

Saint Lawrence

Saint Lawrence was one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages – more than 75 churches in the kingdom of Denmark at the time were dedicated to him, including Østerlars Church, the name of which derives from “Laurentius”.

The Legend

St Lawrence was deacon for Pope Sixtus II in Rome in the 3rd century and responsible for distributing alms for the poor from the church’s treasury and riches, which reputedly included the Holy Grail. The persecution of Christians was rampant during this era in Rome, and when Emperor Valerian came to power in 253, he banned Christianity. Pope Sixtus was executed on 6 August 258. St Lawrence was offered release if he surrendered all the riches of the church, including the Grail, to the emperor. St Lawrence asked to be given three days to collect the riches – but instead of collecting them he distributed them among the poor. On the third day, St Lawrence reported to the emperor without the riches but instead pointed to the poor and hungry people and said: “They are the true treasures of the church, who will not disappear but will multiply in number day by day.” The emperor was not satisfied with this, so he sentenced St Lawrence to a painful death and ordered him to be roasted over a slow fire until his soul let go of his body. This explains why St Lawrence is also depicted holding a grate in his hand, as in this fresco from Överselö Church in Sweden.



The name of the church

St Lawrence has lent his name to Østerlars Church. Over time, “Laurentii kirke” became “Lars’ kirke” (or “Larsker” as the typical Bornholm name contraction invites). At one point, the word “Øster” (east) was added to the name to distinguish it from Nylars Church. Nylars Church is dedicated not to St Lawrence but to St Nicholas, whose name over time transformed into “Nilaus” and then “Nylars”.

The modern Danish names Lars, Lasse, Laurids and Laura are all derivations of the name Laurentius and mean “crowned with laurels”, a dignified meaning that commands respect.

Charity

It is precisely the generous, charitable aspects of the legend of St Lawrence that have made him into one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages – his actions focus on common people as having innate value.

More than 75 churches were dedicated to St Lawrence during the Middle Ages, including Lund Cathedral, which was the episcopal see to which Østerlars Church belonged.

Østerlars Church is no longer a Catholic church, and the veneration of saints is not part of the reformed church’s religious practice in the same way as it was during the Middle Ages.

The day of St Lawrence’s death is August the 10th. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that ash from the fireplace on this day could heal all sorts of maladies. At this time every year, a meteor shower is also seen that has been named the “Tears of St Lawrence” – every shooting star is a tear of sympathy.

Traces of St Lawrence

No frescoes depicting St Lawrence have been found here in Østerlars Church, but it is known that three human shapes were painted on the apse vaulting behind the altarpiece – perhaps one of them depicted the church’s patron saint?

It is conceivable that the church has housed a relic of him. The limestone Communion table, seen in the sanctuary, is the original Communion table and is a type that often had a secret compartment – a relic hiding place. Due to the refurbishments, it is no longer possible to determine whether our Communion table has ever had such a relic hiding place, but the idea is not far-fetched.

Today, however, only the church’s name attests to the fact that St Lawrence was the patron saint here, as does his attribute, the grate, rendered elsewhere on Bornholm:

Hammershus had its own chapel, and the engraved symbol of St Lawrence – the grate – is still visible in the wall outside the chapel.

St Lawrence’s grate is also centrally positioned in Østerlars Church’s seal of office – note the heart in the grate handle symbolising charity.

Østerlars Free School also uses St Lawrence’s grate as a logo.