THE LAST DEACON OF ROME

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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ABSTRACT

Legends and myths have been the subject of storytellers throughout all of human history. St. Lawrence the Deacon’s tale is of no exception. The saint’s epic has been told again and again across the centuries. Though his legacy has faded from the popular culture, I revive it here in the form of a ballad, THE LAST DEACON OF ROME. By poring over both contemporary and ancient accounts of the deacon, I bring to life his death. The ballad honors the saint and paints his martyrdom as a sign of hope for all generations.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin by saying that this frightful section could undoubtedly be longer than the whole of the project. As such, I ask pardon from all of those who deserve to be mentioned here, but go unmentioned due to my own fault. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea máxima culpa.*

I begin by thanking my advisor, Jean Amman. She has always proven to be supportive of my work and style. Even when it might have seemed that this project would not reach fruition, Jean put trust in me and continued giving her simple, good-natured advice. Again, I give you my thanks for your wonderful help and encouragement.

Next, I thank the David Owsley Museum of Art and its many aides for so freely lending their time to me. They diligently held a correspondence with me and generously allowed precious artwork to be reproduced herein. To oblige what was asked of me from the museum, I place supplementary citation material here so as to help other potential researchers.


Austin deserves particular mention, for one of our lunch discussions first planted the seed of this project in my head.

I would like to thank Fr. Dennis for his genuine friendship and guidance. May St. Lawrence bless you always!

I now thank all of those who have given me support over the years:

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Caleb and Ryan.

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All priests and religious, especially the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Carmelites.

The Church and all her saints.
AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

*THE LAST DEACON OF ROME* is a short ballad poem that tells the legendary tale of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence the Deacon. The purpose of the project is threefold:

Firstly, I intend to honor the memory of the saint and his companions. St. Lawrence has served as an icon of heroic virtue for the Roman Church since his death in the third century; however, his name has noticeably faded from popular devotion and the secular culture. I wish to add to the echo of that holy man, even if my work becomes no more than a mere whisper in bellows of the world.

Secondly, I wish to join the ranks of the pious commoner poets and storytellers who once took it upon themselves to tell their families and friends of that noble death. The household troubadours and the blue-collar epic poets had captured the essence of the deacon in their many tall tales. It was as if they knew St. Lawrence like one knows a good friend. Eventually, their true devotion crossed into myth. Yet, to those pious poets, those myths spoke of the truest truths and the greatest realities. As such, I bind myself to their cause, and report those stories as I hear them—as all great storytellers do—so as to mingle with the minds of the devout dead.

Thirdly and finally, I hope to pay homage to historic Muncie’s oldest Catholic church, St. Lawrence Parish. Muncie Catholics have been attended to for over 150 years. Their own account summarizes the Catholic presence in Muncie succinctly: “According to the chronicles of St. Lawrence Parish, Catholics in this area were ministered to as early as the mid-nineteenth century. It is known that Fr. Daniel Maloney would come from Indianapolis on a regular basis to celebrate Mass in the homes of Patrick Tuhey and Peter Cepican 5
Munch” (“Parish History”). The first church building was erected in 1869 under Fr. Lawrence Lamour; thus, when the church was dedicated, it took the name St. Lawrence after the founding priest. Today’s building is of a different construction, and its cornerstone has been resting on Muncie soil since July 4, 1893. Of course, the building has seen many additions and renovations over the years (“Parish History”).

Interestingly enough, Muncie’s own David Owsley Museum of Art also pays tribute to St. Lawrence. The establishment boasts two stunning paintings of this Roman deacon: Massimo Stanzione’s *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* (see Fig. 1) and Maarten de Vos’ *St. Lawrence* (see Fig. 2). I had once overheard that these priceless pieces were attained specifically in honor of Muncie’s venerable Catholic tradition; however, Dr. Robert G. La France, the current Museum Director, said rather plainly that “[a]s far as we know, the fact that both depict St. Lawrence is a lucky coincidence, and not part of a plan to to [sic.] acquire images of the saint” (qtd. in Vaughn). Even so, I embrace this providential thread and emphasize its presence. This “lucky coincidence” is part and parcel of Muncie’s comprehensive St. Lawrence tradition, and I include it here with the rest without partiality. These beautiful paintings simply deserve to be on record, as they tell the tale of that last deacon better than my own words can ever hope to try.
FIG. 1. St. Lawrence is stretched out upon the fiery gridiron, the means of his martyrdom. Notice the angel giving him a palm branch; it is the traditional symbol for the martyr's victory over the flesh.
FIG. 2. de Vos' details are telling. Here St. Lawrence is ornamented with classic iconography. He carries the martyr's victory palm in his left hand while the instrument of his death rests directly below. He even wears the liturgical vestments of his vocation.
Before I tread any further, I want to briefly comment on the style that was chosen to compose *THE LAST DEACON OF ROME*. This poem assumes the form of a ballad. As such, it is highlighted by stanzas of 4 to 6 lines each. The stanzas assume a fairly regular pattern of ABCB or ABCCCB, and lines are often repeated for added emphasis. This simple ballad style was chosen because it captures the feel of folk story and fable. The ballad boasts some unrivaled quality in relating the legendary. Its rhyme drives the piece forward with a sense of excitement and urgency. Paradoxically, its tone takes on the fantastical to more perfectly portray the practical. It clings to form so as to embrace a freedom unknown to prose; indeed, the ballad's recurring structure reflects the cyclical nature of life. Most importantly, the ballad embodies the essence of a hardy shanty. In this way, the piece brings to mind a song sung by the common man. As I have said, I look to join my voices to the poets of old. It is my hope that a ballad may produce this effect and so marry my song to their ancient harmony. G.K. Chesterton achieved this to great effect in his *The Ballad of the White Horse*; I imitate his handiwork in earnest. If I could only capture but a mere hundredth of his wit and wisdom, my piece would have no prospect of being boring!

In order to properly prepare the reader for the subject of my ballad, I offer yet another threefold overview. The first part covers the pious cult of St. Lawrence over the centuries and into the present day. The second part outlines the men involved in the plot of the martyrdom. The third and final part summarizes the story of the martyrdom itself. This three-part section aims to lay down a firm historical foundation about the life and death of St. Lawrence and, by doing so, paint the poem plainly.
Ever since his death in the third century, St. Lawrence has been the subject of pious devotion and fantastic legend. By the fourth century, the oral tradition of his epic end had spread throughout Christendom and had been preserved in the Depositio Martyrvm (Moraglia). Pope St. Damasus (366-84) loved the martyr so much that he wrote a panegyric in verse about St. Lawrence; this honor remains engraved in marble above the Pontiff’s own tomb (Kirsch). The devoted Damasus also dedicated churches after the beloved saint, and many such tributes sprang up in rapid succession in these early years after the deacon’s death. The two earliest written accounts of the martyrdom are found within the works of the Spanish poet Marcus Aurelius Prudentius and St. Ambrose, the famed bishop-teacher to St. Augustine. Prudentius’ work is a lengthy poem while St. Ambrose’s account is contained within his three-part book On the Duties of the Clergy (Kirsch). Select portions of the book highlight St. Lawrence as an exemplar of the clergy. Both of these fourth-century accounts preserve the earliest stories of the saint: the dramatic meeting between Pope St. Sixtus II and St. Lawrence is one such tale, and this particular scene is found time and time again across popular hagiographies.

