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St. Lawrence's Death on a Grill: Fact or Fiction?

An Update on the Controversy

LAWRENCE (Latin *laurentius*, literally “laurelled”) is the name of the archdeacon of the church of Rome who was martyred in Rome in the year 258 during the persecution of Christians ordered by the Emperor Valerian.¹ In the century after his martyrdom, devotion to this St. Lawrence developed rapidly and far beyond Rome. Moreover, it has continued to grow and spread even up to modern times, finding expression in art, music, literature, geographical exploration, and social life. For example, in the year 1145 the cathedral at Lund, Sweden, was consecrated with Lawrence as its patron. As for the literary influence of the martyrdom of Lawrence, one should note how Lawrence's steadfast courage in the face of death is celebrated in the fourth canto of Dante's *Paradiso* (completed by 1320). And Lawrence's burning on a grill is the subject of a conversation in one of the tales, the tenth story on the sixth day, in Boccaccio's collection of short stories called the *Decameron* (written c. 1348).

Too numerous to mention are the representations of Lawrence in the graphic arts. But outstanding among them are the stained glass windows in the cathedral of Bourges, France, which were completed in the year 1230 and illustrate Lawrence's life as well as his death.

We should also note the paintings by Fra Angelico and the Venetian painter Titian. More precisely, between 1447 and 1449, Fra Angelico, at the request of Pope Nicholas V, painted for a chapel in the apostolic palace at the Vatican a series of frescoes illustrating the life and death of Lawrence. In the year 1558, Titian was commissioned by Venetian nobleman Lorenzo Massolo to paint a large (14½ feet by 10½ feet) altar backdrop of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence for his family chapel in the church of the Crociferi at Venice.² In music, the great composer of vocal polyphony, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594), wrote liturgical music for Lawrence's feast day (the *Missa Beatus Laurentius* and solemn vespers for both the vigil and feast day).

As for geographical references, in the year 1534, the French explorer Jacques Cartier gave the name of St. Lawrence to the largest estuary on the North American continent (the Gulf of St. Lawrence) and to the river that flows into it. A few years later, when King Philip II of Spain decided to build a royal retreat in the mountains twenty-eight miles northwest of Madrid near the town of Escorial, he named his retreat San Lorenzo de Escorial so as to honor the fact that the victory of the Spanish army over the forces of Henry II of France at Picardy in the year 1557 occurred on the feast of Saint Lawrence, August 10. In 1737, San Lorenzo was the name given to a municipality on the island of Puerto Rico, because according to legend the martyr saint had appeared to several inhabitants of that place. In addition, St. Lawrence is the name of one of the oldest towns on the coast of Queensland, Australia. In 1909, the cathedral for the diocese of Charlotte, North Carolina, was consecrated with St. Lawrence as its patron. In 1993, Pope John Paul II designated that cathedral in North Carolina a minor basilica, which because of its architectural splendor has been placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. Last but not least, San Lorenzo is the name of a professional soccer team in Buenos Aires of which Pope Francis has been a fan since his youth.

However, in modern times, certain things about Lawrence's martyrdom have been disputed; they have been both seriously challenged

and vigorously defended. In this article, I will look first at the earliest traditions concerning Lawrence's martyrdom, and then I will consider both the modern challenges raised against those ancient accounts as well as one valiant modern defense of the ancient legend.

As for Lawrence's life before his martyrdom, there is general agreement among scholars: Lawrence appears to have been born of Christian parents in Huesca, a town in the region of Aragon, the northeast region of Spain, which was in Lawrence's day part of the Roman province of Hispania Tarraconensis. Eventually the young Lawrence went to Caesaraugusta (today Zaragoza, Spain) to study with a renowned Greek Christian teacher named Xystus (in Latin, Sixtus). When Sixtus left Spain for Rome, Lawrence followed him, and when Sixtus was elected pope in 257, he not only ordained Lawrence a deacon but also appointed him first among the seven deacons of Rome. Thus Lawrence received the title of "archdeacon."

There are a number of brief notices regarding Lawrence's sainthood and martyrdom in some early works of Christian literature. For example, the work variously called *The Almanac of Philocalus*, *The Chronography of 354*, or *The Codex Calendar of 354*, is a liturgical calendar with full-page illustrations (drawings), produced for a wealthy Roman Christian named Valentinus, by the leading calligrapher of the day, a fellow named Furius Dionysius Philocalus.³ This *Almanac of Philocalus* not only contains the earliest mention of the liturgical feast of Christmas, but also notes Lawrence's martyrdom and his burial in the catacomb of Cyriaca on the Via Tiburtina at Rome.

