

## **Secondary Assembly**

### **St Lawrence the Deacon**

---

Today, many people would think of Rome as the visible centre of the Catholic Church. This is because the Pope lives in Vatican City, which is in fact, an independent city state within the city of Rome. As in independent state, the Vatican is able to mint its own coins and print its own stamps. It also has its own legal system and diplomatic missions abroad. There is however no border controls – no one has to show their passport to cross from Italy into Vatican City or vice versa.

It might be easy to imagine that it has always been like this, but this is not the case. Although Saint Peter was the first Pope and Bishop of Rome, in the early days of Christianity, it was a minority religion with small number of followers in Rome, the capital of the Empire. Sunday was a normal working day, so to attend Mass, Christians often had to get up very early in the morning.

The 'new' religion was also misunderstood by many and so was seen as a threat. When Rome was severely damaged by fire in AD 64, the emperor Nero blamed the Christians and began a persecution of them. There were various periods of persecution in the first three hundred years of Christianity.

One period of persecution began in AD 257, when the Emperor Valerian issued an edict ordering priests to offer sacrifice to pagan gods. Those who refused were executed. One of the victims at this time was Pope Sixtus II who was put to death in AD 258, together with several of his deacons. His death meant that another deacon, Lawrence, suddenly found himself as the most senior ranking Church official until a new pope was elected. The city authorities demanded that Lawrence hand over all the treasures of the Church on August 10<sup>th</sup> of that same year.

On the appointed day when the authorities turned up they found Lawrence with a crowd of beggars, sick people and poverty-stricken individuals. When asked to hand over the treasures of the Church, Lawrence pointed to all the poor people that were with him and announced that they were the treasures of the Church. For this, Lawrence was also martyred.

His example of fidelity to Christ and to his vocation as deacon proved a great inspiration to the persecuted Christian community. Lawrence was also known for his generosity to those who were poor. Even today, his name is sometimes mentioned in Eucharistic Prayer One at Mass. Eventually, in AD 313, Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, issued an edict allowing Christianity to be practised throughout the Empire.

This year is 1750 years since Lawrence's death, and although he was not in any way the only person to be martyred, the circumstances surrounding his death have made him a popular saint.

## Points to reflect on:

- If there was a new persecution of religion today, how far would you be willing to go for your beliefs?
- What is a deacon and how is this ordained ministry different to that of priests and bishops? (Point out the difference between a 'permanent deacon' and a man destined for priesthood)
- Many of our churches are quite nicely decorated and furnished buildings. Do we think of each other, and especially those less well off as the 'treasures of the Church'? Can we see the face of Christ in the poor?

## Prayer

From a sermon of Saint Augustine

*Lawrence was a deacon of the Church at Rome. There he ministered the sacred blood of Christ; there for the sake of Christ's name he poured out his own blood. Saint John the apostle was evidently teaching us about the mystery of the Lord's supper when he wrote: "Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for others." My brothers and sisters, Lawrence understood this and, understanding, he acted on it. In his life he loved Christ; in his death he followed in his footsteps.*

*Brethren, we too must imitate Christ if we truly love him. We shall not be able to give any better return on that love than by modeling our lives on his. "Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in his steps." The holy martyrs followed Christ even to shedding their life's blood. They followed him, but not they alone.*

*On no account may any class of people despair, thinking that God has not called them. Christ suffered for all. What the Scriptures say of him is true: "He desires all to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth."*

*I tell you again and again my children that on no account may any class of people despair, thinking that God has not called them. Christ suffered for all. What the Scriptures say of him is true: "He desires all to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth."*

Father in heaven, your holy martyrs follow the example of Christ your Son and give their lives for the glory of your name. Their deaths reveal your power, shining through our human weakness. You choose the weak and make them strong. Help us to be like Saint Lawrence in loving you, in doing your work and in bearing witness to you through our lives. May we each discover our own vocation in life and embrace it with confidence and faith as he did. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.