

## PATRON SAINT OF NEARLY EVERYBODY

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Being reliably informed that Saint Lawrence is venerated by Councils of Allied Masonic Degrees, the idea of producing a biographical essay soon became a reality. Truly, the problems of an essayist are as a grain of sand compared to the Sahara of travail of a martyr, but it may be useful to recite them as both introduction and bibliography.

Having in the house two sets of the World Book Encyclopedia plus Encarta on CD for the computer, it was assumed that research would be quick and simple. Lesson number one: never assume anything.

In all three resources, searching under the category of "Saint" was totally unproductive. Searching under *St. Lawrence* turned up Gulf\_of, Islands Park, River, Seaway and Waterway as suffixes, instructive in their way but not pertinent to the task at hand. Very well then, turning to simply "Lawrence" should lead us directly to our goal. Instead, the articles included Lawrence, Gertrude; Lawrence, James; "Don't give up the ship" Lawrence; and Lawrence, Thomas Edward (who certainly deserves a biography of his own pursuant to "See *Shaw*," but that would be a digression). There was one entry for "Lawrence, Saint, see *Escorial*," in the World Book which is so peculiarly interesting that it deserves a singular place later.

This writer hates computers in general and the Internet in particular but desperation can drive a person to extremes. The web server used allows searching on key words as well as websites, and using just "Saints," or "Saint Lawrence" shunted the research to a variety of booksellers and numerous titles which may have been useful. However, since there was no way to distinguish in them the very Saint being sought, and no desire to buy and read all of them, that direction was abandoned. Where, exactly, should one look for help about Saints? Who is it that accords the title? Why, the Catholic Church, of course. Much too broad to search on. An answer, pulled forward from some back recess of memory was the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

This search revealed a beautiful home page, replete with links and a search window. Choosing first the window to look for St. Lawrence\_not the river or the Seaway, but several pages of Saint Lawrence universities, colleges, associations\_institutions. etc. (Incidentally, no such references revealed whether it was *our* Saint or otherwise that these organizations were named for.)

Perusing the links, one stood out: *Index of Saints*.

This was arranged alphabetically, of course, and although the *As* filled up the first visible page, it was thought that scrolling with the mouse wheel would quickly get on to the *Ls*. Not so; and even with the scroll-bar resorted to, the entries seemed endless-a catalog of Saints by the hundreds. At last reaching the *Ls* and then *Lawrence*, the entries went on and on until only one among them stood out: Saint Lawrence *Martyr*. This was, indeed, our Saint, with two pages of information. Fired with success, further innovation was employed. Using key words combined with *plusses-Lawrence+Catholic+Saint* turned up even more, pertinent information.

It is known that Lawrence was born at Huesca in Spain but no date is given. He was a Deacon in the Roman Catholic Church. As most readers may know (but the writer did not, without further

research), a Deacon in that faith is a clergyman just below Priest in rank. In 258 A.D., the Roman Emperor Valerian, obviously no friend of Christians, in the month of August commanded that all Bishops, including the Pope, Priests and Deacons be executed. In Rome, six other Deacons and the Pope were captured on August 6.

The Pope, Deacons Elicissimus and Agapitus and four other Deacons were beheaded on that date, leaving Lawrence as the ranking Church official in Rome. St. Ambrose of Milan has related that when Pope Sixtus was being led away to his death, that Lawrence begged to be taken with him and share his martyrdom, but the pope forbade it; telling him that he would follow him in three days. His prophecy was approximately correct when, on August 10, 258, the Deacon Lawrence met his death.

Saint Ambrose is also credited with the story of Lawrence's saintly defiance of Roman authority. He seized the opportunity between August sixth and tenth to disperse in his own way, before the emperor might get his hands on it, the material wealth of the church in Rome, which the Pope had entrusted to him. He gave it away to the most needy around him. On the day of his death he was commanded to appear for his execution and bring the treasure of the Church. When he arrived, he brought with him a throng of the crippled, mindless, sick and penniless of Rome, and announced that these were the true treasure of the Church.

It was Ambrose, and also the poet Prudentius, who related that the manner of Lawrence's death was roasting on a red-hot gridiron. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that by the *fourth* century, many legends had grown up about Saint Lawrence and that events preceding, such as that of the treasure, and the manner of his death are not corroborated.

There is, however, doubt of his martyrdom and his veneration since that time. His feast day, widely celebrated, falls on the date of this execution, August 10. Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, erected a memorial, a "little oratory," on a hill, on the Via Tibertina, over his burial place, evidently in the Catacomb of Cyriaca. Pope Pelagius II, who lived 579-90, enlarged and beautified it, next to which an earlier Pope, Sixtus III, had already built a large basilica. In the thirteenth century Pope Honorius III combined the buildings and thus the *Basilica San Lorenzo* stands today.

The Saint, a native of Spain, is especially admired and venerated there, which brings us to the World Book entry for "*Saint Lawrence, see Escorial.*" That article, with a picture, augmented with additions from the Internet, relates that, Philip II of Spain had a huge building erected "In Honor of San Lorenzo." Near the village of Escorial, on a barren hillside, about twenty-five miles from Madrid, it encloses an Augustinian monastery, a college, church, palace, mausoleum, art galleries and a library, built in the overall shape of a gridiron. He was inspired to do it after having defeated the French at the battle of St. Quinten on Saint Lawrence's Day in 1557. The mausoleum encloses the tomb of Philip and many of his successors.

The library contains a world-famous collection of Arabic manuscripts, over one hundred forty works from the Inquisition and thousands of books in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and other languages.

The most impressive part of the structure is said to be the church, one of the finest examples of Renaissance architecture. Impressive or not, one writer has said about it, "There never was, and I hope never will be, a gloomier building." Whether this was a deliberate interior intent of architect Jaun Batista de Toledo in reference to its regal-dead occupants and St. Lawrence's horrible demise, or just one man's opinion, the outside of the building is imposing and stately. It is 744 feet long and 72 feet high with towers that reach 200 feet; and Spaniards call it "EI Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial, the eighth wonder of the world."

Curiously, the Spanish word *escoria* means slag of scum; and *escorial's* literal translation is a dump or dumping place. Hopefully, Spaniards use the term, at least in this instance, more reverently, to mean a place for the repose of the remains of kings and the memory of a revered saint.

As to the title of this piece, Lorenzo is listed by the Church as the Patron Saint of archivists, armourers, brewers, butchers, comedians, confectioners, laundry workers, librarians", paupers, the poor, .restauranters, .school children, seminarians,.students, vintners and others. Whatever our professions and vocations and the state of our prosperity, truly none of us could deny that we, at one time or another, are at least poor in spirit, and the intercession of Lawrence wouldn't hurt. Truly, then, we can name San Lorenzo the Patron Saint of Nearly Everybody.

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