

Thoughts for Valentine's Day

Valentine's Day. We can be quite cynical about its commercialism - all those chocolates, hearts and flowers. Yet as Catholics we can bring real substance to a celebration of this day.

St Valentine, patron saint of lovers, is believed to have been a priest who lived in Rome during the persecutions under Claudius II. A Roman catacomb bears his name, although much of his life (and even how many St Valentines existed) remains a mystery. This lack of historical certainty led the Church to remove the feast day of St Valentine from the official calendar, although it is still celebrated by many communities. In one story told, St Valentine, in defiance of the Roman authorities, persisted in aiding Christians to marry, and for this he was imprisoned and executed on 14 August, around 269 A.D. In 496 Pope Gelasius marked February 14th as a celebration to mark his martyrdom.

True love is courageous. The story of St Valentine's heroism makes that clear. So too does it remind us that romantic love is God's gift, a gift that finds particular honour in one of the sacraments of the Church: marriage. Rekindling romance, at every stage of life, is part of sacramental love. And that takes

courage and practical effort.

The path of learning to love is a precious one, fragile and sacred, difficult and blessed. How can we honour and encourage our people, especially our young, as they make that journey? Again, we must be practical. One Catholic couple has devoted their professional talents to providing media resources that help students navigate their way through the complexities of a sexually-charged culture (see www.choicez.com.au). In my own parish, engaged couples are invited to be mentored by married couples. We love to hold blessings for significant wedding anniversaries, and couples are encouraged to participate in marriage enrichment programs (for resources see www.celebratelove.com.au).

St Valentine's Day speaks to us of the cross. It can be a reminder of lost love, unrequited love, betrayed love, the absence of love. Broken hearts need healing. This is no distraction to love, but central to its mission. The Catholic community offers some excellent healing experiences, like "Seasons for Growth", "The Beginning Experience", "Retrouvaille" and a range of healing retreats. (1) Through a journey from death to life, the broken-hearted become channels of salvific love.

St Valentine's Day is not just for couples. It can serve to remind celibates and dedicated

Christian single people that they, too, are called to be lovers in the most wholesome sense of the word; to be not just religiously 'dutiful', but fired with all the passion and romance befitting the Gospel of Life. This also takes courage and effort. Amidst life's hard knocks, it is tempting to settle for less. Yet our God is a jealous lover with lovingly ambitious dreams for our lives, calling us on to ever greater depths of intimacy and communion.

Certainly the saints knew this. Among my prayer resources, I have a delightful book of love poems in which great saints and holy people speak of their romance with the Beloved. In one verse, Teresa of Avila writes: *'He desired me so I came close. No one can near God unless He has prepared a bed for you.'* The translation (2), by the translator's own admission, is freely creative, yet beautifully sensitive to the task of re-awakening battle-wearied souls to the Divine touch. There is a time for serious duty and study, and there is a time for laughter and love-making. The breadth of our faith experience calls for both.

For all these reasons and more, St Valentine's Day is a day worthy of celebration - an invitation to open our hearts to the romance and risk of Love. •



1. All these programs can be googled, or an enquiry made at your local parish or diocesan office. For an excellent healing retreat, try "Life's Healing Journey" at St Mary's Towers Retreat Centre, Douglas Park NSW.
2. Daniel Ladinsky (trans.), *Love Poems From God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (NY: Penguin Compass), 2002.