

Who Was the Real St. Valentine?

Rev. Edward D. Seely, Th.M., Ph.D.

Many, if not most, contemporary calendars have dropped the word, saint, from the designation of February 14, leaving it just Valentine's Day. Yet within the history of the church, a strong tradition links this day with a third century Christian martyr whose name was Valentine, hence the appellation St. Valentine's Day.

As with other outstanding historic personages, notably St. Nicholas, legendary attributes and acts have become attached to Valentine. One story relates that he healed the blind daughter of the Roman jailer in whose prison he awaited execution. That makes him a saint in some sectors of the Christian church. However, since the Bible designates the word, saint, to refer to all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, he indeed may be referred to as Saint Valentine.

Scholars find it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction regarding this outstanding believer, who truly was a spiritual oak. However, some strands of this tradition appear credible and useful for our own growth and celebration of the day that bears his name.

It appears he was a church leader in and/or near Rome. One of the teachings of the Bible that Valentine especially emphasized was the importance of marriage for those men and women who wanted to live together, a very vital message for us today when so many couples are cohabiting instead of marrying.

At that time in the Roman empire, a day called Lupercalia was celebrated on February 15, a festival which had been going on at least since four centuries before Christ. It has been described by Ted Olsen of Christian History Institute, as "a sexual lottery. Pull names out of a box at random and couple with a young member of the opposite sex. After a year, you get to pick another name."

Moreover, Valentine's message was in direct opposition to Emperor Claudius II (a.k.a. the Goth), who forbade men to marry. Claudius believed that family ties resulted in men being less willing to fight in military operations.

As a consequence of his persistent teaching contrary to the emperor's directive, Valentine was jailed, tried, and convicted of promoting doctrine in opposition to Roman law, a capital offense. He was executed during a persecution of Christians by Claudius about A.D. 269 on February 14. A basilica was built in his honor in Rome in the middle of the fourth century, and a catacomb containing his remains has been discovered at this site.

The evening before he died, Valentine is said to have sent a farewell message to the jailer's daughter, who had been helpful to him. In the message he thanked her for her care and kindness and signed it, "From your Valentine." However, it cannot be confirmed at this time that the recipient was either blind or that the saint or his prayers healed her. Yet, due to his strong teaching on the Biblical view of marriage and love, his name has symbolized the day dedicated to the celebration of love.

As the church has done on other occasions in history, to obliterate the immoral influences of pagan festivals, it attempted already in the ancient period to replace Lupercalia with a much more wholesome Christian celebration. Pope Gelasius I designated February 14 as St. Valentine's Day in A.D. 496.

St. Valentine's Day has come to have added significance at least since the Middle Ages. Some of its attributes have been close to the intended meaning and others more remote.

This year enrich your Saint Valentine's Day and your soul with some related readings from God's Word. For example, regarding the love Christ taught, which was modeled by St. Valentine, reflect on John 13:34-35; 14:21; 15:13; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Matthew 5:44-47. Far from the confused views of love taught by Hollywood, on Madison Avenue, and by special interest groups, let us demonstrate at home and at work the love which is "patient [and] kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

A concluding suggestion: Since our Lord has called us who believe in and follow Him to be His witnesses, how about using the above information as a catalyst to a conversation about Christ? A good discussion starter might be the question: "Do you know who the real St. Valentine was?" Or, "Do you know the origin of Valentine's Day and what it means?"