By the time of the high Middle Ages, the Church had strongly continued her devotion to the saint with newfound fervor. Old tales of the martyrdom were revived again, bound within the pages of The Golden Legend. This thirteenth-century text told the lives of the most popular saints in the most extraordinary ways. A mere 1000 years later, both St. Lawrence and his fatherly friend Pope St. Sixtus found their way into this widely read book. Their entries delightfully echo the ancient writings of Prudentius and St. Ambrose.
The Golden Legend was compiled by the Dominican archbishop Bl. Jacobus de Voragine. His Golden Legend would itself become a legend in the history of literature. Indeed, “[h]is work at once sprang into popular favor and continued to be perhaps the most widely read book, with the exception of the Holy Scriptures, during the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries” (Walsh 214; ch. 13). The learned Dr. James J. Walsh provides significant commentary on this literary behemoth:

Jacobus de Voragine's work consisted of the lives of the greater Saints of the Church since the time of Christ, and detailed especially the wonderful things that happened in their lives, some of which of course were mythical and all of them containing marvelous stories. This gave prominence to many legends that have continued to maintain their hold upon the popular imagination ever since. With all this adventitious interest, however, the book contained a solid fund of information with regard to the lives of the Saints, and besides it taught the precious lessons of unselfishness and the care for others of the men who had come to be greeted by the title of Saint. The work must have done not a little to stir up the faith, enliven the charity, and build up the characters of the people of the time, and certainly has fewer objections than most popular reading at any period of the world's history. For young folks the wonderful legends afforded excellent and absolutely innocuous exercise of the functions of the imagination quite as well as our own modern wonder books or fairy tales, while the stories themselves presented many descriptive portions out of which subjects for decorative purposes could readily be obtained. It must be set
down as another typical distinction of the Thirteenth Century and an
collection to its greatness, that it should have made the Golden Legend
popular and thus preserved it for future generations, who became deeply
interested in it, as in most of the other precious heritages they received
from this great original century. (214, 215; ch. 13)

Dr. Walsh impeccably discloses the gravity of this text to the world. The Golden Legend
was both popular and inspiring, genuinely contributing to the cultural wealth of society
for centuries. The work mustered the zeal of the Christian faithful, enlivened the
imaginations of the nations, and moved artists to make the best of their craft. Perhaps
most importantly, The Golden Legend preserved the spirit of the saints. It is enough that
these traditions remain; the popular traditions are popular for a reason! They tell us about
the saints but also reveal the storytellers. These legends are the treasured heritage of the
faithful: past, present, and future. Thus, St. Lawrence, St. Sixtus, and their companions
remain fresh in the Catholic mind today.

This ever-enduring nature of these third-century martyrs is simply shown within
the pages of Thomas a Kempis’ The Imitation of Christ. Though the text was compiled in
the fifteenth century, it remains one of the most popular Christian devotional books to
this very day. The Spanish counter-reformer and founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of
Loyola, found conversion through this book, and the French Discalced Carmelite St.
Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) cherished the same book dearly. Many others have
likewise come to fall in love with The Imitation of Christ. Indeed, “[w]ith the exception
of the Bible, no Christian writing has had so wide a vogue or so sustained a popularity as
this...it promises to remain, what it has been for five hundred years, the supreme call and

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guide to spiritual aspiration" (Rev. William Benham qtd. in a Kempis). Bound within this book, in one solitary and subtle paragraph, is found that enduring echo of the deacon of Rome:

We are willing to accept anything for comfort, and it is difficult for a man to be freed from himself. The holy martyr Laurence overcame the love of the world and even of his priestly master, because he despised everything in the world which seemed to be pleasant; and for the love of Christ he calmly suffered even God's chief priest, Sixtus, whom he dearly loved, to be taken from him. Thus by the love of the Creator he overcame the love of man, and instead of human comfort he chose rather God's good pleasure. So also learn thou to resign any near and beloved friend for the love of God. Nor take it amiss when thou hast been deserted by a friend, knowing that we must all be parted from one another at last. (a Kempis; ch. 9)

This passage is in the chapter titled “Of the lack of all comfort.” Although this short section is the only part in the entirety of The Imitation of Christ that speaks of the deacon and his Pope, the fact that such allusions even exist is extraordinary and incredibly telling. Of all the vast riches of saints and Scriptures, these unlikely two were picked to serve as the exemplars of saintly virtue. As such, one might begin to marvel about how these martyrs were exalted as the paragons for Christian perfection. After nearly 1800 years, the Church and her faithful still look to Ss. Lawrence and Sixtus! It must be said that these saints are not merely the champions of holy detachment but also of detachment’s end, which is Charity Himself. They were not slaves of the world, nor were
they slaves to one another. Instead, their love of God perfected their love for each other, stripping it of any selfish ends.

What is meant by these words is hard to convey, and that hidden meaning is nothing short of a paradox of perfection. Detachment, a word so cold to modern ears, is perhaps the most optimistic philosophy of the ages. Detachment is not merely a loss but also a gain. Even the purely practical fellow can follow this line of logic: every single choice must eliminate hundreds of other possible choices. The detached man, aware of his finite nature, is willing to sacrifice many goods for what is yet greater. In this dance of detachment, he must choose one good over another. In this way, detachment is the saint's waltz to perfection; he makes room in his heart for love. The ways of the world and of the flesh are consequently cast aside for heavenly things. Perfectly detached men such as Ss. Lawrence and Sixtus gave up everything for the promise of Everything: "But, as it is written: That eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for them that love him" (The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version, 1 Cor. 2.9).

It is in this light that a Kempis's words on the saints must be read, for holy detachment does not mean an uninterested friendship but rather a disinterested one. This distinction is paramount! The former means uncaring while the latter means unbiased and impartial. Hence, detached and disinterested relationships are defined by radical selflessness. They are not caught in the snares of personal interest or gain. Such is the legendary friendship held between Lawrence and Sixtus! This is why the two are still praised by the Church and considered worthy of imitation.
Still, the reader may yet be confused how St. Lawrence might be considered a true friend, having “calmly suffered even God's chief priest, Sixtus, whom he dearly loved, to be taken from him” (a Kempis; ch. 9). St. Lawrence did indeed watch his cherished friend die, but he did so with purity of heart. In some way, Pope St. Sixtus was St. Lawrence’s supreme offering to God. Like the Blessed Virgin, who gave up her beloved Son to Calvary and the cross, St. Lawrence gave up his father, friend, and master to the executioner’s blade. This faith amidst suffering is the perfect mark of St. Lawrence’s unconditional love of God. Truly, the loss of his friend was likely the heaviest cross to bear. Not even the flames that would later send him into Paradise could compare.

Even so, St. Lawrence’s greatest act of charity towards Sixtus was allowing the martyrdom to take place unhindered. St. Lawrence did not look to undo the Pope’s conviction. Instead, the deacon silently obeyed the last requests of his friend, and with kindly consolation, readied him to be rewarded with the red crown of martyrdom and the consummate splendor of the Divine Intimacy of the Triune God. Lawrence could offer no greater gift to his friend than God Himself.

These decisions were made with the perfect hope of the Gospel. To Ss. Lawrence and Sixtus, time was nothing in the face of eternity. Death, too, was but an old friend—a necessary friend—who welcomed the faithful into the communion of saints. In the minds of these holy men, nothing could keep them apart:

(As it is written: For thy sake we are put to death all the day long. We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.) But in all things we overcome, because of him that hath loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor
things to come, nor might, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version, Rm. 8.36-39)

Recall then that all of these ideas are stunningly contained in one small paragraph bound in The Imitation of Christ. Without question, the martyred duo endures today as the exemplar of true friendship.

Having established the persistent relevance of the cult of St. Lawrence, I now offer the Dramatis personae of the piece:

ST. LAWRENCE, the central focus and namesake of THE LAST DEACON OF ROME, was “one of the victims of the persecution of Valerian in 258, like Pope Sixtus II and many other members of the Roman clergy” (Kirsch). Six other ancient deacons preceded him in gaining the sacred crown of martyrdom: Felicissimus, Agapitus, Januarius, Vincentius, Magnus, and Stephanus (Kirsch; Ott). As the title of the ballad implies, St. Lawrence was the last of the seven (Kirsch).