However, Christian literature of the fourth century provides us with three slightly later but much more detailed accounts relating not just the fact of but also the precise circumstances of Lawrence's martyrdom. The earliest extended account of Lawrence's martyrdom is found in a work of St. Ambrose of Milan (337–397), entitled *De officiis ministrorum* (*On the Duties of the Clergy*). Its modern translator and editor, Ivor Davidson, says in his introduction to the work, "Overall the likeliest setting for the writing of *De officiis* is some time in the late 380s, the period of Ambrose's greatest literary activity."⁴

The account of Lawrence's martyrdom in Ambrose's *De officiis* is a two-part story. The first part appears in book 1, chapter 41, paragraphs 205–207:

And let us not forget holy Lawrence. When he saw his bishop, Sixtus, being led away to be martyred, he began to weep—not for the other man's suffering but because he himself was being left behind. So he began to plead with him, saying: "Where are you going without your son, father? Where are you hurrying off to, holy priest, without your deacon? Never before has it been your way to offer the sacrifice without your minister present. What is there about me that has displeased you now, father? You did not prove me unworthy, did you? At least see whether you chose a suitable minister. You entrusted me with consecrating the Lord's blood and allowed me to share with you in celebrating the sacraments. Are you now denying me the opportunity to share in *your* blood? Make sure your good judgement isn't cast in question at the very hour when your courage wins you such praise. The rejection of a disciple spells loss for the office of his master. Isn't it true that illustrious men, men of real distinction, win their victories in the contest that their disciples go through, rather than in their own? After all, Abraham offered his son, and Peter sent Stephen on before him. Let it be the same with you, father: demonstrate your bravery in your son: offer to the one to whom you have taught so much. This way, you will be confirmed in your assessment of me, and you will attain the crown with a proper escort alongside you."

Then Sixtus said: "I am not leaving or abandoning you, my son, but there are greater contests yet reserved for you. I am an old man, and so I am given an easier fight to finish. But you are young, and for you there is a more glorious triumph over the tyrant awaiting. You will come along soon. Stop your crying! After three days you will be following me: it is only seemly that this interval should come between a priest and his Levite. It wasn't right that you should win the battle under the

guidance of your master, as though you needed someone to help you through it. Why are you so keen to share my suffering? I leave an entire inheritance to you. Why do you desire my presence so much? Weak disciples should go before their master, and strong ones should follow, so that they win the battle for themselves, without their master, for they no longer need a master's teaching. That was why Elijah left Elisha behind. It is to you, then, that I am entrusting the legacy of my bravery." . . . [N]o one pressed holy Lawrence to act in this way—it was down to nothing but his love and devotion. In any event, he too, three days later, was placed on a grid-iron and burnt to death for having made a mockery of the tyrant: "He's roasted," he said: "turn him and eat him." Such was the bravery of his spirit: he conquered the very nature of fire itself.⁵

Later, in book 2, chapter 28, paragraphs 140–41, Ambrose concludes his story of Lawrence's martyrdom by setting forth a concluding moral lesson:

This was the kind of gold that the holy martyr Lawrence kept back for the Lord. He was given an ultimatum to produce the treasures of the church, and he promised that he would present them. On the following day, he led out the poor. Asked where the treasures were that he had promised, he pointed to the poor and said: "These are the treasures of the church." . . . These were the treasure that Lawrence presented, and the victory was his, for not even the persecutor could take them away . . . Lawrence, who chose to spend the church's gold on the poor rather than keep it back for the prosecutor, received the sacred crown of martyrdom as a reward for the unique and brilliant way that he dealt with the situation.⁶

The next extended literary reference to Lawrence occurs in a work of the Latin poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348–424).⁷ Prudentius was born in the year 348 in that same northeast region of Spain where Lawrence was born and raised. It is probable that Pru-

dentius was born of Roman citizens, indeed noble Christian parents. This can be said because his writings show a man who had received an extensive classical education. More precisely, Prudentius's writings reveal a man who had not only a profound knowledge of Christian doctrine and literature but also an intimate knowledge of pagan classics. For example, his poetry shows the influence of Virgil and Horace. Most of Prudentius's life was spent in work as a public servant of the imperial Roman government, in which he most probably rose to consular rank. He died in the year 424 at Zaragosa.

Prudentius's work, called *Peristephanon* or *The Martyrs' Crowns*, is a collection of fourteen hymns to early Christian martyrs. Hymn 2 celebrates the martyrdom of Lawrence, and seems to have been written between 401 and 403 after a trip to Rome during which Prudentius took part in the celebration of the feast of St. Lawrence and visited his basilica on the Via Tiburtina. This hymn is written in what is called "iambic dimeter acatalectic," the Ambrosian measure widely used in hymns of the Church at that time. Its narrative of Lawrence's martyrdom is identical with that of Ambrose's. For example, as in verses 397–404:

When slow, consuming heat had seared
The flesh of Lawrence for a space,
He calmly from his gridiron made
This terse proposal to the judge:

"Pray turn my body, on one side
Already broiled sufficiently,
And see how well your Vulcan's fire
Has wrought its cruel punishment."

