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# St. Lawrence O'Toole: Bishop and peacemaker

Richard McBrien | Nov. 10, 2008 Essays in Theology

When I was growing up in Hartford, Conn., many years ago, it was still a time when, as in other U.S. cities with a large Catholic population, neighborhoods were defined by the parishes you belonged to. If asked where you lived, you would answer, ?St. Justin?s? or ?the Cathedral.?

Most parishes had their own baseball teams in the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) league. During Holy Week, following the Holy Thursday services, the custom was to visit -- on foot, no busses or cars -- seven churches in order to gain a plenary indulgence.

Some parishes even had full-scale bands that marched in city-wide parades. St. Augustine?s on the south side of Hartford was a prominent example. One of the curates strode proudly at the head of the group.

**Essays in Theology by Fr. Richard McBrien**

We got to know the identities of saints from the names of churches throughout the city: St. Joseph, St. Michael, St. Ann, St. Peter, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, St. Justin, St. Luke, St. Patrick, St. Anthony, and St. Lawrence O?Toole.

It is the parish created in honor of St. Lawrence O?Toole that is of particular interest this week because the saint?s day of entrance into eternal glory is celebrated on this Friday, Nov. 14.

After Hartford?s Cathedral of St. Joseph burned down Dec. 31, 1956, St. Lawrence O?Toole?s (if memory serves) became the temporary site of ordinations to the priesthood until my own classmates were ordained in the newly dedicated cathedral on Ascension Thursday,1962. (Another classmate and I had been ordained a few months earlier in the chapel of St. Thomas Seminary, Bloomfield, because we had followed an accelerated course of study at St. John Seminary in Boston.)

I thought of such things while contemplating St. Lawrence O?Toole?s approaching feast day, and decided that it might be an appropriate occasion to pay respect to him, even though he is not the best-known of saints in the United States or Canada. In Ireland, however, it is a different story.

St. Lawrence O?Toole lived in the 12th century, 1128-80. He is generally regarded as one of the most important archbishops in the history of Dublin. How that came to be is a story in itself.

Lawrence was kidnapped at the age of 10 by a local king (of which Ireland at the time seems to have had many). He was held for two years but was eventually released into the custody of the local bishop. When Lawrence?s father came to bring the boy home, young Lawrence announced that he wished to become a monk.

He was left in the care of the bishop, eventually entered the local monastery, and at age 25 was elected its abbot.

He only avoided becoming a bishop as well by pointing out the canonical requirement that a bishop be at least 30 years of age.

However, less than 10 years later, in 1162, he was elected (not appointed by the far-off pope in Rome) as archbishop of Dublin. It was exactly 800 years before the archdiocese of Hartford?s class of 1962 was ordained to the priesthood.

Lawrence soon gained a reputation for his commitment to the poor, his tireless preaching, and the quality of his liturgical celebrations (pastoral standards that many of today?s bishops could profitably emulate).

When the English invaded Ireland in 1170, Lawrence served as a peacemaker, and later as a mediator between the king of England and Irish leaders at the synod of Cashel. In 1175 he traveled to Windsor and negotiated a treaty between King Henry II and the Irish high king, Rory O?Connor.

On the same occasion, while visiting the shrine of the martyred Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, he narrowly escaped death at the hands of a crazed person. Lawrence intervened successfully on behalf of his assailant when the king ordered the man hanged (which was reminiscent of Pope John Paul II?s reaching out to his assailant and granting him forgiveness).

In 1180 Lawrence pursued King Henry II to Normandy on behalf of Rory O?Connor, but he fell ill and died on his way home to Ireland. It was in the abbey at Eu, on Nov. 14.

When the abbot asked the dying Lawrence if he had made out a will, Lawrence replied: ?God knows I have not a penny in the world.?

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l in the crypt of the church of Our Lady of Eu and canonized a saint 45 years later, in 1225. The following year his remains were brought back to Dublin.

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Although his feast day is not on the General Roman Calendar, it is observed throughout Ireland -- and in St. Lawrence O?Toole parishes everywhere, no doubt.

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