Long before the Valerian persecutions in Rome, St. Lawrence lived in Spain. It is held that he was born “in Spain, at Osca, a town in Aragon, near the foot of the Pyrenees. As a youth he was sent to Saragoza to complete his humanistic and theological studies. It was here that he first encountered the future Pope Sixtus II” (Moraglia). Later, Lawrence would leave for Rome for love of that Christian capital; he would do so in a migratory wave that had been considered common at the time. His master and friend Sixtus had done the very same (Moraglia).

When Sixtus had later been elected pope, the new Pontiff made haste to appoint his beloved disciple, Lawrence, to the office of proto-deacon. This was fitting, for St.
Lawrence was perfect for the position; indeed, he was already a virtuous man
“remarkable for his human qualities, his subtlety of mind and for his intelligence”
(Moraglia). The deacon faithfully held his office for about a year until the time of his
martyrdom on August 10, 258 (Kirsch; Ott).

POPE ST. SIXTUS II, the friend, master, and teacher of St. Lawrence, was a
learned man of Greek ancestry, said to have been “one of the most famous and esteemed
teachers” of the period (Moraglia). Before his rise to the papacy, he taught at Saragoza in
Spain, “one of the most renowned centres of learning” (Moraglia). It was here that he had
first met St. Lawrence as one of his pupils. Eventually, Sixtus travelled to Rome in
similar fashion to Lawrence. The Golden Legend suggests that Sixtus himself brought
Lawrence and his cousin Vincent with him to Rome on account of their lively virtue.

On August 31, 257 (Ott), “Sixtus was raised to the Chair of Peter and began a
pontificate that would last for less than a year” (Moraglia). Soon thereafter, he made his
favorite pupil, St. Lawrence, head of the deacons of the Roman Church. He longed to
have his greatest friend by his side. Truly, St. Lawrence remained obedient to the pope’s
wishes until the very end; he witnessed Sixtus’ martyrdom on August 6, 258 (Ott).

And lastly, VALENIAN, the Roman Emperor, plays chief antagonist in THE
LAST DEACON OF ROME. The Caesar initiated the notorious persecution that would
kill countless Christians, among them being St. Lawrence, Pope St. Sixtus, and the
remaining six deacons of Rome.

1 There are, however, other characters. Hippolitus and Romaine are two such persons. They appear as they
do in all the legends: without significant background. Everything you need to know about them is bound
within the story itself. Interestingly enough, Hippolitus has his own chapter in The Golden Legend; he is
remembered as both a martyr and a saint.
Valerian had been proclaimed emperor by the army in 253 at Rhaetia (Löffler). His Christian persecutions began shortly before Sixtus’ papacy (Ott). “In 257 Valerian issued a rescript, in kindly language, taking from Christians the right to hold assemblies or to enter the subterranean places of burial, and sending the clergy into exile” (Löffler). This first edict also bound Christians to “participate in the national cult of the pagan gods” (Ott). Transgressors of the imperial edict could be exiled or killed at whim. Strangely enough, this first edict did not prevent the most recent Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Sixtus II, from shepherding his flock (Ott). However, in the first days of August, 258, a second edict was put into effect. This decree was merciless, and served to kill many of the Christian leaders of Rome and Carthage (Löffler; Ott). St. Cyprian, a bishop and fellow martyr under the Valerian persecutions, writes at length on the details of this bloody scourge. I retain the full-text of his letter so as to preserve the undeniable urgency in which it was first composed. Indeed, I do not intend to mince the words of a martyr. The bishop’s epistle reads as follows:

I did not write to your community at once, dearest brother, because all the clergy, exposed as they are to the imminent danger of being put to the test and prepared in a spirit of dedication for the divine glory of heaven, were quite unable to leave here. But you must know that the messengers whom I dispatched to Rome have now returned. I sent them to find out the truth and report back whatever may have been decreed in our regard, for many conflicting and unreliable rumors are current.

The true state of affairs is this. Valerian has issued an edict to the Senate to the effect that bishops, presbyters and deacons shall suffer the
death penalty without delay. Senators, distinguished men and members of
the equestrian class, are to be deprived of their rank and property, and if,
after forfeiting their wealth and privileges, they still persist in professing
Christianity, they too are to be sentenced to death. Ladies of the upper
classes are to be deprived of their property and exiled. In the case of
members of the imperial staff, any who have either previously confessed
or do now confess to being Christians shall have their property confiscated
and shall be assigned as prisoners to the imperial estates.

To this decree the Emperor Valerian attached a copy of the letter
he had sent to the provincial governors concerning us. Every day we are
hoping that this letter will arrive, for we are standing firm in faith and
ready to endure suffering, in expectation of winning the crown of eternal
life through the help and mercy of the Lord. I must also inform you that
Sixtus was put to death in a catacomb on the sixth of August, and four
dacons with him. Moreover, the prefects in Rome are pressing this
persecution zealously and without intermission, to such a point that
anyone brought before them is punished and his property is claimed by the
treasure.

I ask you to make these facts known to the rest of our fellow
bishops, in order that by the exhortation of their pastors the brethren
everywhere may be strengthened and prepared for the spiritual combat.
Let all our people fix their minds not on death but rather on immortality;
let them commit themselves to the Lord in complete faith and unflinching

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courage and make their confession with joy rather than in fear, knowing that in this contest the soldiers of God and Christ are not slain but rather win their crowns.

Farewell in the Lord, dearest brother. (qtd. in The Liturgy of the Hours)

St. Cyprian’s words speak for themselves, and they do well in introducing the narrative of THE LAST DEACON OF ROME. As it is, the ballad begins with the aforementioned martyrdom of Pope St. Sixtus II. I shall now summarize the plot since the stage has been set:

Following the second edict of Valerian, the Pope fled to the catacombs of St. Callixtus and hid there with his flock. While the Holy Father was celebrating the Mass, a band of Roman soldiers suddenly descended upon that hidden assembly. St. Sixtus was taken from his chair and captured without delay (Moraglia; Ott). The four deacons with him, Januarius, Vincentius, Magnus, and Stephanus, were similarly apprehended (Ott).

Sixtus and his companions were then brought before Emperor Valerian and his tribunal. The Caesar and his court offered freedom to the Christian men if they would offer sacrifice to the pagan god Mars (The Book of the Popes; The Golden Legend). When the men had flatly refused this offer of apostasy, they were imprisoned in Mamertine (The Golden Legend).

St. Lawrence, ever the Pope’s beloved disciple, somehow managed to find his master. Before the prisoners had been taken away, the deacon cried out to Sixtus:

2 The myth is repeated throughout most sources; as such, the main threads of the legend are considered common knowledge for our purposes. Here, citations are only used for distinct information and direct quotations. Remember that this plot summary is the synthesis of my research; many details of the legend go unmentioned.
“Father, whither goest thou without thy son? Priest, whither goest thou without thy minister?”

Sixtus replied, “Son, I leave thee not, but greater battles be due to thee, after three days, thou deacon shalt follow me priest, but in the meanwhile take the treasures of the church and depart them where thou wilt” (*The Golden Legend*).

The obedient servant quickly gathered the gold of the Church and dispersed the wealth amongst the poor. He sought them day and night “and gave to each of them what was needful” (*The Golden Legend*). Having thus removed the treasures of the Church from the reach of Her persecutor, St. Lawrence hastened back to the tribunal, knowing that St. Sixtus and his companions would be given one last chance to submit to Valerian’s wishes.

Indeed, the Pope and his cohort were given a final offer to sacrifice in the temple of Mars. This time, Valerian warned the prisoners that if they should refuse, they would all have their heads cut off. Without hesitation, the Pope and his men denied the Emperor (*The Golden Legend*). Being true to his word, Valerian sent his prisoners back to St. Callixtus’ cemetery to be executed (Ott).