The reference to the pagan god Vulcan is a distinctly Prudentian touch, for Prudentius intentionally describes Lawrence's martyrdom as signaling the end of the reign of the pagan gods over Rome. Indeed, the poem begins: "Once mother of unholy fanes, Rome, dedicated now to Christ, by Lawrence led to victory, you trample on the

heathen rites.” And then in verse 10 Prudentius describes Lawrence’s death as “the triumph over wanton Jove.”

Finally, we should consider the sermons given by Augustine of Hippo (354–430) in honor of Lawrence. In the Augustinian Heritage Institute’s *The Works of Saint Augustine*, Part 3, volume 8, *Sermons*, there are no less than four sermons wherein St. Lawrence is mentioned, sermons that give witness to the veneration of Lawrence not only on the Roman peninsula but also in North Africa.⁸ Sermon 303, entitled “On the Birthday of Saint Lawrence,” is quite long and has various themes. The editor estimates it was delivered in Hippo Regius in the year 400. I quote here from the opening words: “Today is the feast of the blessed martyr Lawrence. Readings suitable to this holy solemnity were heard. We have heard them and sung them, and followed the reading of the Gospel with the greatest attention. So let us follow in the footsteps of the martyrs by imitation of them.”⁹ And then Augustine goes on to warn the congregation about attachment to things. And in section 8 he says:

Saint Lawrence was an archdeacon. The treasures of the Church were demanded of him by the persecutor, as the tradition states. Which is why he suffered such dreadful torments, it is quite horrifying to hear about them. Placed on a gridiron, he was scorched all over his body, tortured with the most excruciating pain by fire. Yet he overcame all these bodily afflictions with the sturdy strength of his charity, helped by the one who had made him like that. *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus in good works, which God has prepared for us to walk in* (Eph 2:10).

Now this is what he did, to stoke up the fires of the persecutor’s rage, not because he wanted him to be angry, but out of a desire to commend his own faith to posterity, and to show how he was dying without a care in the world: “Let some carts come with me,” he said, “in which I can bring along the Church’s treasures.” Carts were sent, he loaded them with the poor, and ordered them to go back, saying, “These are the

treasures of the Church.” And it’s true, brothers and sisters; the needs of the needy are the great wealth and treasure of Christians, if we really understand where we should be saving what we possess. The needs are there in front of us; if we deposit our savings with them, we won’t lose them. We aren’t afraid of anybody making off with them; the one who gave them to us, you see, is keeping them safe; nor could we find a better guardian, nor a more trustworthy maker and keeper of promises.¹⁰

Sermon 305A in this collection of Augustine’s sermons is dated to the year 401 and said to have been given by Augustine in the cathedral at Carthage, where he had gone to join with other North African bishops in a council against the Donatists. The editor says in a footnote on page 333, “The primate and bishop of Carthage, Aurelius, put pressure on the reluctant Augustine, then a very junior bishop, to preach.” Augustine began with the words:

Because the audience is getting bored and restless, the sermon was to have been canceled; but out of respect for the martyr, it has to be given. So with the Lord’s help it will be so timed that it is neither burdensome, nor yet cut too short to do justice to the subject. In Rome today has dawned as one of the greatest feasts there, which is celebrated by a great concourse of the people; we are uniting ourselves to our brothers and sisters there in one body, under one head [a reference to Pope Anastasius of Rome], absent indeed in body, but still present in spirit. After all, it’s not only where the tomb of his body is, that the memory of his merits is celebrated. Devotion is owed to him everywhere; his flesh is laid in one place, but his spirit is triumphantly with the one who is everywhere.¹¹

And then in sermon 304, dated 417, Augustine says: “The Roman Church commends this day to us as the blessed Lawrence’s day of triumph, on which he trod down the world as it roared and raged against him, spurned it as it coaxed and wheedled him, and in each

case conquered the devil as he persecuted him. How glorious a wreath is worn by Lawrence the martyr, and with what a multitude of virtues it is adorned, as with a variety of flowers, the whole city of Rome can testify.¹²

Next there is Sermon 303 in this collection. It is dated to the year 426 and is identified as having been given at the church in Milevis, about 120 miles west of Hippo Regius, where Augustine had gone to take part in the election and ordination of a bishop. Some have questioned the authenticity of the sermon; nevertheless, I quote it here. It opens with the words:

Lawrence's martyrdom is famous, but at Rome, not here; such, I mean is the smallness of the congregation which I see. Just as Rome cannot be hidden, so Lawrence's crown cannot be hidden. But why it should still escape the notice of this city, I cannot tell. So listen, the few of you who are here, to just a few words; because I too, in this bodily weariness and this head, am not capable of much. . . . Such was the martyrdom he achieved; that was the glory he was crowned with. The favors he obtains at Rome are so notable, they simply cannot be counted.¹³

Frederic van der Meer, in his *Augustine the Bishop: The Life and Work of a Father of the Church*, says of Augustine's remark here regarding the smallness of the congregation, "Church attendance was worse if a performance had been announced at the theatre, and then Augustine knew very well that only the old faithful ones would turn up, nor did he fail to show that he was unaware of it. One day, for instance, when a performance took place on the same day as the feast of St. Lawrence and it was stiflingly hot, he began his sermons with the words quoted above."¹⁴

