

AUGUST X.

ST. LAURENCE, M.

[From St. Ambrose, *De Offic.* lib. i. c. 41, lib. ii. c. 48; the four panegyrics of St. Austin, *Serm.* 302, 303, 304, 305, besides four others in the Appendix to his *Sermons*, and his seventy-two hom. in *Joan.*, two under the name of St. Ambrose; Prudent: *hym.* 2 de *Cor.* St. Leo, *Serm.* 83; St. Peter *Chrysol.* *Serm.* 135; St. Maximus *Taurin.* *Serm.* 56; St. Fulgentius, &c. The Acts of St. Laurence being a modern compilation are not here made use of. See *Tillemont.* t. iv.]

A. D. 258.

THERE are few martyrs in the church whose names are so famous as that of the glorious St. Laurence, in whose praises the most illustrious among the Latin fathers have exerted their eloquence, and whose triumph, to use the words of St. Maximus, the whole church joins in a body to honour with universal joy and devotion. The ancient fathers make no mention of his birth or education, but the Spaniards call him their countryman. His extraordinary virtue in his youth recommended him to St. Xystus, then archdeacon of Rome, who took him under his protection, and would be himself his instructor in the study of the holy scriptures, and in the maxims of Christian perfection. St. Xystus being raised to the pontificate in 257, he ordained Laurence deacon; and though he was yet young, appointed him the first among the seven deacons who served in the Roman Church; hence by several fathers he is called the pope's archdeacon. This was a charge of great trust, to which was annexed the care of the treasury and riches of the church, and the distribution of its revenues among the poor. How faithful and disinterested our holy deacon was in the discharge of this important and difficult office appears from the sequel.

The Emperor Valerian, through the persuasion of Macrian, in 257, published his bloody edicts against the church, which he foolishly flattered himself he was able to destroy, not knowing it to be the work of the Almighty. That by cutting off the shepherds he might disperse the flocks, he commanded all bishops, priests, and

deacons to be put to death without delay. The holy pope, St. Xystus, the second of that name, was apprehended the year following. As he was led to execution, his deacon, St. Laurence, followed him weeping; and judging himself ill-treated, because he was not to die with him, said to him, "Father, where are you going without your son? Whither are you going, O holy priest, without your deacon? You were never wont to offer sacrifice without me, your minister. Wherein have I displeased you? Have you found me wanting to my duty? Try me now, and see, whether you have made choice of an unfit minister for dispensing the blood of the Lord." He could not, without an holy envy, behold his bishop go to martyrdom, and himself left behind; and being inflamed with a desire to die for Christ, he burst into this complaint. From the love of God, and an earnest longing to be with Christ, he contemned liberty and life, and thought of no other honour but that of suffering for his Lord. Hence he reputed the world as nothing, and accounted it his happiness to leave it, that he might come to the enjoyment of his God; for this he grieved to see himself at liberty, was desirous to be in chains, and was impatient for the rack. The holy pope, at the sight of his grief, was moved to tenderness and compassion, and comforting him, he answered, "I do not leave you, my son; but a greater trial and a more glorious victory are reserved for you, who are stout and in the vigour of youth. We are spared on account of our weakness and old age. You shall follow me in three days. He added a charge to distribute immediately among the poor, the treasures of the church, which were committed to his care, lest the poor should be robbed of their patrimony if it should fall into the hands of the persecutors. Laurence was full of joy, hearing that he should be so soon called to God, set out immediately to seek all the poor widows and orphans, and gave among them all the money which he had

in his hands; he even sold the sacred vessels to increase the sum, employing it all in the like manner. The church at Rome was then possessed of considerable riches. For, besides the necessary provision of its ministers, it maintained many widows and virgins, and fifteen hundred poor people, of whose names the bishop or his archdeacon kept the list; and it often sent large alms into distant countries. It had likewise very rich ornaments and vessels for the celebration of the divine mysteries, as appears from Tertullian, and the profane heathen scoffer, Lucian. Eusebius tells us,¹ that the magnificence of the sacred vessels inflamed the covetousness of the persecutors. St. Optatus says,² that in the persecution of Dioclesian the churches had very many ornaments of gold and silver. St. Ambrose,³ speaking of St. Laurence, mentions consecrated vessels of gold and silver; and Prudentius speaks of chalices of gold and silver, embossed, and set with jewels.

The prefect of Rome was informed of these riches, and imagining that the Christians had hid considerable treasures, he was extremely desirous to secure them: for he was no less a worshipper of gold and silver than of Jupiter and Mars. With this view he sent for St. Laurence, to whose care these treasures were committed. As soon as he appeared, he said to him, according to Prudentius, "You 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 to light these concealed treasures; the prince has need of them for the maintenance of his forces. I am told that, according to your doctrine, you must render to Cæsar the things that belong to him. I do not

(1) Hist. lib. viii. c. 22.

(2) Lib. i.