St. Lawrence followed the party to the catacombs. He ran after Sixtus and once again lamented, “Forsake me not, holy father, for I have dispensed the treasures that thou deliveredst to me!” Some of the Roman guard overheard the talk of treasure and began to pay keen attention to the deacon of Rome (*The Golden Legend*). The deacon, sowing many tears, repeated his plea to the Pope:

Where, father, are you going without your son? Where, holy priest, are you hastening without your deacon? Never were you wont to offer

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sacrifice without an attendant. What are you displeased at in me, my father? Have you found me unworthy? Prove, then, whether you have chosen a fitting servant. To him to whom you have entrusted the consecration of the Saviour's blood, to whom you have granted fellowship in partaking of the Sacraments, to him do you refuse a part in your death? Beware lest your good judgment be endangered, while your fortitude receives its praise. The rejection of a pupil is the loss of the teacher; or how is it that noble and illustrious men gain the victory in the contests of their scholars rather than in their own? Abraham offered his son, Peter sent Stephen on before him! Father, show forth your courage in your son. Offer me whom you have trained, that you, confident in your choice of me, may reach the crown in worthy company. (qtd. in Ambrose)

Sixtus then answered:

I leave you not nor forsake you. Greater struggles yet await you. We as old men have to undergo an easier fight; a more glorious triumph over the tyrant awaits you, a young man. Soon shall you come. Cease weeping; after three days you shall follow me. This interval must come between the priest and his levite. It was not for you to conquer under the eye of your master, as though you needed a helper. Why do you seek to share in my death? I leave to you its full inheritance. Why do you need my presence? Let the weak disciples go before their master, let the brave follow him, that they may conquer without him. For they no longer need his guidance.
So Elijah left Elisha. To you I entrust the full succession to my own
courage. (qtd. in Ambrose)

Shortly thereafter, the humble Pontiff was led to his chair and swiftly beheaded.

Januarius, Vincentius, Magnus, and Stephanus were killed in like manner to their master.

When the soldiers had finished their bloody crime, those who had earlier
overheard St. Lawrence speak of the Church’s treasure found the deacon and brought him
before the provost of the guard. This provost was “no less a worshipper of gold and silver
than of Jupiter and Mars” (Thurston and Attwater 297). And so, upon hearing about the
purported riches of the Church, he quickly delivered the deacon to the Emperor. The
avaricious Valerian, bent on securing the vast treasures of the Church for himself, asked
Lawrence plainly, “Where be the treasures of the church, which we know well that thou
hast hid?” (The Golden Legend). When the deacon gave no answer, Valerian handed him
over to yet another provost. The Emperor made his command clear: gain the treasures
and force the deacon to sacrifice to idols, or “put him to death by divers torments” (The
Golden Legend). This provost in turn delivered the deacon over to a man named
Hippolitus. This latest provost, Hippolitus, then imprisoned Lawrence.

Eventually, Hippolitus demanded that Lawrence reveal the hidden treasures of the
Church. Lawrence promised the curious provost that he would do so, on the condition
that he converted to Christianity. Hippolitus, perhaps intrigued at the deacon’s bold
proposal or desperate for the rumored fortune, agreed with equal confidence. And so, at
that very hour, Hippolitus and his men believed and were baptized into the faith. When
the Roman was baptized, his eyes were opened and he proclaimed, “I have seen the souls
of the innocents joyous and glad” (The Golden Legend). Hence, the vision fulfilled St. Lawrence’s promise to the man; namely, to reveal the true treasures of the Church.

In short time, the Emperor’s provost returned to Hippolitus, asking for Lawrence to be brought forth again. The guard fetched the saint and returned to the awaiting inquisitor. The Emperor’s man once more asked about the Church’s treasures:

You Christians often complain that we treat you with cruelty, but no tortures are here thought of; I only inquire mildly after what concerns you. I am informed that your priests offer in gold, that the sacred blood is received in silver cups, and that in your nocturnal sacrifices you have wax tapers fixed in golden candlesticks. Bring out these treasures; the emperor has need of them for maintenance of his forces. I am told that according to your doctrine you must render to Caesar the things that belong to him. I do not think that your God causes money to be coined; He brought none into the world with Him; He only brought words. Give us therefore the money, and be rich in words. (Thurston and Attwater 297).

The deacon, “wise as serpents and simple as doves” (The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version, Mt. 10.16) feigned compliance: Lawrence said that the treasure was so great that it would take three days in order to collect it all. The skeptical inquisitor had his doubts, and so consulted Hippolitus on the matter. The newly baptized man defended his prisoner-friend, and thus the provost granted the request of three days grace “on pledge of Hippolitus” (The Golden Legend).

Over the course of the three days, St. Lawrence gathered together all the poor, “[t]he decrepit, the blind, the lame, the maimed, the lepers, the orphans, widows and...
maidens” (Thurston and Attwater 297) and returned to Emperor Valerian in the palace of Salustine (The Golden Legend). As he presented the people to the Emperor, the saint, in solemn sincerity, proclaimed:

These are the treasures of the Church. And truly they were treasures, in whom Christ lives, in whom there is faith in Him. So, too, the Apostle says: We have this treasure in earthen vessels. What greater treasures has Christ than those in whom He says He Himself lives? For thus it is written: I was hungry and you gave Me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me to drink, I was a stranger and you took Me in. And again: What you did to one of these, you did it unto Me. What better treasures has Jesus than those in which He loves to be seen? (qtd. in Ambrose)

Infuriated by this holy trick, Valerian demanded that the deacon now sacrifice to the pagan gods and forsake his Christian ways. St. Lawrence only replied with a question: Who should be worshipped?—“[He] that maketh, or he that is made?” (The Golden Legend). Valerian was further inflamed and promptly ordered that the defiant deacon be flogged with “all manner of torments” (The Golden Legend). At the Emperor’s command, Lawrence “was beaten all naked with rods and staves, and pieces of iron burning were laid to his sides” (The Golden Legend).

In the midst of his passion, St. Lawrence cried out to God, asking for Jesus Christ to receive his spirit. A thundering voice then filled the palace in reply: “Yet many torments be due to thee” (The Golden Legend). Valerian became alarmed at the voice of God, and in great fear, ordered that the deacon be flogged again with improved vigor. The humble prisoner only smiled and thanked God, praying “for them that were there”
(The Golden Legend). As it is written: “Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you” (Christ Jesus qtd. in The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version, Mt. 5.44).

The saint’s prayers were soon heard: A knight named Romaine happened to be present during these events. Seeing the heroic virtue of the young deacon, he immediately came to believe in God. Consumed with zeal, Romaine approached Lawrence and begged to be baptized by his hand. Valerian sat witness to this exchange, and maddeningly shouted, “I ween that we shall now be overcome by art magic” (The Golden Legend). Twisted with newly forged anger and fear, the Caesar stopped the present tortures and relinquished the scourged man to Hippolitus to be sent back to his cell (The Golden Legend).

Romaine followed the saint to his cell. The knight had brought with him a pitcher of water, so that he might soon be baptized. Upon finding St. Lawrence, Romaine fell down at his feet and pleaded to be baptized. And so it was done. When Valerian came to know of the underground baptism, he had the knight beaten and tortured so much so “that he might not hold him upon his legs” (The Golden Legend). Still, Romaine would not deny his newfound faith. So he happily accepted the sword, and was swiftly beheaded (The Golden Legend).

Later that same night, Valerian again summoned St. Lawrence. Hippolitus unlocked the cell and led his friend to the palace. While the two were en route, Hippolitus began to weep, for he had heard of Romaine’s untimely death. He confided in the deacon, revealing that he felt ashamed for his secret conversion. Romaine had just died in the public square for his Christian convictions while Hippolitus remained alive, hiding his
own christening. Lawrence consoled his friend, telling him to remain strong and to hide Jesus Christ within. The saint hinted at his own death, saying that he would look to Hippolitus for strength when the time came. Truly, in this last hour, now was not the time for weakness or despair (The Golden Legend).

When the two had finally made it to the palace, Valerian savagely greeted Lawrence with “all manner of torments that could be devised or thought” (The Golden Legend). The Emperor made his last appeal: “[T]hou shalt make sacrifice to the gods, or this night shall all these torments be dispended on thee.”