As for the character of the accounts of Lawrence's martyrdom as presented by these three patristic writers, Ambrose, Prudentius, and Augustine, the modern translator and editor of Ambrose's *De officiis* says of its narrative of the martyrdom of Lawrence, "The dramatic

account which follows of the exchange between the dying Sixtus and Lawrence and the narrative of Lawrence's death reflect a lost *passio Laurentii* tradition of the mid- to late fourth century."¹⁵ Indeed, the accounts in Prudentius and Augustine are so similar to Ambrose's that one might conclude that all three authors, the poet and the two bishops, must have based their narrative accounts on the same source, the original *passio Laurentii*. Nevertheless, in modern times, the historical accuracy of the story of Lawrence's martyrdom as related by Ambrose, Prudentius, and Augustine has been challenged.

For example, Rev. Patrick Healy, in his *The Valerian Persecution: A Study of the Relations between Church and State in the Third Century* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1905) views the tradition of how St. Lawrence was martyred as "not worthy of credence, as the slow lingering death cannot be reconciled with the express command contained in the edict regarding bishops, priests and deacons (*animadvertantur*) which ordinarily meant decapitation."

Another sceptic, Pio Franchi de' Cavalieri sets forth his own theory of how the tradition arose. He presents this in an essay, "*San Lorenzo e il supplicia della graticula*," published in *Romische Quartalschrift* 14 (1900), 159–76, and yet again in *Note agiografiche* 5 (1915), 65–72. Pio Franchi's theory is that this legend was the result of a mistaken transcription, the accidental omission of the letter "p" by which the customary and solemn formula for announcing the death of a martyr, *passus est*, that is, "he suffered and died," was made to read *assus est*, "he was roasted."

Yet another criticism is set forth in the works of Belgian Jesuit Hippolyte Delehaye. Delehaye was born in Anvers in 1859 and died at Brussels in 1941. He joined the Society of Jesus in 1876. But in 1891 he joined the Bollandists, a small group of Jesuits in Antwerp, Belgium, a society founded by Jesuit priest Jean Bolland in the seventeenth century for the critical study and publication of the lives of the saints, with the precise aim of purging the lives of the saints of any apocryphal and legendary details. Their work was halted with the suppression of the Jesuits in 1772 but was taken up once again

in 1837. Delehaye's critique of the story of Lawrence's grilling is set forth in his article in *Analecta Bollandiana* 19 (1900), 452–53. Later, in his book-length work *Les Légendes Hagiographiques*, Delehaye repeats his negative judgment of the St. Lawrence legend and expands upon his method in arriving at that opinion. That work went through several editions, first appearing in 1905. A second edition appeared in 1927 and then a third edition in 1955, several years after his death. I quote here from an English translation of the fourth and final edition, *The Legends of the Saints*.¹⁶ His assessment of the “legend” of Saint Lawrence is expressed this way: “In the Passion of St. Lawrence the gridiron torture, which it seems impossible to reconcile with the terms of Valerian's second edict, is evidence of foreign influence; a legend about other martyrs current in the east is so like it as to exclude pure coincidence.”¹⁷ Delehaye is referring to the account of the Phrygian martyrs in Socrates of Constantinople's *Ecclesiastical History*. Socrates, the church historian, was born at Constantinople about the year 380 and died around the year 450. His *Ecclesiastical History* is in seven books, each covering the life of one of the emperors, and was designed as a continuation of Eusebius's *Church History*. Socrates, in book 3, chapter 15, says:

Amachius governor of Phrygia ordered that the temple at Merum, a city of that province, should be opened, and cleared of the filth which had accumulated there by lapse of time: also that the statues it contained should be polished fresh. This, in being put into operation, grieved the Christians very much. Now a certain Macedonius and Theodulus and Tatian, unable to endure the indignity thus put upon their religion, and impelled by a fervent zeal for virtue, rushed by night into the temple, and broke the images in pieces. The governor, infuriated at what had been done, would have put to death many in that city who were altogether innocent, when the authors of the deed voluntarily surrendered themselves, choosing rather to die themselves in defense of the truth, than to see others put to death in their stead. The governor seized and ordered

them to expiate the crime they had committed by sacrificing: on their refusal to do this, their judge menaced them with tortures; but they despising his threats, being endowed with great courage, declared their readiness to undergo any sufferings, rather than pollute themselves by sacrificing. After subjecting them to all possible tortures he at last laid them on gridirons under which a fire was placed, and thus slew them. But even in this last extremity they gave the most heroic proofs of fortitude, addressing the ruthless governor thus: "If you wish to eat broiled flesh, Amachius, turn us on the other side also, lest we should appear but half cooked to your taste." Thus these martyrs ended their lives.¹⁸

There is a parallel account in Sozomenus's *Ecclesiastical History: A History of the Church in Nine Books*, in book 5, chapter 11 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, vol. 2, 334). Sozomenus was born about 400 and died in 450. Though born in Gaza in Palestine, he travelled a great deal but eventually settled at Constantinople, where he wrote his *Ecclesiastical History*, drawing heavily from the church history of Socrates. Sozomenus's church history was written around the year 443.

