

- In July 257, Emperor Valerian initiated a persecution against the Christians of the Roman Empire. Celebrating Mass was outlawed; priests and deacons were exiled, and Catholics were forbidden from the catacombs where they normally worshipped.
- The following summer in August 258, Valerian upped the ante by issuing a second edict mandating the death penalty for any clergy refusing to worship the gods of Rome.
- The members of the upper classes of society who refused to worship the Roman gods would be deprived of land and titles. The men could also be executed and the women exiled.
- While Valerian's persecution wasn't as severe as that of Emperor Diocletian 30 years later, it still had a chilling effect on the Catholics of Rome and led to the martyrdom of well-known saints such as St. Cyprian of Carthage, Pope St. Sixtus II, and St. Lawrence.
- Pope Sixtus II and 5 deacons were arrested on August 6, 258, while celebrating Mass in the catacombs of St. Callistus. He and 4 of the deacons were put to death that very day.
- But St. Lawrence, who was the archdeacon of Rome – and therefore the one responsible for the Church's treasury – was spared and tasked by the Prefect of Rome with gathering up and handing over the Church's money and valuables.
- Knowing that he was going to die, St. Lawrence sold much of the Church's gold and silver, and gave it to the poor of the city.
- When the Prefect came to his church and demanded that Lawrence hand over the Church's treasures, the good deacon presented them with the poor and needy he had gathered there and said: "Here are the Church's most prized treasures."
- This act of defiance earned Lawrence an especially painful execution: being roasted to death on gridiron – a martyrdom he endured with both humor and heroism.
- Today, August 10<sup>th</sup>, is the feast day of this most glorious deacon of the Church.
- Last Sunday I spoke about the importance of being generous with our time, talent, and treasure as a means of preparing ourselves for Heaven. The story of St. Lawrence reminds us that true wealth is not to be found in material goods.
- This is why Christ Himself counsels us in the Gospel today:
- *Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.*
- The point here is that we must keep our focus on our Lord and the world to come while we live in this world, keeping ourselves free from worldly attachments that could harm us. For this is how we prepare ourselves for Heaven.
- In the Gospels our Lord often regales us with parables about Heaven that, at first, might seem difficult to comprehend. Yet, Jesus uses these parables to explain the supreme value of Heaven.
- For example, Heaven *is* the treasure buried in a field, it *is* the pearl of great price – worth whatever we must give to attain it. Yet, these parables often include a threat of punishment for those who are bad, or who persist in evil and wickedness, as does today's parable.
- Understand that our Lord repeatedly underscores the truth about judgment and damnation not because He's trying to scare us. He does so because He knows all too well our propensity to forget these truths!

- In other words, our Lord wants us to be ever conscious of the fact that there are consequences for our sins, and these He would like to spare us.
- This is why we must be intent upon seeking His will and living as He would have us live.
- And rather than living with a servile fear of hell, we must look at all the many blessings God bestows upon us, and then set about ordering our lives in a way that is pleasing to Him by living a life of faith – as our readings encourage us today.
- My dear brothers and sisters, do you understand how much our Lord loves you? Do you realize the great gift of grace it is to be not only alive and well, but to be Catholic?
- Are you not amazed that in His goodness, God is willing to pardon even the worst and most wicked of sins if only we repent of it, so great is His desire to save us? It's astounding really – and the only proper response is to live our lives in gratitude to God for His many gifts.
- To be sure, our lives will be much more joyful if we order them out of gratitude, rather than allowing them to be ruled by fear. And so we must constantly show our gratitude to God for His blessings, His grace, and His mercy toward us.
- While there are many ways to show our gratitude to God, especially by being generous with time, talent, and treasure, the most important way to show our gratitude to God is by being generous with our hearts by truly loving God and neighbor.
- As your pastor, of course I want you to give generously of your time, talent, and treasure. But more than anything, I want you to love.
- Loving God means being quick to obey Him and His Church's teachings with joy, trusting that following His commandments and doing His will is the very best thing that can ever happen to us. We love our Lord by having faith in His goodness.
- Very beautifully, our Lord encourages us today with these words: "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for the Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom." Meditate on those words for just a moment: the Father is pleased to give you the Kingdom!
- In these tender words we can see that God wants to save us: that He wants us to have faith in His desire to save us! So even though our Gospel speaks of judgment and punishment and the expectations our Lord has of us, there is great hope expressed as well.
- Living in this way: conscious that we will one day face judgment for our earthly lives, yet hopeful in God's mercy and in His desire to save us from our sins, is at the heart of the Christian understanding of God and of how our relationship with Him should be ordered.
- Showing our gratitude to our Lord by loving Him above all else, by obeying Him and the teachings of the Church, and by being generous with our time, talent, and treasure, are intrinsic to living a Christian life, and is also a great way to prepare ourselves for Heaven.
- My dear brothers and sisters, our God is a mighty God to be sure, One Who is all-powerful and all-knowing. He is the Creator and Ruler of all things. Nothing exists or remains in existence without Him.
- And yet despite His ineffable greatness, He remains a personal God – One we can come to know. He is a God of love, a God of mercy. He is a God Who suffers both with and for His people. He is a Good Shepherd Who sees us as His flock.
- Like good St. Lawrence, may we understand that the most valuable treasure we can ever possess is not gold or silver, but God Himself. And in our love and gratitude, may we love Him above all things and be willing even to lay down our life for Him and His Church.
- St. Lawrence, pray for us.