

St Lawrence. 10th August – prepared by Dr Sophia Errey

One of the earliest non-Biblical saints to be commemorated in images was Lawrence, who was martyred in Rome in the third century. In the 380s St Ambrose wrote a guide for his clergy and included an account of Lawrence's life and death. This was later popularized by Prudentius in his *Peristephanon*, ("Crowns of Martyrdom", a series of 14 poems) written c 404-5.

Lawrence was one of the seven deacons appointed by Sixtus II in 257 to be in charge of finances, and the distribution of supplies to the poor, the "ministry" role of the deacons referred to in Acts Ch 6.

Fra Angelico and his team painted scenes from the life of St Lawrence in the lower section of the Capella Niccolina in the Vatican between 1447 and 1551. These two panels show him receiving the treasures, and distributing to the poor.



In August 258 the Emperor Valerian ordered all bishops, priests and deacons executed. Sixtus, who was conducting a service at the Catacomb of Callixtus was seized and executed immediately.

When ordered by the Prefect of Rome to hand over the wealth of the Church, which was rumoured to be large. Lawrence asked for three days to get the wealth together, distributed all of the available funds, and, in Prudentius' poem "He runs about the city gathering in to one flock the companies of the infirm and all the beggars who cry out for alms" and presented the gathered crowd with the words "These are the treasures of the church." He was executed by being placed on a gridiron over a blazing fire.

Hence the apse mosaic in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. A city which, as the Imperial capital from 402 to 476, the Ostrogothic capital from 476 to 540, then a Byzantine centre until 751, was enriched with a series of churches with extraordinary mosaics. Here a deacon, who has long been identified as Lawrence, with a cross borne over his shoulder ("Take up your cross and follow Me") and an open Gospel on his respectfully covered hand, moves lightly – joyfully- toward the flaring brazier, on the other side of which a book cupboard displays the four Gospels. His robe, the cross and book allude to his role as a deacon – leading the procession and reading the scriptures during the services.



Because he refused to hand over the holy books also Lawrence is the patron of archivists and librarians.

Phillip 11 of Spain dedicated his enormous, austere monastery/residence near Madrid, El Escorial, built between 1563 and 1584 to St Lawrence, having won a significant battle on 10th August.

