

A reflection on the Icon of St Laurence O Toole:

Saint Laurence O'Toole (*in Irish: 'Naomh Lorcán Ua Tuathail'* as we can see at the bottom of the icon) is the principal patron saint of the Archdiocese of Dublin. This icon of St Laurence was written during the Year of Faith (2012-2013). It presents us with elements of St Laurence's life that speak to us of how the mystery of Christ was at work in him, leading him to be a person of faith, of prayer and of peace.

An icon is a very different type of image from a photograph. Similarly, the Gospels are a completely different type of writing to a newspaper report. The Gospels are written in a way as to invite us into relationship with Christ Jesus. So too, the aim of an icon is to help us to enter into relationship with Christ and to help this friendship grow. In St Laurence, we see someone who is a friend of Christ and like Him.

Even looking at an icon in silence can be the beginnings of prayer.

St Laurence looks at us square-on, as a person of faith facing the world with courage in the strength given by God. The prayer we find in Psalm 17 is apt for him: "I love you Lord, my strength, my rock, my fortress my saviour. My God is the rock where I take refuge; my shield, my mighty help, my stronghold."

Laurence was born in Castledermot, County Kildare, in 1128. His father was Maurice O'Toole, King of High Murray. When he was just 10 years old, Laurence was given as a hostage to Dermot McMurrrough, King of Leinster. Often, chieftains would give their children over to another chieftain or king, as a guarantee of their good will. They expected their child to be well treated and educated in the 'court' of the host.

This was not the experience of young Laurence. Dermot McMurrrough had the young boy banished to a wilderness location (possibly near the Glen of Immal in County Wicklow). The child we see in chains recalls how he spent two precarious years in very harsh conditions as a child hostage, malnourished and neglected. There is a story told of

a woman there who took pity on him. It is said that she cried for her 'holy boy' when Laurence was moved to the monastery of Glendalough so as to be restored to his family. We see the saintly bishop's hand outstretched in protection of a "widow and orphan" (cf. Psalm 146: 7-9). In the Bible, widows and orphans represent the poorest, people with no security, and the marginalized of any kind. Beside St Laurence's foot is a basket of bread, symbolic of his feeding of and charity towards the poor.

The round tower and church building recall the monastery of Glendalough, where the young Laurence was released from being hostage aged 12 and where he chose to remain. He was elected abbot of the monastery at 26. He must have had many gifts to be elected the head of the community at such a young age. He was following in the footsteps of the great abbot of Glendalough and another patron of the Dublin Diocese, Saint Kevin. The surrounding hills are like the beautiful valley of Glendalough. They remind us that much of the Archdiocese of Dublin is in a rural setting.

St Laurence stands firmly on a rock - symbolic of his trust in God - and of the small hermit's cave called St Kevin's Bed in Glendalough, a place of retreat, silence and solitude to which he often returned.

St Laurence wears a Bishop's mitre and the 'pallium' of an Archbishop. The pallium is made of lambs' wool and features several crosses, to make us think of Christ the Good Shepherd, who bears his sheep on his shoulders. He became Archbishop of Dublin in 1162.

St Laurence also wears a mitre and holds a crozier, signs of his office as shepherd to the people of the Diocese entrusted to him. He wears the white alb, stole and chasuble of a priest. His face, as it engages us, does not show any particular emotion. We find this sort of expression on the face of anyone who is listening carefully to us, simply there for us, fully present to the other person.

On the right we see stone buildings representing the city of Dublin. St Laurence began the rebuilding of Christchurch Cathedral as we have it today (*centre*). We see an open door. His door was open to everyone to join in the prayer of the church. [He invited the Augustinian Canons to live in the Cathedral and to sing the Divine Office there, and he joined them often]. His door was open in welcome to the poor and to the renewal and support of his priests.

Above right is the spire of the small chapel of the town of Eu in Normandy, France, where St Laurence is buried. He died there whilst on a mission to further reconciliation and peace between King Henry II of England and the Irish Kings. The people there recognised him as a deeply holy man. His tomb in Eu soon became a place of pilgrimage and he was canonised (declared a saint) in 1225.

On the right, we see a boat with the logo of the Year of Faith on its' sails. The boat symbolizes the Church, the barque of Peter. The main 'mast' of the boat in the logo is the cross with sail shapes which compose an IHS – the first three letters of the name of Jesus in Greek. It is Christ who gives us dynamism and urges us on.

The background to the sails is a circle, like the sun which, together with the 'IHS', reminds us also of the Eucharist, which gives us energy for loving. The boat is representative of St Laurence's many travels.

In the last ten years of his life Laurence made many trips to England and led the six Irish bishops who attended the Lateran Council in Rome in 1179. The boat sails turbulent waters and we see a shield attacked by many spears: St Laurence lived through violent times. One time, he was saying Mass at the altar of St Thomas à Beckett in Canterbury, England, when someone attacked him with a club. St Laurence was much sought after as a deeply respected mediator.

Man of faith in God, his rock; man of deep prayer and blessed peacemaker, St Laurence O'Toole, pray for us.