Whatever one might think of Delehaye's arguments, it must be conceded that his opinion has become the standard accepted judgment regarding the legendary character of Lawrence's death. For example, I quote here from the most recent, that is, the third, revised edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. In that dictionary's entry on St. Lawrence, it says of the story of Lawrence's being slowly roasted to death on a gridiron: "This story has been widely rejected by modern scholars, who maintain that he was beheaded like Sixtus II and other contemporary martyrs."¹⁹ The entry on "Lawrence" in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* says: "Few details of his life are historical. He was a Roman deacon, closely associated with Pope Sixtus II, who was martyred a few days before him in the persecution of Valerian; he was also prominent in almsgiving, which was part of his duties. But other details, including the famous roasting on

the gridiron, are quite unhistorical, as the contemporary instrument of capital punishment was the sword.”²⁰ The entry on Lawrence of Rome in *Butler's Lives of the Saints* says, “It must be regretfully admitted that good reasons have been adduced for doubting the historical reliability of such moving incidents as St. Lawrence's presentation of the goods of the Church, and the manner of his death.”²¹

However, now that we have considered the modern critique of the legend of Lawrence's having been burned to death on a gridiron, we should also consider how at least one modern scholar has defended the historical integrity of Lawrence's gridiron death. Henri Leclercq (1869–1945), a Benedictine theologian and ecclesiastical historian, was a Belgian by birth but moved with his parents to Paris in 1874. In 1914, Leclercq finally moved to London, where he remained for the rest of his life, much of which he spent doing research in the reading room of London's British Museum. Leclercq sets forth his defense of the historical integrity of the traditional account of Lawrence's martyrdom in two essays: his article “Gril” which appears in *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie chrétienne et de Liturgie* volume 6, columns 1827–31, and that same dictionary's article “Laurent” in volume 8, columns 1917–47. I believe Leclercq's arguments in favor of the historicity of Lawrence's death by fire are cogent. Indeed, here I will present even more historical evidence that supports Leclercq's arguments.

We should begin by considering the fact that Roman law had always provided for several different forms of capital punishment. The Roman jurist Ulpian, who lived from A.D. 172 to 223, produced two major commentaries on Roman law. The first is entitled *Ad Sabinum* and consists of fifty-one books on Roman civil law. The second, entitled *Ad edictum* and written in eighty-three books, is Ulpian's compilation and commentary on historic judicial decisions. From Ulpian's works and those of other classical historians, it is apparent that capital punishment in Rome took various forms. No doubt, beheading was the most common form of capital punishment for Roman citizens, guaranteeing a quick and thus merciful end. But at times other methods were used, intended precisely to humiliate or

extend the suffering depending on how heinous the crime. *Poena cullei* was the Roman legal term for the punishment of parricides, that is, those accused of having murdered a parent. Parricides were sewn up in a sack and then thrown into the Tiber River.²² Then there was also *voluntaria mors*, suicide ordered by the emperor for high social figures who had offended him.²³

Crucifixion was meant to be a prolonged form of tortuous death reserved for insurrectionists and performed as a public spectacle in order to serve as a warning to others. Livy in his *History of Rome*, book 22, paragraph 33, line 1, tells us how, in the year 217 B.C., twenty-five slaves made a conspiracy in Rome and were crucified. Appian of Alexandria (c.95–c.165), in his *Civil Wars*, book 1, paragraphs 116–20, reports a more famous use of crucifixion. He tells us how in the year 71 B.C. the Roman general and politician Marcus Licinius Crassus defeated a slave uprising led by one Spartacus, a gladiator from Capua near Naples. As punishment for this insurrection, Crassus lined the Via Appia, the main road from Rome to Capua, with more than six thousand crucified slaves.

As for the execution of Christians, however, history witnesses to an even wider variety of forms of capital punishment, including death by burning. Ignatius of Antioch was fed to the lions. On his way to Rome, under armed guards, he wrote a letter to the church at Rome regarding his end there, saying:

From Syria all the way to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts, on land and sea, by night and day, chained amidst ten leopards (that is, a company of soldiers) who only get worse when they are well-treated. Yet because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple: nevertheless I am not thereby justified. May I have the pleasure of the wild beasts that have been prepared for me; and I pray that they prove to be prompt with me. I will even coax them to devour me quickly.²⁴

Eusebius in his *Church History*, book 5, chapter 1, quotes a letter in which is described the persecution of Christians in Lugdunum (mod-

ern day Lyons) in the province of Gaul. The account says “a great many were suffocated in prison” (214) and Alexander, a physician, “was condemned to the wild beasts” (216). However, the earliest literature seems to suggest that the burning of Christians was preferred. The earliest account of a Christian martyrdom outside of the New Testament is a work called the “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” a letter written about the year 156 from the church of Smyrna to the Christian community of Philomelium in greater Phrygia, giving an account of the martyrdom of Smyrna’s bishop Polycarp, who was burned to death by the Roman government.²⁵ This letter was written shortly after his execution and represents the account of first-hand witnesses. Irenaeus in his *Adversus haeresis* book 3, chapter 3, line 4, and Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* also refer to the martyrdom of Polycarp, and their narratives concur with the story as told to us in the “Martyrdom of Polycarp.”

The Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 56–120) includes in his *Annals* (written A.D. 116) an account of Nero’s burning Christians to death (see book 15, paragraphs 44 and 45): “Fixed to crosses and made flammable, on the dwindling of daylight they were burned for us as nocturnal illumination.”²⁶

Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine* (written before Constantine’s death in 337), chapter 52, wherein he treats of “the manifold forms of torture and punishment practiced against the Christians” (this is the chapter heading in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series) asks, “Is there any punishment by fire, are there any tortures or forms of torment, which are not applied to all, without distinction of age or sex?”²⁶

I have already quoted from Eusebius’s *Church History*, book 5, chapter 1, wherein he quotes a letter describing the various forms of capital punishment employed in the persecution of Christians in Lugdunum (present day Lyons) in the Roman province of Gaul (France). However, for our interests it has yet another important reference, this time to the use of fire. It says of one named “Sanctus,” because he would not cooperate with his interrogators, “There arose

therefore on the part of the governor and his tormentors a great desire to conquer him; but having nothing more that they could do to him, they finally fastened red-hot brazen plates to the most tender parts of his body. And these indeed were burned.”²⁸ Later, the letter describes another fellow named Attalus, who “was placed in the iron seat and the fumes arose from his burning body.”²⁹

Yet another account of a Christian sentenced to death by fire can be found in Ambrose of Milan’s *De virginibus*, his treatise on virginity written in three books addressed to his sister Marcellina. There Ambrose describes how, in the year 377, Agnes of Rome was sentenced to be burned at the stake, but when the wood refused to ignite, she was quickly beheaded.

Thus I think it is reasonable to conclude: while it is an indisputable fact that the Valerian persecution authorized only beheadings, that does not exclude the possibility that a humiliated and outraged Roman official, having felt he had been made a fool of by Lawrence, might have resorted to a more vicious method of execution. This scenario is even more probable when we consider the fact that, at the time of Lawrence’s martyrdom, the Emperor Valerian was not in Rome but in the East battling the Persian invasion of the Roman Empire there.³⁰ And in his stead he had left one Publius Cornelius Saecularis, to serve as *praefectus urbi* of Rome, sole administrator of order in the city.³¹

However, there is yet more historical evidence that we must consider if we are to be able to correctly understand the martyrdom of Lawrence. Our consideration of the death and honor accorded Lawrence would not be complete if we did not consider the archeological tributes to Lawrence the Deacon, which begin very early. Leclercq’s essay on St. Lawrence includes a careful survey of all the earliest funerary inscriptions witnessing to Lawrence’s martyrdom. However, I want to insist that we should also consider the archeological evidence.

It is amazing that Lawrence the Deacon was given the same honor accorded the apostles Peter and Paul. I am referring to the fact

that it was Peter, Paul, and Lawrence who were the first Christian leaders honored with a major church in Rome. In the year 312, Constantine declared that his victory over Maxentius had been due to the Christian God. Then he announced that Christian persecution should cease. Christian property was to be restored and clergy given privileges. He made numerous benefactions including the property of the Plautii Laterani family upon which Constantine built a residence and church for the bishop of Rome (what is now known as the Lateran Palace, alongside the basilica and baptistery of St. John Lateran). But Constantine also financed the construction of several funerary halls in basilica form at martyrs' graves in the Christian cemeteries on the outskirts of the city: St. Peter's at the Vatican, St. Paul's outside the walls on the Via Ostiense, and St. Lawrence on the Via Tiburtina. The church of St. Agnes on the Via Noventana was built on the initiative of Constantine's daughter, Constantia. Between 314 and 335, Constantine commissioned these large funerary halls, not as congregational halls with a eucharistic altar, as the Christian basilica would become, but instead as large assembly halls to house Christians who came to pay homage at the grave of a great martyred saint. Constantine wanted the basilica of St. Lawrence to be built next to the hill containing his catacomb with stairs leading down into Lawrence's grave. He built a shrine with a small apse at the grave itself and donated silver furnishings including lamps and candelabra for the decoration of Lawrence's tomb. The Constantinian funerary hall was a large U-shaped building built next to the small hill that contained the catacomb. Primarily, it served as a covered cemetery for the many Christians who wished to be buried next to the martyr, but it also hosted funerary banquets and services in honor of the saint. The evidence suggests that Lawrence the Deacon was given greater honor than his master, Pope Sixtus II. For example, shortly after his beheading, Pope Sixtus was buried in the papal crypt in the catacomb of Pope Calixtus. But fifty years would pass before Pope Damasus I (366–384) would honor Pope Sixtus II: Damasus

