

SHREWSBURY: ST LAURENCE WINDOW

The St Laurence Window, in the Cathedral chancel, commemorates Canon Ambrose Moriarty's mother Sarah Ann who died in 1915 aged 74. She was the sister of Samuel Webster Allen, 4th Bishop of Shrewsbury (died 1908) and her son Ambrose was to become the 6th Bishop. The window depicts episodes in the life and death of St Laurence, who was Archdeacon of Rome and assistant to Pope Sixtus II (St Sixtus) in the middle of the 3rd century,

At the apex are the sun of righteousness (Malachi 3:20/4:2) and the bright star of the morning (Revelation 22:16), symbolising Christ, and the crossed keys of St Peter (Matthew 16:19), symbolising the Church.

The main central light shows Laurence wearing the deacon's dalmatic, a long-sleeved tunic with two coloured strips running down its length. It is decorated with panels showing the crossed keys of St Peter (see above). Laurence is holding a gridiron and a palm branch, and there is a golden crown above his head. The palm branch and crown are symbols of martyrdom, and, according to tradition, he was martyred by being roasted alive on a gridiron (see below). Behind him is Rome, surrounded by the Aurelian Walls, and crocuses bloom around his feet. The Latin inscription on scrolls running across the light reads BEATE LAURENTI MARTYR CHRISTI INTERCEDE PRO NOBIS ('Blessed Laurence, martyr of Christ, intercede for us'). At the foot of the light is the memorial inscription IN PIAM MEMORIAM SARAE ANNAE MORIARTY QUAE OBIIT DIE XXVI MAII MDCCCCXV. FILII POSUERUNT ('In pious memory of Sarah Ann Moriarty who died on 26th May 1915. [Her] children put up [this memorial]'). The children referred to were Ambrose and his older sister Mary Agnes (died 1953) who was a schoolteacher. Just above this and to the left of Laurence's feet is Mrs. Moriarty, a small figure kneeling in prayer.

Now look at the three small lights directly above the main ones. They illustrate the first part of Laurence's story.

On the left we see him as a boy being instructed in the Scriptures by Sixtus, who was then Archdeacon of Rome. Sixtus became Pope and made Laurence his archdeacon: Laurence became responsible for assisting Sixtus at Mass, looking after all the things needed for the celebration of the Church's services, collecting donations and distributing alms to the needy. The other two scenes show Laurence assisting at Mass.

In the centre Sixtus, at the altar, is holding a chalice and Laurence is pouring wine and water into it from two cruets in preparation for consecration. **To the right** Laurence is distributing Holy Communion to the faithful. There is an inscription in this scene running round the curved wall of the apse behind the altar, only partly visible. In the apse of St Pudenziana's church, the oldest surviving place of Christian worship in Rome (a church since around 390 AD), is a mosaic showing Christ holding a book inscribed DOMINUS CONSERVATOR ECCLESIAE PUDENTIANAE ('The Lord, protector of the church of Pudenziana'), and comparison of these words with Margaret Rope's fragmentary inscription shows that the two texts are the same. By using the St Pudenziana text Margaret has placed her scene in a real church in Rome, as close as possible in date to St Laurence's life.

Next to the two outer main lights. In each the lower scene comes first.

In the left hand light the story of Laurence's martyrdom begins. The Emperor Valerian was persecuting the Christians, and in the year 258 he had Sixtus arrested. **In the lower part** of the light Sixtus, his hands bound, is being led to martyrdom by two Roman soldiers. Laurence, on bended knee, pleads with Sixtus to be allowed to accompany him. They always offered the sacrifice of the Mass together; now Laurence wants to join him in death. The Latin text below is part of Laurence's plea: TU NUMQUAM SINE MINISTRO SACRIFICIUM OFFERRE CONSUEVERAS ('You had never been accustomed to offer the sacrifice [of the Mass] without [your] servant'). This is from the Office of St Laurence's feast-day. Sixtus replied 'Soon you will come ... you will follow me in three days', and told Laurence to distribute the Church's treasures among the poor so that they would not fall into the hands of the persecutors. **In the upper part of the light** Laurence, outside his church, is doing this, handing out coins from a coffer which an assistant is carrying: the text below, from Psalm 111/112 (also part of the Office of his feast-day) DISPERSIT DEDIT PAUPERIBUS translates as 'He has dispersed, he has given to the poor'.

