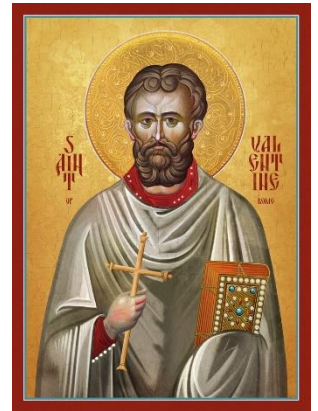


Grace Notes in Miniature

Friday February 12th, 2021

Dear friends,

As we anticipate the start of Lent next week, the celebration of St Valentine's Day on Sunday may give some of us the excuse for some pre-Lenten indulgence. Most people today may have no idea that this celebration began as a Saint's day as the title "Saint" is not commonly associated with it any more. The day which we now observe with cute, fat little cherubs holding bows and arrows, with flowers and chocolates, was once the memorial of a martyr, although like a number of stories of third century martyrs, his may be the accretion of several Christian martyrs who died on February 14. Perhaps the most convincing is the story of the bishop of Interamna – modern-day Terni. According to the official biography of the Diocese of Terni, Bishop Valentine was born and lived in Interamna but was imprisoned, tortured, and martyred in Rome on February 14, 269. Various legends credit him with gaining converts through healing ministry, although often the converts were executed along with him. Stories abound of him performing marriages of Christian prisoners while they were all in prison and this may be the foundation of his patronage of love.



Last week I wrote about Ash Wednesday and want to continue with some thoughts about that day. This may be a time to remember that certain days are designated as Holy Days of Obligation (days when our attendance at Mass is required) and that in Canada, these consist of all Sundays of the year,

Christmas Day and its Octave, January 1st: Mary Mother of God. There is, however, the expectation that we observe other days with prayer, spiritual and corporal works, fasting, abstinence and almsgiving, as is appropriate to the season. Fridays, throughout the year but especially in Lent, have traditionally been days of abstinence – or for substituting some charitable or penitential action in its place.

Fasting refers to reducing one's food intake while abstinence is self-denial of something good which we enjoy – such as meat. In many cultures the Eve of a feast day is a day of fasting and/or abstinence and prayer in preparation for the feast to follow. We also can

be reminded that there are forty days in Lent because a Sunday is not meant to be a day of fasting but is always a celebratory reflection of the Resurrection; thus, six weeks of six days (36) plus Ash Wednesday and the Thursday, Friday and Saturday of that week add up to forty days. St Basil of Caesarea noted that fasting is meaningless unless it is accompanied with the avoidance of sin – or at least the intention and effort to do so.

*In previous years, we have often seen a surge of church attendance on Ash Wednesday with the visible sign of the imposition of ashes on people's faces. It's worth noting that the ashes, like other blessed items like holy water, palms, oil, candles, scapulars, medals and other religious jewelry, are **sacramentals** – they are to be treated with reverence and incite us to actions worthy of what they represent. I have heard stories from school chaplains about the “head bump” where a student who attended the Ash Wednesday rite will pass a smear of ashes on to someone who didn't attend, and also of people using a cigarette butt to put the mark on their foreheads. This diminishes the sign for those to whom it is a serious sign of commitment and, like a sacrament which is not nourished by the recipient to be the “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us by God”, denies God the opportunity to act through us in the work of building up the Kingdom here on earth. Perhaps, this year as we have to forgo the sign of ashes, we may be inspired to make the outward sign through our actions and witness.*

To return to (St) Valentine's Day, one can make the same point that protestations of love in flowers and candy and saccharine messages in greeting cards are far less meaningful than the expression of love on a daily basis by always putting the needs and happiness of the other ahead of our own. If our Lent is our time to walk more closely with the Lord, then it is also a time to share the love we receive from Him even more with others. For:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)



Wishing you a beautiful St Valentine's Day and a very blessed start to Lent!

Gillian