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WARM HEARTS IN A COLD MONTH

“Please be my Valentine.” These are welcome words most of us are familiar with from childhood days. As we grow older, we still look forward to seeing them when another February 14 makes its debut. The bright red hearts that show up for St. Valentine’s Day have a broad following throughout the western world and now beyond it into other cultures. But where is the saint who started it all? He is hardly noticed.

Who was St. Valentine? Actually there are three candidates in our Christian tradition, all of them martyrs. In third-century Rome, one was a priest and another a bishop. A third St. Valentine suffered in Africa with companions and that is all we know of him.

Legends tell us that the priest Valentine lived in the reign of Claudius the Cruel who wanted to increase his military forces with single men. Married men who had to be posted for a long time at the outer limits of Rome’s vast empire were a problem for him: they were lonely. So the emperor issued an edict forbidding marriages. Secretly Valentine celebrated the weddings of couples who came to him. For this he was imprisoned and beheaded.

Thus Valentine became patron of lovers and especially those who experience difficulties in achieving the union they seek. Customs associated with his feast day in the middle of February emerged in connection with a pagan festivity called Lupercalia which was celebrated at the time in Rome when birds began to pair. Chaucer, the great fourteenth-century poet, wrote, “On St. Valentine’s Day /When every foul (bird) cometh to choose his mate.” In Wales, wooden spoons were given with decorations of hearts and keys to signify that the receiver “unlocks my heart.”

St. Valentine is probably astonished to see what has developed from his long-ago concern for lovers oppressed by Roman law. In America, Esther A. Howland created the first commercial greeting cards in the 1840s. The business world has for the most part usurped the religious significance of the saint’s feast. With solicitations from florists, candy makers, and producers of greeting cards, we are urged to choose from a broad selection. The town of Loveland, Colorado can look forward to a vast influx of envelopes that want its expressive postmark.

Emphasis on affection calls forth joyous feelings which we communicate to others. Earlier usage selected the person who was most particularly the object of fond sentiments but today we are glad to send valentines to a wider circle. Sometimes we make our own cards with crayons or paints-- and now on our computers. It’s easy to compose personal verses since in English “valentine” rhymes so easily with “thine” and “mine.” Comedy sometimes adds its own special note.

The symbol of the heart makes us reflect on the importance of reaching out in tender feeling for our fellow human beings. We are reminded of Christ's words, "The command I give you is this, that you love one another" (Jn 15:17). The human Heart of Jesus moves our hearts, so human too, to extend a loving gesture to others. The First Letter of John declares, "We, for our part, love because God has first loved us (4:19).

St. Valentine's feast is a time of sweetness and beauty. It doesn't include the negative connotations of certain days we commemorate. All is positive. We appreciate our relatives and friends for being close to us. The words of St. Paul come into our thoughts. "Love is patient. Love is kind...It is not self-seeking... it rejoices with the truth...it does not brood over injuries....Love never fails" (1 Cor 13:4,6,8) Those ubiquitous red hearts are speaking these phrases to us.

St Paul writes of forgiveness for one who has "given offense....I beg you to reaffirm your love for him," he says. (2 Cor 2:5,8). In our human interactions, hurt and reproach weigh down our spirits. Reaffirming our love can lift that burden from ourselves and from the one who has been the source of our pain. Love can often involve a struggle to let go of resentments, to move beyond the incidents that hold us chained to our memories. These sad remembrances may turn up at times of prayer when we want to be quiet and alone with God. They nag at our attention. Love is much more than a lighthearted dance. It can be that in its merry manifestation. But at times the voice of Jesus speaks to us to push our hearts to a fresh acceptance of those who are now at an emotional distance from us. Christ has taken on our weak flesh to bring about the reign of true love in all its forms of caring.

Loving one another makes the cold February temperatures turn warmer. It can be an effort to do this, but the return is so great. To spread an atmosphere of affection around us is to counteract the horror of violence the media present to us every day. In loving, we are gainers and we often see the wonder of a return of endearments. The Spanish Carmelite, St. John of the Cross, wrote in a letter frequently quoted, "Where there is no love, put love, and you will draw out love."

The red Valentine hearts sing a happy, happy song but they also convey music that appeals to our deepest selves. We strengthen our will and raise it to embrace one we may have distanced ourselves from.

Then we say the words: "Please be my Valentine." The request invites a new togetherness and when we hear it said in return, we smile and answer "Yes! Yes!"

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