had metrical inscriptions in “Damasian characters”—that is, large elegant letters by the calligrapher Furius Dionysium Philocalus—placed on the catacombs of Christian martyrs at Rome, including the so-called “catacomb of the popes,” where Sixtus II was buried.³² However, Damasus gave much greater honor to Lawrence by building the church of San Lorenzo in Damaso. The phrase “in Damaso” means “in the house of Damasus,” referring to the fact that Pope Damasus built this church over what had been his home. Indeed, it was not until the 580s, three hundred years after Pope Sixtus II’s martyrdom, that Pope Pelagius II commissioned the construction of a basilica over the grave of Pope Sixtus II.³³ Moreover, all the evidence suggests that popular devotion to St. Lawrence began very early and quickly grew to such enthusiasm that it far overshadowed devotion to Pope Sixtus and his six other deacons.³⁴

Lastly, I want to consider not just the historical background of Lawrence having been burned to death over a grill fire but also the historical background to Ambrose’s account of Lawrence’s final words to his Roman executioner: “He’s roasted, turn him and eat him.” In this regard it is important that we note how the earliest Christians were often vilified as cannibals. When Tacitus in book 15 of his *Annals* describes the followers of Christ as “a class hated for their abominations,” he is referring to the rumor that these Christians gather behind closed doors where they eat flesh and drink blood. Consider also the report of the governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, to the Emperor Trajan. In his Letter 96 (written in the year A.D. 110), Pliny reported to the emperor regarding his investigation into the practices of the Christians in Bithynia, how on a certain day of the week they would meet, sing hymns to Christ as to a God, and later in the day meet together again, this time to take food. However, Pliny assures the emperor “it was ordinary and harmless food.”³⁵ These rumors about Christian cannibalism had their source in the Gospel of John, chapter 6, verse 53, wherein we are told of Jesus’s teaching: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.” A few verses later

in John 6:60 we are told of the crowd's response to this teaching: "Then many of his disciples who were listening said, 'This saying is hard; who can accept it?'" Later still we are told in John 6:66, "As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him." It would not be surprising, in light of persistent accusations of cannibalism, if more than one Christian turned back those accusations on persecutors who roasted Christians alive on a grill.

A Final Consideration

One final theme in the work of the Bollandists and all these modern assessments of the legends of saints' lives and deaths should be noted: the role of popular imagination. Delehaye's second chapter is entitled "The Production of Legend." There he indicts the popular imagination as the principal origin for false legends about the saints. Half way through the chapter, he says:

Surely enough has now been said to show that, among the people at large, the senses govern the understanding, that there is a certain sluggishness of mind that stops short at what can be touched, seen, heard, unable to rise to a higher level. This mental insufficiency explains people's blind attraction towards what is marvelous, the supernatural made concrete. The thought of the invisible sovereignty of divine Providence is not enough; the inward working of grace does not offer anything that can be seen or taken hold of; and the soul's mysterious commerce with God has to be translated into concrete effects if it is to make any impression on the people's mind. The supernatural makes full appeal to it only if the supernatural is blended with the marvelous, and consequently popular legends are overflowing with wonders. Visions, prophecies and miracles are a necessary part of the lives of saints as recounted by the people.³⁶

On the following pages, Delehaye further insists:

We must especially beware of supposing that from an artistic standpoint the level of the miracle-centered productions of popular hagiography is in general a high one. Apart from a few really happy finds and interesting motifs well marked out, we are confronted with nothing but platitudes and grotesque fantasies that are frequently altogether fantastic. The feverish imagination thirsts for wonders, it is itching with ambition to outstrip extraordinary stories by others yet more extraordinary; and only too often it exceeds all propriety in a sphere wherein opportunities for ingenious fiction are endless. . . . Such wild excesses invite us to consider the emotions which beset the people at large, intense, unrestrained emotions which give to everything they touch a stamp of exaggeration and sometimes violence, as so many legends testify. The multitude is moved by very strong feelings: it knows nothing of moderate opinions or fine distinctions, which it can neither perceive nor express; when it says what it thinks and feels it does so vigorously.³⁷

My own response to Delehaye's claim—that saints' legends are the creation of the popular imagination and emphasize fantastic miracles—is simply to say that the "legend" of St. Lawrence contains no miracles. Instead, it is a dramatic but simple witness to the man—that is, not to his employment of miraculous powers but to his moral character. As Richard P. McBrien says in his *Lives of the Saints* in the entry on "Lawrence, deacon and martyr": "The vitality of his cult in the universal church has not been based so much on the few scraps of information we have of his life, but on the way in which his saintly example has inspired the imagination and behavior of countless Christians throughout history."³⁸ The story of Lawrence's death offers us not wondrous works but "saintly example."