Lawrence said in reply, “My night hath no darkness, but all things shine in my sight” (The Golden Legend).

And so the deacon was stripped of his garments and stretched out upon a large gridiron bed. The torturers poured burning coals beneath the grill, and forced Lawrence down with pitchforks (The Golden Legend).

Roasting alive, Lawrence continued to profess his faith to the Emperor. The last deacon of Rome took to his punishment with great joy, calling the coals refreshing. Even upon that fiery bed, he was singing God’s praises. In saintly humor, he sang his own kind of roasting words to Valerian: “Thou cursed wretch, thou hast roasted that one side, turn that other, and eat” (The Golden Legend).

St. Lawrence then gave his last thanks to God and surrendered his spirit. Valerian and the court departed in confusion, leaving the body of the saint upon the pyre. The very next morning, Hippolitus returned to take the body away. He came with a priest named Justin, and they buried the deacon with costly ointments. “And the christian men that
buried him, fasted three days and three nights, and hallowed the vigils, weeping there and wailing” (*The Golden Legend*).

Thus concludes the tale of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence the Deacon.

A few postscript words remain to be said before I let the reader move forward.

As one might suspect, many odds and ends did not make it explicitly into *The Last Deacon of Rome*. I now present three particular items of interest:

Firstly: Throughout most of the tall tales regarding St. Lawrence the Deacon, the young martyr is said to have worked many miracles among the poor and the imprisoned. I chose to pass over these accounts because they were so numerous and so varied (and, quite frankly, a point of detraction from the main plot). It is enough to say that these miracles could have happened, and that they are, at the very least, telling of the Christ-like nature of the saint. The Church, in harmony with the words of Christ, can easily fathom a man working such great miracles: “Amen, amen I say to you, he that believeth in me, the works that I do, he also shall do; and greater than these shall he do” (qtd. in *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, Jn. 14.12).

Secondly: *The Golden Legend* makes the very specific note that Pope St. Sixtus II was responsible for bringing Lawrence and his cousin, Vincent, to Rome. The source describes that the humble Pontiff saw them to be “right ordinate” by their virtue and so had them join. Given the context, one might assume that this phrase implies the ordination of the two youths to the deaconate. Indeed, it is known that Sixtus had Lawrence ordained a deacon—but what happened to Vincent? I chance to say that Vincent is merely shorthand for Vincentius, one of the four deacons slain in the tomb of St. Callixtus alongside Pope Sixtus. If this is true, then St. Lawrence not only witnessed
the death of his friend and master, Sixtus, but also that of his kin, Vincent. This fact heightens the drama tenfold, and is worthy of our brief consideration.

Thirdly and finally: Liber Pontificalis had a passage on the death of St. Lawrence that was unlike any other that I had previously seen. It reads, "And after the passion of the blessed Xystus, on the third day, Lawrence, his archdeacon, suffered also, August 10, likewise the subdeacon Claudius and Severus, the priest, and Crescentius, the reader, and Romanus, the doorkeeper." This passage is too telling of the great extent of Valerian’s persecution. He hunted not only deacons but doormen! Imagine it! Romanus the doorkeeper certainly was a courageous character, for he could have escaped notice, given his so unassuming station. Yet Romanus diligently held his station—and the doors—unto death. Likely so zealous and humble was Romanus that he must have flown to heaven first, desiring to hold St. Peter’s door for his saintly superiors. If I had but more time, I would write his ballad, too. Truly, the doormen among us are the greatest of saints.

My last effort in this post (post) script is for the sour-faced skeptics. I aim to reconcile some of the supposed contradictions within the stories of the saint.

Regarding the Emperor at the time: Many sources, such as The Golden Legend and Liber Pontificalis, claim that Decius was the Roman Emperor during the events of THE LAST DEACON OF ROME. To be certain, Valerian was the Caesar at the time. St. Cyprian’s firsthand account strongly supports this, and modern scholarship follows suit. Indeed, Decius served as Emperor from 249 until 251 (Healy), yet St. Lawrence and companions were martyred in 258. This confusion is easily accounted for. The two Roman Emperors reigned at very close periods: Valerian assumed the throne in 253, only two years after Decius (Löffler). The two also sported an incredible hatred for
Christianity that led to parallel persecutions. Like Valerian, Decius made efforts to annihilate Christianity itself: “Bishops and priests were unconditionally punished with death. To all others was given an opportunity to recant and, to ensure the abandonment of Christianity, all were compelled to submit to some test of their loyalty to Paganism” (Healy). These decrees of Decius could easily be confused with those of Valerian. On the surface, the two are practically the same.

*The Golden Legend* takes its scholarship another step up, going so far as to inject authentic history into its narrative. The legend takes its main plot-device from reality when it makes reference to a certain Phillip: “[Phillip] delivered all his father's treasure and his, to S. Sixtus and to S. Laurence, to the end that if it happened to him to be slain of Decius that they should give this treasure to poor people and to the churches.” In the story, the Catholic Phillip is pursued and martyred by Decius’ men. In the history books, Decius was known to have solidified his place as Caesar “by the defeat of Philip at Verona” (Healy). In this way, the clever bards of old found the perfect stimulus for the story; namely, the greedy Decius would scour the Earth in search of the golden hoard. This, in effect, would send Sixtus and Lawrence crashing into the plot, as they were the ones gifted with the precious bounty of Phillip.

*The Golden Legend* even offers a caveat to its claim: “But many doubt if he [Lawrence] suffered under this Decius, for it is read in the chronicle that Sixtus was long after Decius.” The compiler then presents a massive litany of evidence supporting the claim that Decius was the Caesar responsible for the martyrdoms. Still, we learn from this two significant details: firstly, that the people who wrote *The Golden Legend* found history important and had gone to great lengths to establish their beliefs; and secondly,
that even thirteenth-century scholars were in disagreement about the proper Emperor of the period.

In short, the Caesar-confusion is rather easy to understand, and the inaccurate history of legend was actually very close to reality.

Regarding the place where Sixtus and his companions died: St. Cyprian’s letter plainly states that “Sixtus was put to death in a catacomb” (qtd. in *The Liturgy of the Hours*). Most sources claim that the martyrdom happened in St. Callixtus’ tomb. Fr. Moraglia agrees without a moment’s hesitation: “The cemetery to which the holy Bishop of Carthage alludes is that of St Callixtus.” Another source claims that “[i]n order to escape the vigilance of the imperial officers he [Sixtus] assembled his flock on 6 August at one of the less-known cemeteries, that of Prætextatus, on the left side of the Appian Way, *nearly opposite the cemetery of St. Callistus*” [emphasis added] (Ott). While this might at first appear to be a source of contention, the account itself only states that Sixtus was captured outside of the cemetery in question; indeed, it makes no report regarding his place of death. As it was more likely that the Pope was “first brought before a tribunal to receive his sentence and then led back to the cemetery for execution” than to have been killed forthwith (Ott), it is plausible that he was captured outside of St. Callixtus’ but later martyred within it. At any rate, the Holy Father was certainly killed near the place, and his remains have since been entered in the cemetery (Moraglia; Ott).

Regarding whom Sixtus died with: Modern scholarship reports that the Pope was beheaded alongside only four of his deacons, Januarius, Vincentius, Magnus, and Stephanus, (Ott) while the two other deacons, Felicissimus and Agapitus, were “put to death the same day” (Kirsch). Older accounts blur this distinction. *The Golden Legend*
exactly reverses the trend, stating that Sixtus, Felicissimus, and Agapitus were instead beheaded together. *Liber Pontificalis*, in denial of all previous claims, says that the Pope “was beheaded and with him six others, all deacons, Felicissimus, Agapitus, Januarius, Magnus, Vincentius and Stephen.” What is important, then, is all but apparent: the six deacons died on the same day as Sixtus, thus rendering St. Lawrence the last deacon of Rome.

