

Readings: *2 Corinthians 9: 6 – 10; Psalm 111 (112); John 12: 24 – 26.*

Laurence, one of the seven deacons of Rome, was executed on 10th August 258. That is all we know for certain about him. But time has embellished his story: This is the traditional account of his death. On 6th August, Laurence was on his way to one of the catacombs on the outskirts of the city – one of his tasks as a deacon was to look after the places where Christians were buried. As he arrived, he met the Bishop, Pope Sixtus and four of his fellow deacons. They were under arrest. In the previous year the emperor Valerian, who up to this point had been friendly, published a decree against Christians. They were ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods to show their loyalty to the state. Most refused, so the emperor had set about destroying the Church by executing its leaders in Egypt, North Africa, and Rome.

Laurence asked the Pope: “Father, where are you going without your deacon?”, and received the reply “You will follow me in four days.” The Pope and his four deacons were beheaded immediately, and two more of the seven were arrested and executed later in the day.

Laurence, left alone in charge of the Church’s goods and responsible for caring for the needy, sold the sacred vessels to add to the sum he had and distributed it all to the sick, widows and orphans. When ordered to surrender the church’s wealth, as the emperor needed money to pay his troops, Laurence spent three days collecting together all whom the Church supported – blind, lame, lepers, orphans, and widows among them – and on the fourth day invited the city prefect to inspect the true treasures of the Church. Understandably, the prefect took this as an insult, and ordered that Laurence be slowly roasted to death on a gridiron. From his burning body arose smoke, which was noxious to pagan spectators, but gave off a sweet smell to believers. The story ends with the well-known request to be turned over so that the other side could be cooked.

The truth is probably that, like his bishop and fellow deacons, Laurence was beheaded. He was buried in one of the cemeteries, where the Basilica of S. Laurence-Outside-the-Walls now stands. The persecution ended the following year and Laurence has since been honoured as the most famous of the Roman martyrs after the founding apostles Peter and Paul. Many artists have portrayed Laurence as a joyful, generous, and courageous witness to Christ.