The right hand light continues the story. **In the lower half** of the light Laurence has been summoned to appear before the prefect of Rome, who has demanded that he hand over the treasures of the Church. Laurence has brought the poor with him and, showing them to the prefect, who is on horseback, says HI SUNT THESAURI ECCLESIAE ('These are the treasures of the Church'). The prefect, enraged, orders that Laurence be put to death. **In the upper half** of the light we see him being slowly roasted alive on a gridiron: the inscription (from the Office) reads SUBJICIENTIBUS PRUNAS INSULTAT LEVITA CHRISTI ('The deacon of Christ mocks [them] as they throw burning coals under [him]'). This text is a reference to the joke which he is said to have made to his tormentors: 'I'm done on this side - turn me over!'. Because of this incident he has become the patron saint of comedians (and cooks!).

The story concludes in the **pair of small lights near the top of the window**. **In the left hand one** we see a torchlit funeral procession: Laurence's body, covered in a gold cloth, is being carried on a bier towards his burial place in the catacombs of Rome. At the head of the procession is a fossor (grave digger) carrying his pick and his lamp. Margaret Rope's fossor is based on a 3rd century fresco of the fossor Diogenes in the cemetery of Callistus in the catacombs. A drawing of the fresco is reproduced in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1909-11, which is probably where she saw it. Note the swastikas on the fossor's tunic: the swastika was used as a secret sign by 3rd century Christians, in the same way as the more well-known fish symbol. In the wall of the catacomb are slabs bearing memorial inscriptions to those buried in the niches behind them. The inscription ..IVIBAS IN PACE ET PETE PRO NO.. ('Live in peace! And pray for us') is a genuine ancient inscription from the catacombs, but the line above ...AROLUS W SACERD.. ('Charles W priest') seems to be Margaret Rope's tribute to a Cathedral curate, Charles Whitefoord. He served at the Cathedral during 1915 and 1916 and was a chaplain to the forces from 1916 to 1918. On 29th May 1918 he was wounded by a shell on the Western Front and died the next day. Margaret Rope's brother Fr Henry Rope thought he was one of the holiest priests he had ever met. The other inscription ...RTYRIS ...O NOBIS is a request for one of the martyrs buried in the catacomb to 'pray for us' (... MARTYRIS ORA PRO NOBIS).

In the right hand small light Christians are kneeling in prayer before Laurence's

tomb which, in common with other important graves in the catacombs, had an arched recess over it and was covered by a stone slab which would have served as an altar for the celebration of Mass. The inclusion of a relic in the altar-slabs in Catholic churches originated from this use of the martyrs' tombs. Inscribed on the wall to the left of the tomb is a gridiron and AUG X ('10th August'), St Laurence's feast-day. Over the arched recess are palm branches and on the wall to the right is LAURENT[IUS] MARTYR ('Laurence martyr').

The borders of the main lights are decorated with martyr's crowns, flames (note the resemblance between crown and flames) and gridirons. **The tracery lights** show items connected with Laurence's duties: wheat (symbolising the bread used in the Mass), censers, bells, lamps, candlesticks and plate (used in the Church's services) and coins.

The window contains one puzzle which I have not been able to solve. At the very bottom of the main right hand light are the words 'Ora pro me Francisco Laurentio' ('Pray for me Francis Laurence'). Who was Francis Laurence? Whoever he was, he might have been the reason St Laurence was chosen as the theme for the window.

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