

Feast of St. Valentine, Feb. 14, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

He is one of the most famous saints in the world. Along with people like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick and St. Nicholas, St. Valentine is one of those holy Christians whose story migrated into the popular culture, and took on a life of its own.

Last night, I spoke at a meeting of school parents. I thanked them for coming, and assured them that their children were all behaving at home, quietly doing their homework. Most of the moms laughed at me and assured me that their children were *not* doing homework last night – they were making Valentines out of red paper, glue and glitter.

And yes, today, many children – and adults – have handed each other greetings of red and gold, and wished each other a ‘happy Saint Valentine’s day.’

And yet, I suspect that most of those who shared that greeting have almost no knowledge of real man whose name was Valentine.

What do we know of St. Valentine from history? I’ll tell you. In the early centuries of the church, there was a man named Valentine in Italy who was arrested by the Roman Empire, and put to death for the crime of being a Christian.

That is all we know for sure.

Most scholars say that Valentine was either a priest or bishop. At least two Italian cities claim that he was born there. In the 4th and 5th centuries, those cities built churches in honor of the martyr “St. Valentine.”

But - all we know for sure is that he died for the faith. Which actually tells us something else for certain – *he loved Jesus*. After all, he died because of his faith in Jesus. And human beings typically are willing to die only for someone that they

love. So we know that Valentine loved the Lord.

After his death, other stories became known concerning this saint. For instance, it is said that Valentine was arrested by Roman officials. He was dragged before the governor, who tried to convince Valentine to renounce his faith. Being an Italian, the governor made Valentine ‘an offer he couldn’t refuse.’

They were willing to give Valentine some time to think about his decision. So Valentine was thrown in jail, and he knew that his life would soon end because he could not deny the Jesus whom he loved.

Now, I think it would have been understandable if, in the darkness of that prison cell, Valentine had become focused on his impending suffering and death. We would all understand if he had sent messages to other Christians, asking them for food, maybe a glass of wine, some visitors to cheer him up, a priest to pray for him.

But... Valentine did not become self-focused or self-centered. Instead, from his prison cell, he wrote letters to Christians that he knew, and in these letters from prison, Valentine poured out his heart, and constantly encouraged other Christians to love each other, following the example of Jesus.

He was about to give his life for the One who gave his life for us, and Valentine chose to be an encourager: “love each other, love as Christ loved.”

Perhaps these letters from prison were the *original* Valentines?

And perhaps St. Valentine was simply repeating the example he found in the writings of St. Paul. As we listened to tonight’s reading from First Corinthians, we are listening to a letter from St. Paul. And what is Paul doing in this letter? He is encouraging us to love each other as Christ loves us.

If you’ve been to weddings, you know this text. But Paul did not write this letter to engaged couples – he wrote it to a small group of Christians in the city of Corinth. And they needed encouragement... they needed to be encouraged to remember that

love – authentic Christian love – is not a feeling or Hallmark sentiment. Love is the sum of the daily decisions we make to encourage each other, do the best for each other, focus on the needs of the other, be faithful to the other.

Paul's letter is crystal clear. What does love look like? It is patient, kind, not jealous or envious, not boastful. It forgives everything, hopes always... love never fails.

And as you listen to this letter of encouragement from Paul, remember this – the Bible tells us that GOD IS LOVE. So when St. Paul describes love, he is really describing God - who God is, how God loves us.

On this Saint Valentine's Day, we remember a man who loved the Lord Jesus more than he loved life itself. We remember a man who did not focus on himself, but knew that he was called to love his neighbors concretely, generously, completely. We remember a saint who wrote words of encouragement to those who needed a word of hope.

May we follow his example, and be inspired by his faith. May the Lord be praised now and forever.