Regarding the manner of death of Sixtus: All sources, ancient and new, factual and fictitious, report that Pope St. Sixtus II was martyred by beheading. This is the consensus, yet the fourth-century poet Prudentius offers an outlier in the data: His version seems to have had the Pope crucified. Ott writes, “Entirely contrary to truth is the statement of Prudentius (ibid., lines 23-26) that Sixtus II suffered martyrdom on the cross, unless by an unnatural trope the poet uses the specific word cross (‘Jam Xystus adfixus cruci’) for martyrdom in general.” Ott, I think, misses the point. For the poet, tropes such as these are not “entirely contrary to the truth”; rather, they more perfectly reveal the reality of martyrdom. Truly, Prudentius was masterfully recalling the words of Christ: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (qtd. in *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*, Mt. 16.24).

Regarding the manner of death of Lawrence: Some modern skeptics choose to doubt the last deacon’s death by fire. “Contemporaneous reports about the persecution of Valerian” are said to give rise “to grave doubts” about St. Lawrence’s gridiron demise (Kirsch). These grim cynics deny that such an extraordinary form of execution could be employed. It is more of a miracle to deny that such an execution could occur among thousands of killings! Indeed, “[w]e know this sentence was inflicted on Fruttoso and on Cepican 32
the deacons Eulogius and Augurius of Tarragona during the reign of Valerian” (Moraglia). Though a rare form of martyrdom it may be, no tangible facts exist in order for one to reasonably doubt this tradition. Perhaps it is the very strangeness of the martyrdom that lends itself to its fresh longevity of life.

To conclude this long-winded introduction, I yield to the voice of G.K. Chesterton. I take his words from the prefatory note of The Ballad of the White Horse. Though I only take from it in part, I urge the reader to later pore over it in full. Chesterton here speaks of Alfred, the King of Wessex. GKC’s notes are so universal regarding legends that I beg the reader to place St. Lawrence in the place of King Alfred:

This ballad needs no historical notes, for the simple reason that it does not profess to be historical. All of it that is not frankly fictitious, as in any prose romance about the past, is meant to emphasize tradition rather than history. King Alfred is not a legend in the sense that King Arthur may be a legend; that is, in the sense that he may possibly be a lie. But King Alfred is a legend in this broader and more human sense, that the legends are the most important things about him....I have seen doubts of the tradition, which may be valid doubts. I do not know when or where the story started; it is enough that it started somewhere and ended with me; for I only seek to write upon a hearsay, as the old balladists did....But I am not concerned to prove the truth of these popular traditions. It is enough for me to maintain two things: that they are popular traditions; and that without these popular traditions we should have bothered about Alfred about as much as we bother about Eadwig....it is the chief value of legend
to mix up the centuries while preserving the sentiment; to see all ages in a sort of splendid foreshortening. That is the use of tradition: it telescopes history.

And so, it seems all has been said; may the democracy of the dead find voice through me.

B.T.C.
THE LAST DEACON OF ROME

By B.T. Cepican

THERE are few martyrs in the Church whose names are so famous as that of St Laurence, in whose praises the most illustrious among the Latin fathers have written, and whose triumph, to use the words of St Maximus, the whole Church joins in a body to honour with universal joy and devotion. (Thurston and Attwater 297).
The tyrant of Rome, Valerian
Has issued his decree,
"Find all the Christian loyal men!
Find all the hidden heathens!
And bring them back to me."

"Hunt the Christian game, my knights!
Search every house and home!
Find the Pope and all his court!
Slay everyone who will support
Sixtus, Bishop of Rome!"

The soldiers obeyed and set out
To find the Vicar of Christ.
One troop traversed the Appian Way
Down Callixtus' ossuary
Finding Sixtus set down to pray
Offering true sacrifice.

Old Sixtus was torn from his chair
In front of his frightened flock.
Thus the Mass was put to a halt
After that unholy assault
While the knights left Callixtus' vault
With Sixtus, the Church's Rock.

The Pope was captured with six more,
Those humble and true deacons:
Felicissimus, Agapitus,
Januarius, Vincentius,
Magnus and good Stephen.

Dragged about in heavy chains,
The prisoners were led.
Like a march for their funeral
They were put to a tribunal,
A tribunal for the dead.

Before Valerian, they stood
In the heart of the palace.
The Emperor sat, decked in jewels
Grinning a grin worn by fools,
A grin so wry and callous.
The smile gave way to words
As Valerian began to say,
"Christians, I am a good Caesar,
And I know how wise you are.
So offer sacrifice to Mars
And I shall let you go away."

Sixtus, the old Greek, stood tall.
He spoke like a philosopher,
"We shall not so easily
Fall to your apostasy.
In Christ alone, are we free.
Death! Yes, death, do we prefer!"

Valerian spat and snarled,
"Take them out of my sight!
Put them behind bars!
They might yet submit to Mars
Later in the night!"

Just then, hidden in the square
Appeared Lawrence the Deacon.
He saw the Pope dragged off like Socrates
But still asked the Pontiff many pleas,
His young voice beginning to weaken:

"My father, my master, my friend:
Where do you go without your son?
Why go without your lowly one?
Let me follow you to the end!"

The Pope replied, "Listen well:
I do not leave thee behind.
In three days more, you shall join me!
Now run to the Church's treasury
And give to the poor all that you find!"

In haste did the young deacon fly
In deference to the Pope.
Like a runner to the finish,
His drive did not diminish
Obliging Sixtus' hope.
Lawrence gathered all the treasures
And did as he was told.
He sought the poor and elderly
And gave them all the gold.

Having no time left to spare,
He dashed back to the castle,
Hoping to see his Sixtus there
Before the likely hassle.

Lawrence came as the Caesar spoke,
"I offer you one last chance.
Give to Mars your adoration
And be free within my nation!
You may even keep your station
So long as you change your stance.

"Remember now, this is it!
Choose your words with good judgment.
For I tell you all very plain:
Disobey me, and you shall be slain.
The sword shall then be your bane
If you fail to relent!"

Sixtus spake with bold clarity,
"For what shall it profit us all
If we gain the world whole
But suffer the loss of the soul?"

The Greek continued in good cheer,
"You offer us less than an acre!
Truly! Much less than the whole earth!
We are ready now to die to birth!
Send us off to meet our Maker!"

The prisoners laughed at the remark
And so did the court of the king.
In death’s dark shadow
They would not wallow
But instead all praises sing.

Valerian glowed in a fury
Like old Lucifer.
He raised his fist as judge and jury
And now as executioner.
“I gave you the chance,” said he,
With curling black beard
Valerian sneered
That foolish grin-hyperbole.

“Now take your laughter to the grave
And join Callixtus’ tomb.
Lose your heads with merriment
And dance unto your doom.

“Rot in that dark, lonely place!
Yes! Rot, rot away!
Wither into dry bones
Building up the old catacombs
With lost heads as smiling stones
Down the Appian Way!”

The guard took the prisoners
Off to that lonely place.
Lawrence secretly did follow
Knowing that tomorrow
He might not see his master’s face.

And so they stood in the chamber,
The chamber of the saint.
The Pope and his men like lambs
Needing no restraint.

And Lawrence rushed upon them
Like a son coming home.
He cried out to dear Sixtus,
Sixtus, the Bishop of Rome:

“My father, my master, and friend:
Why leave without your deacon?
After all these many years
Would you now refuse my tears
And leave without your son?

“I have left both country and kin
To serve you here and now.
I left my homeland of Spain
And now the sword is twixt us twain
Dealing me yet so much pain!
Unless I follow thou!”
“Never have you offered sacrifice
Without your servant near.
If you must be the sacrifice
Let me serve you here!

“What have I done to displease you?
What is it I have done?
If you must wear the red diadem
Then count me worthy to die with them
And share in the martyrdom!

“Prove your wisdom in choosing
Me as the deacon-chief!
I, who am always present
Partaking in the Sacrament—
Would you refuse me the consent
To partake in your grief?

