

SOLEMNITY OF ST LAURENCE 2023

The Basilica of San Lorenzo is just outside the city walls in Rome. It has had a long association with death as it was built on the site of a third century catacomb and opposite the sprawling Verano cemetery. Unlike many of the other Papal Basilicas it is perhaps less often visited and may be this is the reason it has always been one of my favourites. It is of course home to our own patron saint, Laurence, one of the seven deacons of the city, along with the relics of St Stephen, St Justin and Pius IX.

San Lorenzo is situated in a very complex and poor area and was home for many years of Fr Carmine de Filippis, a Capuchin friar who was one of the exorcists of the Diocese Rome. The Basilica and Fr Carmine came to mind as I reflected on today's Solemnity of St Laurence, because I recalled heading back late one evening from San Lorenzo having spent time observing Fr Carmine at work in the ministry of exorcism. I was tired and processing what I had seen and heard.

The bus which I was on was almost empty, and my hands were in the pockets of my coat as it was cold, and I was holding my rosary quietly praying. Opposite was a young woman who was dressed, I think in what is called a 'goth fashion', very black hair, dark purple fingernails, heavy black eye make-up, black clothes. She seemed somewhat agitated. At one point she shouted 'Basta, basta!' – enough, enough. The other passengers looked startled. Initially I wasn't aware that she had shouted at me, until I began praying again, she suddenly stood up right in front of me, purposefully pulling her black coat open to reveal a T-shirt with an image of Our Lady that had been badly disfigured, she was also wearing a crucifix upside down.

Quietly, without taking my eyes off her I took the rosary out of my pocket so that it was visible, and this seemed to press the nuclear button: "Basta, basta" she screamed, spitting at me, and shouting, at the next stop she ran off the bus. It could have been a scene from a Hollywood movie, but it was a normal wet, cold, November evening on the number three ATAC tram. The other passengers shrugged: "*Scusa padre, pazzo, molto pazzo*" – crazy, very crazy. Sharing the incident with Fr Carmine some days later he said in a nonchalant Italian way: "*Padre, you stand up for Christ, then be prepared for all kinds of crazy stuff.*"

When the 22-year-old Laurence entered upon the ministry of deacon under the guidance of Pope Sixtus II, I doubt that he had any idea of the "crazy stuff" that would come his way, including martyrdom. The cost of discipleship, which is core to what we have heard in the liturgy of the Word today and in the life of our patron, opens each of us to unexpected challenges. As Paul so clearly taught. '*Thin sowing means thin reaping. Each one should give what he has decided in his own mind...not grudgingly or because he has been made to.*' The disciple of Jesus freely gives, why, because the encounter with the living Jesus, the encounter with liberating love which is at the heart of the good news we proclaim, demands nothing less than everything.

When Laurence, at the demand of the Prefect of Rome, brought out the treasures of the Church, among those treasures were not only those who were sick and materially poor...but also those who needed to be liberated from darkness, brought into the light. Laurence in his diaconal service wanted to open everyone he served to the presence of the truth of the Gospel. He wanted

to set the captives free and so do we. The witness we give to the power of the Gospel will touch no one unless it has touched us to the very core of our being and opened us to the Spirit of generosity, of self-giving love. Pope Benedict put it beautifully on a visit he made in October 2011 to the Charter House at Sera San Bruno in Calabria. He said:

“The monk, in leaving everything, ‘takes a risk’...in order to live on nothing but the essential he finds a deep communion with his brethren, with every human being...This vocation, like every vocation, finds an answer in an ongoing process, in a life-long search. Indeed, it is not enough to withdraw to a place such as this in order to learn to be in God’s presence...it requires time, practice and patience...and the beauty of every vocation in the Church consists precisely in this: giving God time to act with his Spirit and to allow one’s own humanity to form itself in the maturity of Christ.”

If we live our vocation merely as a duty, as a fulfilment of ‘my’ own personal desires then it becomes solely about me! When, like St Laurence, we choose to live our discipleship as a gift of the Spirit, in the power of the living presence of Christ to whom we want to be configured, then our discipleship becomes all about HIM and all for OTHERS.

The cost of discipleship is before us today, literally it is before us in the presence of these relics, so what might St Laurence say to us today? I believe he desires to reignite in us a passion for Christ, which overflows into a passion for all humanity. Just behind Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem is the chamber that is thought to house the tomb of King David and up an adjacent staircase is the “cenacle” the upper Room which marks the birthplace of the Eucharist and Pentecost, the birthplace of the Church. The very first generation of Christians gathered and settled here and returned after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. These heroic disciples knew well the cost of saying yes to Christ. They knew that their passion for Christ would take them to have to make difficult and challenging decisions. They suffered persecution, lived with the threat of martyrdom, but their passion for Christ gave them hope, fuelled them with life.

St Laurence is with us today and we would do well to spend time listening to him and who knows we might hear him say to you and to me:

Carefully and prayerfully look at the times you are living in. See these times through the lens of God’s plan.

Don’t look for what is comfortable and easy, what suits your personal agenda and ambition, but look for what is true and for what leads to life.

Don’t fight today’s battles with yesterday’s strategies, it will not work.

Don’t talk about a new world order, a better monastic community, a new future without committing to becoming better people, witnesses to the one who is life.

We’re living in an age that requires a compelling, Christian narrative. A narrative that provides a counter witness to the crazy stuff that is peddled, advertised as truth. We’ve swallowed secular values and we’ve baptised them with a spiritual gloss that only feeds a false gospel. Now there is a call to rearticulate the truth that feeds a spiritually malnourished world. Laurence knew what was true. He was not prepared for thin sowing, a sowing that perpetuates a lifeless myth.

The Gospel that I had in my hands in that rosary and the mystery and power of Christ that it released, confronted in an unexpected fashion a person lost in darkness, spiritually oppressed. The darkness cannot stand against the light.

Let us today pray that like Laurence we will be courageous witnesses of life and light, that this monastery may be a light house, a beacon of faith guiding others to Jesus. Let us pray that we do this not merely by inspiring words but by transparent lives.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

10 August 2023