

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.”

Six years ago, I became a card-carrying, occasionally participating member of the Mars, Chicago Plant retired men’s breakfast club. Linda and I had recently returned to the Chicago area, which presented me with the opportunity to reengage with my old cronies. In pre-Covid-19 days the group met monthly at a local restaurant to partake of so-so food and engage in conversation that typically began with an individual accounting of what each of us had been up to over the past several weeks. That continued until the third cup of coffee. Then it was time to settle into the good stuff – the good old days; stories of the crazy antics of past colleagues, tales of who did what to who. These were remembrances of the past, fondly shared and oft told with a degree of regularity.

This strikes me as having a great similarity to our annual observance of the Feast of St. Laurence. We have a history of holding up this special day to remember our namesake saint, and this morning the tradition continues; I’m honored to share his story once again.

The year was 257 A.D. First and Second century Rome had become a challenging mission field for early Christians. Hostility against the followers of Jesus was growing. The barbarism and severity of pagan Rome had begun to reach a fever pitch.

Although Rome proclaimed itself the shining example to the world, intolerance grew to the point that authorities began charging Christians with the crime of hatred to the human race, which, in turn, led to the persecution aimed primarily at the clergy and the laity of the upper classes. All properties used by the Church were confiscated, and assemblies for Christian worship were forbidden.

On August 4, 258, Pope Sixtus the Second and his seven deacons were apprehended in the Roman catacombs. Each was summarily beheaded with one notable exception, Laurence the Archdeacon.

Though no authentic “Acts” of Laurence’s ordeal have been preserved, the tradition is that he was held for questioning and interrogated at length. Eager to plunder the Church’s great riches, the Emperor Valerian commanded Laurence to reveal their whereabouts. As an incentive, he offered Laurence a way out of certain death. If he would show Valerian where the Church's great stores of gold and silver were located, he would issue an order of clemency, sparing his life so that he could continue his work. Valerian was delighted when the deacon asked for three days to gather all the wealth of the Church together in one central place!

For three days, Laurence went throughout the city and invited the poor, the handicapped, and the misfortunate to come together. They were being supported by a thriving early Christian community who understood the Gospel imperative to recognize Jesus in the poor.

When Valerian arrived, Laurence presented to the emperor those whom he had assembled saying, "These are the treasures of the Church." As you can imagine, Valerian was not amused. Legend has it that he ordered Laurence to be burned alive, in public, on a gridiron over a bed of glowing coals. The roasting continued until at some point Laurence is purported to have jokingly said to his executioners, "Let my body be turned; one side is broiled enough." Hence he came to be revered as the patron saint of bakers and comedians.

Tradition records massive conversions to the Christian faith as a result of the faithful life, and the death, of this one humble deacon who understood the true heart of his vocation. He was buried in a cemetery on the Via Tiburtina, the spot upon which Constantine would build a Basilica.

Years later, St Augustine reflected on the heroism of Laurence in a sermon preached on his feast day, emphasizing that his life and death were an example for all Christians to emulate: "I tell you again and again my brethren, that in the Lord's garden are to be found not only the roses of His martyrs. In it there are also the lilies of the virgins, the ivy of wedded couples, and the violets of widows. On no account may any class of people despair, thinking that God has not called them."

Laurence's witness is indicative of the paradoxical nature of Christian living. The point he attempted to impress upon the emperor is that the hallmark of our life in faith is that we do not see or measure things as others

do. As the Rev. Sam Portaro so aptly puts it, “We do not measure riches by how much we can amass for ourselves, but by how much we are able to invest in others. This unusual form of bookkeeping presents a considerable challenge to those who oversee the church’s finances, but any honest accounting of the church’s true wealth vindicates Laurence: our riches are measured in human lives. The bounty of the Christian table is measured in grain broadcast far and wide; in life freely given and abundantly returned.”

This message was part and parcel of my diaconal formation that culminated in ordination on December 26, 1987, the Feast of St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr. Standing before Bishop Frank Griswold, I, and twenty-one other future deacons received one final reminder that we were about to enter a special ministry of servanthood; one in which we were to serve all people, particularly the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely. That through us, Christ and his redemptive love would be made known, through word and example, to those among whom we live, work and worship; that our lives and teaching would show Christ’s people that, like Laurence, in helping the helpless we are serving Christ himself.

The final question put to us that day was the clincher, “Will you in all things seek not your glory but the glory of the Lord Christ?” In expectant anticipation of what was to follow, I eagerly answered, “I will,” and within moments my new vocation became a reality.

We have no idea how Laurence came to be a deacon; we encounter but a few brief moments of his ministry and the impact of his astounding

witness. On the other hand, my path to ministry, which I can speak to, followed a well-defined course which, throughout the passing years has become ever more demanding. Today, the formation process requires more reading and reflection; more knowledge delivery systems to embrace; more varied learning experiences; and more ministerial competencies to successfully demonstrate. Yet, the purpose of it all, the ultimate outcome remains unchanged; that the deacon, well grounded in the Christian faith, sowing good seed, remain modest and humble, strong and constant, so that, through example, many may come to know and love God.

I appear before you today, filled with gratitude and the grace of God for the ability to have served those around me in this manner, to the best of my ability, with patience and grace for the past three decades. It is reassuring to know that there are and will continue to be so many women and men who are called and inspired to witness within the context of diaconal ministry, this ministry of service. So it is with this in mind and heart that I share with you my decision to retire from active ministry effective September 20<sup>th</sup> of this year. I anticipate and welcome opportunities to connect with you with the assistance of Zoom over the next several weeks leading up to my final Sunday.

I will share additional thoughts on that day, but in the meantime, I can say with assurance that my years spent among you have been some of the most rewarding of my ministry. So many of you have touched me in ways that have overwhelmed me and enriched me; I am grateful if I have been

able to return that in some small measure. So to you, the treasures of the Church, what remains to be said is simply this: May God's blessing and grace be upon you and remain with you this day and always.

Amen.