with those who were anxious to martyr Deacon Lawrence.

The prefect had a great gridiron prepared with white hot coals beneath it. He had Lawrence’s body tortured upon it. Placing his trust in the Lord, Lawrence endured great suffering but not without a sense of humor. According to legend, he said, “It is well done. Turn me over!” Lawrence died but with a prayer on his tongue for the conversion of Rome.

“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Lawrence’s heroic martyrdom did indeed produce positive results. Others were less likely to cave into the demands of the emperor to offer sacrifices to false gods. Idolatry began to decline in Rome. Of lesser note, he is the patron saint of comics. Of greater note, he is the patron saint of the poor.

The martyrs of every century make us pause and think about what is truly important in life. If our destiny is indeed eternity with our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, should we not also be willing to stand up to tyranny in order to profess our faith with our very lives?

Sources:

1. catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/calendar/day.cfm?date=2019-08-10
2. franciscanmedia.org/saint-lawrence/
3. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_\(emperor\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_(emperor))