“Even though your fortitude
Will be remembered and praised
Do not give our enemies
Reason to doubt your ways.

“So grant your servant this kind wish:
To follow where you trod.
For Abraham offered Isaac
And Peter sent Stephen quick
Before him off to God.

“Please hear my unseemly lament
And show your trust in me.
I want you to gain the red crown
In worthy company.”

And Sixtus shook his head and smiled,
Knowing his rash friend’s heart.
The deacon was too young yet
To realize his own part.

The Pope said, “I do not forsake you.
But I have grown so old:
My fight is already won
While your test has just begun.
For you looms glory untold!”
“My dear Lawrence, stop your weeping, 
For you shall have martyrdom! 
In three days shall you follow 
And join me in the Kingdom.

“Son, why do you need my presence? 
Let the weak go before, 
And let the brave follow the weak— 
Follow after this ancient Greek!— 
And battle alone, so to speak, 
With strength enough to win the war.

“So it was with Elijah and Elisha, 
So it must be with us. 
Pray for me to the very end, 
Pray for your dear Sixtus.”

And as the guard pulled them away, 
Lawrence bore another thought: 
“Father! Know I gave the treasure 
To the poor without measure! 
Hear these words as one last pleasure 
Before thy end is wrought!”

Old Sixtus took on some lost youth 
At Lawrence’s address. 
The Pope stood angelically 
In Callixtus’ dark alley 
Awaiting the cutlass.

The six deacons were kneeling 
While Sixtus sat in chair. 
The grave Romans came like thunder 
Swinging swords without wonder 
Slicing bodies and heads asunder 
As in some sick nightmare.

And with the deed, it was done. 
The seven now were dead. 
Those men had paid the greatest price, 
Themselves a bloody sacrifice, 
Now on their way to Paradise 
To the Triune Godhead.
Without delay the guard came back
And seized Lawrence with speed.
The man-at-arms explained his charge,
"We overheard of your treasure-large,
A treasure that we need."

And so the guards gave him over
To their commander knight.
And when he heard of that golden store
He planned to rush the prisoner
Off to the Emperor
Before the end of the night.

The provost pulled his deacon-prize
Before the greedy king.
He was no less a worshipper
Of gold and gems and silver
Than of Mars and Jupiter,
As he fiddled with his rings.

The Emperor sat silent,
Donning a poor façade.
He tried to be benevolent
But like hiding a thick accent
He could not simply reinvent
His inner Herod.

"Lawrence! What a privilege it is
To have you in my court!
Just tell me what I need to hear
And we shall cut this short!

"My guards told me of your fortune.
Do not hold me in suspense!
If you tell me where tis hidden
I shall let you leave from hence!"

The deacon gave no answer
To king Valerian,
Echoing the timeless wisdom
Of a Galilean.
The Emperor was not patient
When it came to such shows.
Thus consumed by indignation
He became an abomination
Losing any toleration
And from his throne arose.

"Provost, give him to Hippolitus
And send him off to jail.
Gain from him every precious stone
And have him worship Mars and Aion
Or put him through all tortures known
Should your endeavors fail."

Hippolitus was handed Lawrence
So he bound him with chains
And conducted him to his cell
Ready to give the pris’ner hell
If he were too strong-willed to tell
Where the riches remained.

The Roman ward was unalike
To his Roman brethren.
In his stalwart hands and face
Was every fine trait of that race
Under which Rome began.

Hippolitus was different
From his liege and lord.
He was like the golden eagle
Rugged and rare and regal
Marvelously adorned.

Then Hippolitus looked forward
And stared at the deacon.
The cleric’s gaze, like a dagger,
Caused the Roman some slight stagger
As if Lawrence saw his sin.

Prompt and plain he asked Lawrence,
"Where is your treasury?
If you reveal the hidden loot
I might just set you free."
Lawrence replied, "I will show you
The secret you desire,
Of the true treasures of the Church.
Yes! I shall end your grueling search
But I ask one thing prior:

"If you are to see the beauty
So hidden in this land,
Believe in Christ and repent!
I bid thee take the white garment
Of the beginning Sacrament:
Be baptized at my hand!"

Hippolitus was dumbfounded
At the deacon’s deal.
Try as he might, he could not escape
Its uncanny appeal.

Perhaps the guard was desperate,
Perhaps he was intrigued,
So he accepted the proposal
And put himself at the disposal
Of the deacon-lead.

As the ritual finished through
With water, words, and rites
Hippolitus had a vision,
One of heavenly sights:

"I have seen the souls of the just
Scattered throughout the land!
They are the treasure you promise!
I was but a doubting Thomas
But now I understand.

"For I was graced with a vision,
A vision of a home.
At baptism I crossed the Tiber
Finding a truer Empire,
Finding a truer Rome."
“So I serve a new master,
And I say this with laud.
Like Longinus of the Holy Lance
Another knight graced with a trance
I have been given equal chance
To confess the Son of God.”

And the provost of Valerian
Returned without a sign.
He had one sermon to preach,
And he sounded genuine:

“Lawrence! Do not be afraid!
I come bearing peace.
Let us talk of that treasure!
And then of your release.

“Do not deny what I have learned,
For I know a great deal:
Your priests wear costly chasubles,
And you use precious cups and bowls.
Gold candelabra for candles—
All hard to conceal!

“Bring out this fantastic fortune,
Consider it a tax.
Rome was not built in a day,
Nor was Rome built without pay.
These are simply facts.

“Give to your God what is your God’s—
But that is half the verse!
Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s—
The coin inside your purse!”

And the deacon of Rome made answer
In the form of a trick,
“I shall bring you all the treasure,
But it is so beyond measure
That I cannot bring it quick.

“And so I make my meek request:
Allow three days for the task
So that I may gather the lot.
Otherwise, my friend, I cannot
Bring back all you ask.”
The inquisitor furled his brow
As if deep in thought.
He was sorely suspicious
Of that truly ambitious
Three-day treasure plot.

And then he remembered the ward,
Good old Hippolitus.
“Cell guard, you are a Roman true,
The ideal of civic virtue.
So counsel me on what to do
For in your words I trust.”

The provost was unaware
Of his friend’s conversion.
He might not have sought direction
If he knew the guard’s intention
To be a true Christian.

Hippolitus spake candidly,
“The deacon does not lie.
Though his words be strange and wild,
He is but an innocent child.
To this I testify.”

And so on Hippolitus’ pledge,
Lawrence had passed the test.
The provost was satisfied
And sent him on his quest.

And over the three days
Lawrence scoured the Empire.
He dashed upon moor and mountain
And went to all the public fountains,
More sweeping than Nero’s fire.

He gathered the lowliest ones,
The ones who are abhorred:
The decrepit, the poor and lame,
The blind, the sick and the maimed,
Lepers, orphans, widows, and maids,
The treasures of the Lord.
And when the three days were spent,
He trekked back with those poor.
They marched to Salustine castle,
And marched past Valerian's vassals
Through Valerian's door.

Lawrence appeared before the provost,
He appeared before the Czar.
He pointed to his company
And explained who they are.

"These are the treasures of the Church,
The treasures that you seek.
For Christ is the greatest treasure,
And Christ dwells in the weak.

"Remember, as it is written
In Matthew's Gospel:
Christ dwells in the famish'd,
Christ dwells in the pris'ner and naked,
Christ dwells in the neglected,
Christ dwells in every soul.

"What better treasures can there be?
What better treasures than them?
For through the poor, the Lord is seen,
The Lord from Bethlehem."

Valerian grew livid,
While tearing at his beard.
For the first time in a long time
His grin had disappeared.

"How dare you mock me with this joke!
I have been abused!
Do not dare to beg for mercy,
For it shall be refused!

"Though you do not give me silver,
Though you do not give me gold,
I am not done with you just yet,
Things remain to be told:
“My patience has died with you;  
It has certainly deceased.  
Worship the gods of Olympus  
Or follow after your priest.”

