

St. Lawrence and the “Treasures of the Church”



St. Lawrence of Rome (c. 225–258) Born in Osca, Spain, Lawrence was ordained a deacon, and though still young, was appointed first among the seven deacons who served in the patriarchal church. Lawrence was called the arch-deacon of Rome, a position of great trust that included the care of the treasury and riches of the church and distribution of alms among the poor. At that time, Roman authorities had established a norm according to which all Christians who had been denounced must be executed and their goods confiscated by the Imperial treasury. At the beginning of August 258, the emperor Valerian issued an edict that all bishops, priests, and deacons should immediately be put to death. Pope Sixtus II was captured on the sixth of August 258, while celebrating the liturgy and was quickly executed.

After the death of Sixtus, the prefect of Rome demanded that Lawrence turn over the riches of the Church. It is reported that St. Lawrence asked for three days to gather together the wealth. He worked swiftly to distribute as much Church property to the poor as possible, so as to prevent its being seized by the prefect. On the third day, at the head of a small delegation, he presented himself to the prefect, and when ordered to give up the treasures of the Church Lawrence presented the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering, and said these were the true treasures of the Church.

One account records St. Lawrence declaring to the prefect, "The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor." In great anger of this act of defiance, the Prefect condemned Lawrence to a slow, cruel death. Lawrence was tied on top of an iron grill over a slow fire that roasted his flesh little by little. It is said that Lawrence was burning with so much love of God that he seemed almost not to feel the flames. The legend further concludes that Lawrence made his famous cheerful remark, "I'm well done on this side. Turn me over!" And from this derives his patronage of cooks, chefs and comedians. Lawrence of Rome was declared a saint by the early Christian community soon after his martyrdom in 258.