

The story of St Lawrence (or Laurence)

St Lawrence was one of the seven deacons of Rome and, like the original seven appointed with Stephen, had responsibility for the administration of the church. Despite having no legal standing, the huge church of Rome had in fact accumulated a large amount of property and a fund out of which were maintained widows and orphans, girls vowed to virginity and a wider circle of poor and needy persons. The Roman State had no system of social security and the church's pioneer work in bringing organised relief to those whom society ignored, was one of the things which impressed and moved converts. When the Bishop of Rome was martyred, Lawrence is said to have cried out, 'Father, where shall the bishop go without his faithful deacon?' The Bishop replied, 'In two days, you shall follow me', and so it proved, for the deacon was in turn arrested.

It was intimated to Lawrence that his life would be spared if he surrendered to the Prefect of the City the church funds of which he was the administrator. Lawrence asked for time to collect the money and spent the night distributing the funds to the poor, asking each recipient to be present in the forum the next morning. When the Prefect asked where the treasure of the Church was, Lawrence gestured towards the great crowd of paupers and exclaimed, 'There is the treasure of the Church, the poor whom she loves and feeds in the name of Christ'.

Refusing to accept that this was more than a subterfuge, the Prefect had Lawrence tortured to exact from him the real hiding place of the missing funds. Traditionally, Lawrence suffered by being roasted on a gridiron – which is his emblem in art – and his last words were said to be, 'You can turn me over now. This side is done.'

Lawrence's Feast Day, which we celebrate, is the 10th August. He was martyred in 238AD.

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