(3) De Offic. lib. ii. c. 28.

think that your God causeth 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." St. Laurence replied, without showing any concern, "The church is indeed rich; nor hath the emperor any treasure equal to what it possesseth. I will show you a valuable part; but allow me a little time to set every thing in order, and to make an inventory." The prefect did not understand of what treasure Laurence spoke, but imagining himself already possessed of hidden wealth, was satisfied with this answer, and granted him three days' respite. During this interval, Laurence went all over the city, seeking out in every street the poor who were supported by the church, and with whom no other was so well acquainted. On the third day he gathered together a great number of them before the church, and placed them in rows, the decrepit, the blind, the lame, the maimed, the lepers, orphans, widows, and virgins; then he went to the prefect, invited him to come and see the treasure of the church, and conducted him to the place. The prefect, astonished to see such a number of poor wretches, who made a horrid sight, turned to the holy deacon with looks full of disorder and threatenings, and asked him what all this meant, and where the treasures were which he had promised to show him. St. Laurence answered, "What are you displeased at? The gold which you so eagerly desire is a vile metal, and serves to incite men to all manner of crimes. The light of heaven is the true gold, which these poor objects enjoy. Their bodily weakness and sufferings are the subject of their patience, and the highest advantages; vices and passions are the real diseases by which the great ones of the world are often most truly miserable and despicable. Behold in these poor persons the treasures which I promised to show you; to which I will add pearls and precious stones,—those widows

and consecrated virgins, which are the church's crown, by which it is pleasing to Christ; it hath no other riches; make use then of them for the advantage of Rome, of the emperor, and yourself." Thus he exhorted him as Daniel did Nabuchodonosor, to redeem his sins by sincere repentance and almsdeeds, and showed him where the church placed its treasure. The earthly-minded man was far from forming so noble an idea of an object, the sight of which offended his carnal eyes, and he cried out in a transport of rage, "Do you thus mock me? Is it thus that the axes and the fasces, the sacred ensigns of the Roman power, are insulted? I know that you desire to die; that is your frenzy and vanity: but you shall not die immediately, as you imagine. I will protract your tortures, that your death may be the more bitter as it shall be slower. You shall die by inches." Then he caused a great gridiron to be made ready, and live coals almost extinguished to be thrown under it, that the martyr might be slowly burnt. Laurence was stripped, extended, and bound with chains upon this iron bed over a slow fire, which broiled his flesh by little and little, piercing at length to his very bowels. His face appeared to the Christians newly baptized, to be surrounded with a beautiful extraordinary light, and his broiled body to exhale a sweet agreeable smell; but the unbelievers neither saw this light nor perceived this smell. The martyr felt not the torments of the persecutor, says St. Austin, so vehement was his desire of possessing Christ: and St. Ambrose observes, that whilst his body broiled in the material flames, the fire of divine love, which was far more active within his breast, made him regardless of the pain: having the law of God before his eyes, he esteemed his torments to be a refreshment and a comfort. Such was the tranquillity and peace of mind which he enjoyed amidst his torments, that having suffered a long time, he turned to the judge, and

said to him, with a cheerful and smiling countenance, "Let my body be now turned; one side is broiled enough." When, by the prefect's order, the executioner had turned him, he said, "It is dressed enough, you may eat." The prefect insulted him, but the martyr continued in earnest prayer, with sighs and tears imploring the divine mercy with his last breath for the conversion of the city of Rome. This he begged Christ speedily to accomplish, who had subjected the world to this city, that his faith might, by triumphing one day in it, more easily spread itself from the head over all the provinces or members of its empire. This grace he asked of God for that city for the sake of the two apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, who had there begun to plant the cross of Christ, and had watered that city with their blood. The saint having finished his prayer, and completed his holocaust, lifting up his eyes towards heaven, gave up the ghost.

Prudentius doubts not to ascribe to his prayer the entire conversion of Rome, and says God began to grant his request at the very time he put it up; for several senators, who were present at his death, were so powerfully moved by his tender and heroic fortitude and piety, that they became Christians upon the spot. These noblemen took up the martyr's body on their shoulders, and gave it an honourable burial in the Veran field, near the road to Tibur, on the 10th of August, in 258. His death, says Prudentius, was the death of idolatry in Rome, which, from that time, began more sensibly to decline; and now, adds the same father, the senate itself venerates the tombs of the apostles and martyrs. He describes with what devotion and fervour the Romans frequented the Church of St. Laurence, and commended themselves in all their necessities to his patronage; and the happy success of their prayers proves how great his power is with God. The poet implores the mercy of Christ for himself, and begs

he may obtain, by the prayers of the martyrs, what his own cannot. St. Austin assures us that God wrought in Rome an incredible number of miracles through the intercession of St. Laurence. St. Gregory of Tours, Fortunatus, and others, relate several performed in other places. It appears, from the Sacramentary of Pope Gelasius, that his feast has been kept with a vigil and an octave, at least, ever since the fifth age. In the reign of Constantine the Great, a church was built over his tomb, on the road to Tibur, which is called St. Laurence's without the walls; it is one of the five patriarchal churches in Rome. Seven other famous churches in that city bear the name of this glorious saint.

ings, all the rest of our lives is to be suspected of the same disorder; nor can we easily give any other evidence that faith and divine love are the principles of our actions.

In St. Laurence we have a sensible demonstration how powerful the grace of Jesus Christ is, which is able to sweeten whatever is bitter and harsh to flesh and blood. If we had the resolution and fervour of the saints in the practice of devotion, we should find all seeming difficulties which discourage our pusillanimity to be mere shadows and phantoms. A lively faith, like that of the martyrs, would make us, with them, contemn the honours and pleasures of the world, and measure the goods and evils of this life, and judge of them, not by nature, but by the light and principles of faith only; and did we sincerely love God, as they did, we should embrace his holy will with joy in all things, have no other desire, and find no happiness but in it. If we are dejected or impatient under troubles, indulge murmurs and complaints, or call ourselves unhappy in them, it is evident that inordinate self-love reigns in our hearts, and that we seek our own inclinations more than the will of God. The state of suffering is the true test of our love, by which we may judge, whether in duties that are agreeable to nature, we love the will of God, or only do in them our own will. If self-love discovers itself in our suffer-