Also, in the light of Delehaye's indictment of the popular imagination we must ask: Was Ambrose the victim of popular imagination? Was he pandering to "the people's blind attraction to what is marvelous"? It is important to remember Ambrose was both a learned

man and a career Roman civil servant. That he would have accepted uncritically a popular legend regarding a Roman civil servant and a Christian leader is hard to imagine. Moreover, Ambrose had the means to check the historical reliability of the account of Lawrence's martyrdom. More precisely, Ambrose, though born in Roman Gaul (about the year 340), was the descendent of a noble Roman family. Indeed, at the time of his birth, Ambrose's father, like Lawrence's executioner, Publius Cornelius Saecularis, was serving as a highly placed Roman civil servant, prefect of Gaul. Moreover, after his father's death, Ambrose returned to Rome with his mother and sister, where they stayed for several years, during which Ambrose pursued a classical education. Ambrose followed his father into government service and in the year 372 was made consular prefect (governor) of Liguria and Emilia. It is doubtful that Ambrose would expose and even celebrate the insubordination of a Roman official without first checking the facts. Surely, Ambrose would have made some effort to check the reliability of the sources he used regarding Lawrence's death.

Ambrose, Prudentius, and Augustine do not dazzle their audience with miracles and fantastic tales of supernatural events. They do not succumb to a misguided "popular imagination." Instead, they present us with a serious moral lesson regarding the courage and daring so often exhibited in the saints. St. Lawrence, along with the art and architecture his story has inspired, will continue to stand out for the extraordinary valor he demonstrated during one of the darkest periods of Christian persecution in Church history.

Notes

1. Lawrence (Latin *laurentius*, literally "laurelled") is the name of the archdeacon of the Church of Rome who was martyred in Rome in the year 258 during the persecution of Christians ordered by the Emperor Valerian. In this article the spelling of St. Lawrence's name will vary according to the source, British or American, quoted. In British English the name is spelled "Laurence." In American English it is spelled with a "w" rather than a "u," and thus "Lawrence."

2. Titian's painting of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence is now in the Jesuit church at Venice, Santa Maria Assunta.
3. See Michele Renee Salzman, *On Roman Time: the Codex-Calendar of 354* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
4. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum*, trans. Ivor Davidson (Oxford University Press, 2001), 5.
5. Ambrose, 237–39.
6. *Ibid.*, 347.
7. In my description of the life and work of Prudentius, I follow the account given by M. D. Eagan in his introduction to *The Poems of Prudentius*, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962).
8. Trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1994).
9. *Ibid.*, 300.
10. *Ibid.*, 304.
11. *Ibid.*, 324.
12. *Ibid.*, 316.
13. *Ibid.*, 313.
14. Frederic van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop: The Life and Work of a Father of the Church*, trans. Battershaw and Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 174.
15. Ambrose, 310. *Passio* is the Latin word used to translate the Greek *pathos*. Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* bk. 2 identifies three artistic modes of persuasion, one of which, *pathos*, consists of “awakening emotion” in the audience so as to lead them to make the right judgment.
16. Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. Donald Atwater, (NY: Fordham University Press, 1962).
17. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
18. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. A. C. Zenos in Philip Schaff's *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2nd series), 1886, 2:86.
19. F. L. Cross, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Rev. E. A. Langstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 963.
20. David Hugh Farmer, trans., *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 237.
21. *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, ed. rev. supplements Herbert Thurston and Donald Attwater, (NY: P. J. Kennedy and sons, 1962), 3:297.
22. See Cicero's speech, *Pro roscius amerino*, and the execution of one Publicus Mallelus as described in *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*.
23. See the death of Seneca in Tacitus, *The Annals*, chapter 15, lines 61–64. We must also consider court-ordered death by crucifixion.
24. In *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 231.
25. See “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” *The Apostolic Fathers*, 298–327.

26. Tacitus, *Annals*, trans. A. J. Woodman (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 325–26.
27. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2nd series), 1:513.
28. Eusebius, *Church History* in *ibid.*, 1:214.
29. *Ibid.*, 16.
30. See *The Scriptorum Historiae Augustae*, trans. David Magie, Loeb Classical Library series (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1932, 3:7: "Valerian was growing old in Persia."
31. See the reference to Publius Cornelius Saecularis in A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale and J. Morris, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1980–1992), 1:795.
32. See *Damasus of Rome: The Epigraphic Poetry*, ed. Dennis Trout (NY–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 116–17.
33. See Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome* (Brighton, England: Sussex Academic Press, 2001).
34. H. D. M. Spence-Jones, in his *The Early Christians in Rome*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1911), 254, notes how quickly devotion to Laurence developed: "From very early times S. Laurence, the deacon of Sixtus II, received extraordinary honour." And then he quotes Bishop Lightfoot's amazement that the honor accorded Lawrence was so great that it eclipsed that of the other and early martyr St. Hippolytus (170–235) who was buried so near Laurence.
35. *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), 5.
36. Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, 33–34.
37. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
38. Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 322–23.

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