Lawrence remembered Pope Sixtus,  
And his prophetic vow:  
In three days more, he would follow,  
And three days more was now.

The deacon held high his head  
And questioned the Caesar:  
“Who is due our adoration?  
The Creator or your creation?  
The Star-weaver or star?”

When Valerian heard these words,  
His visage changed its form:  
His grin returned all crooked,  
His face became a storm.

“So it seems you want to die!  
But I shan’t be so fast!  
I shall beat you until brittle,  
Inch by inch and little by little,  
You shall thus begin to whittle,  
But I shall make it last!”

And at the Emperor’s command,  
Lawrence was flogged in turns.  
First being stripped of his tunic,  
He was then scourged with rod and stick  
And branded with hot irons.

Then Lawrence, deacon of Rome,  
Cried out in agony,  
“My God, my God! Take my spirit!  
Draw my soul unto Thee!”
And lo! There came a fearful voice,
The Triune Godhead’s Word!
It came like a strong trumpet blast,
A sound so sonorous and vast,
Of future, present, and past,
Like a sharp two-edged sword.

“My servant Lawrence, I hear your cry!
But now is not your hour!
You have more torments yet to suffer
From this Roman power.”

And when the voice had been heard
By every person near,
Everyone was paralyzed,
Paralyzed with fear.

Valerian was terrified
At this thunderous God.
And so he gave his next command
Ready with the rod:

“I hear your God chastises
The people He adores.
He must love you without cost
To grant such a holocaust
As merciless as yours!

“You are but a fruit of the vine,
And I am here to prune;
Like a grape you will be pressed,
Bled into the vintage-best
Of a martyr’s maroon.”

Lawrence looked to heaven with joy,
And smiled in reply.
“I thank God still on this day,
I thank Him most amidst the fray.
For my enemies here, I pray
With fervor as I die.”

Cepican 49
And in the midst of his passion,
Came a soldier from the crowd.
He rushed upon the bloody scene
And for a moment came between
The saint and the sadistic-mean,
And finding Lawrence, bowed.

“I am Romaine,” said he of the guard.
“And God has sent me here.
I have watched you undergo
Every single hit and blow
With saintly good cheer.

“I am a man and a soldier,
And I have seen the worst of war.
Yet in all of my years,
Never have I seen this before.

“You are a holy deacon,
And you are just a boy!
Yet even in your naïve youth
You are more ready to die for truth
Than I am to live for joy.

“Your heroic virtue has won me,
Alongside your prayers.
Thus, baptize me in the name of God:
Make me one of His heirs!”

The Caesar sat, witness to all these things,
And said his mad rebuff,
“Guards! Stop this magic siren-spell
And take the deacon to his cell,
For I have had enough!”

Hippolitus the ward claimed Lawrence
And nursed his injury.
Somehow deacon Lawrence
Stood tall in victory.

And Romaine the Roman followed fast
After the deacon-chief.
He brought a pitcher of water
To be sealed in his belief.
And when Romaine found the deacon,
He fell unto his knees.
He begged to be baptized right then
To set his soul at ease.

As the ritual finished through
With water, words, and rites,
Romaine was filled with life anew
And returned to his fellow knights.

Zeal possessed Romaine of the guard,
So he preached to the Empire.
Thus, the secret Sacrament
Was known to the government,
And the outcome was dire.

Romaine was seized in an instant,
Dragged off before his liege.
He was granted no formalities
As his body lay besieged.

The knight was beaten badly,
Every inch of him with stings.
Valerian began to speak
As he fiddled with his rings:

"This is it! I offer you one chance
To give in and concede.
Worship the gods of your country,
Praise the gods of your family,
And forsake your Catholic Creed."

The noble Roman smiled and said,
"The Catholic Creed binds me
To exalt the God of Abraham,
To exalt the Christ, the Paschal Lamb,
To tremble before the great I AM:
The God of Eternity.

"You bid me to worship the old,
But God cannot be so!
For my God is timeless and true,
Ever ancient and ever new,
He was before the gods we knew:
Benedicamus Domino!"
“So in some sense I obey you,
Somehow, against all odds:
I praise the God of my country,
I praise the God of my family,
I praise the God of the gods!”

Valerian had lost all sense
And he began to scoff:
“Romaine, you have better prayed
For your God to come to your aid!”
And then the Czar brandished a blade
And cut Romaine’s head off.

Later that night, Valerian
Called Lawrence to his throne.
And so Hippolitus came by
And led him there alone.

The guard was shedding many tears,
And he was much in pain,
For in the silence of his watch
He had learnt about Romaine.

“Lawrence,” whispered the solemn guard,
“Let me confide in thee:
I confess my God in secret
Like some Christian counterfeit
Or an unworthy hypocrite
And I feel so guilty.

“For Romaine was killed in public,
For spreading our Lord’s name.
And here am I, afraid and hiding,
Hiding to my shame!”

Lawrence embraced his friend and said,
“Your Father knows your heart,
And He shall reward you well.
But listen to what I tell:
My hour is soon to start,

“Now is not the time for weakness,
Nor is it for despair.
I will look to you, Hippolitus,
To see the image of Jesus
When my pain, I cannot bear.”
When the two had finally arrived
At that place of gloom,
Valerian sat at his spot,
Surrounded by a great lot
Of all torments ever thought,
Stashed within the room.

The Emperor, clad in darkness,
Was brooding in his chair.
Like Nero, he strummed the violin
And assumed that crooked grin
With an apathetic air.

"Lawrence," said the insane Caesar,
"This is my last appeal:
Worship Mars with your every breath,
Or I shall send thee off to death!
Do we have a deal?"

And as Caesar Valerian
Kept plucking at the strings,
Lawrence opened his mouth
And said some simple things:

"It is good what you offer me,
To send me off to rest.
I shall accept your offer,
And consider myself blessed,

"For my night hath no darkness
Throughout the long fight;
Everything shines with God's glory,
Everything in my sight."

And so the deacon was stripped bare
Like Christ before the Cross.
Lawrence did not seem to care,
For he counted all as loss.

And before him was placed a large grill,
A cruel bed of iron,
Fashioned by the strong blacksmith,
Of interlocked crosses herewith
Prepared for him to burn.
And Lawrence was stretched out upon it,
As if to be crucified.
He lay above the wrought metals
While the torturers heaped hot coals
Beneath him to be fried.

And the torturers kept him down
With pitchforks and the prong.
He was being roasted alive,
Yet he still sang his song:

"God is my joy, God is my all!
He gives me everything!
Even now, I have a warm bed
That I find refreshing!

"Valerian! Thou cursed wretch!"
Lawrence joked in stride,
"Quickly! Turn me over now!
For I am done on this side!"

Mad Valerian obliged,
And poked him with the prongs.
Even when he was flipped over,
He continued with his songs:

"Valerian! My time is almost up!
Now do I prophesy!
Hear the things that I have to say!
Hear them before I die!

" 'He hath put down the mighty from their thrones,'
So sayeth Queen Mary.
You shall be humbled by foreign rule
Made into your oppressor’s footstool
Drinking your greed to death like a fool.
I pray thee be wary.

" 'And hath exalted the humble and meek,'
So sayeth Queen Mary.
Generations shall speak of my name,
And the Church shall preserve my fame:
My tale, legendary.
“And the Roman Empire will fall.
This is to be sure.
But with every crucifixion,
There is a resurrection,
And Rome shall endure.”

And when Lawrence finished saying these things,
He gave up his spirit home:
He would see God face to face
And give Saint Sixtus an embrace
As last deacon of Rome.

Valerian and his court fled confused,
Leaving the saint upon the blaze.
Hippolitus returned for the body
With the morning’s rays.

The Roman guard came with a Roman priest,
And said the Roman rite.
They perfumed him in costly oils
And buried him in Roman soils,
Holding vigils day and night.

And Hippolitus looked to the sky,
And at last! Things were still.
He saw the Roman eagle soar
Above Vatican Hill.
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