

Column

For the first time since 1945, Ash Wednesday and St. Valentine's Day will fall on the same day this year. For some this juxtaposition will create a dilemma. Do I attend a solemn church service calling for prayer and fasting? Or do I send roses and a heart-shaped box of chocolates to the one I love, perhaps along with a special dinner and a dance?

My purpose in this column is not to tell you how to work out this conundrum. Rather, it is to suggest that these two observances have a common theme – love – and just perhaps can work together.

In the latter – St. Valentine's Day – it is love between the sexes. *Eros*, to use the Greek word, is what is being celebrated. The exact origin of this day is shrouded in the mist of time. There have been several Christian martyrs by this name. According to one legend, a priest, prior to his martyrdom around 270 BC, signed a letter to the daughter of his jailor "from your Valentine". She had apparently befriended him during his imprisonment.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the practice of sending affectionate messages or valentines began in the 1500s, with the first commercially printed ones in the United States appearing in the 1700s. These often depicted Cupid, the Roman god of love, along with hearts, representing the seat of emotion.

I don't know if it is still done, but when I was in elementary school, the custom was to distribute Valentine's cards to fellow members of your class. When I first began attending school at the age of 5, I misunderstood the protocol. I thought you were to bring a card only for the girl you liked. So, I brought an especially nice one and put it in her sleeve – a row of these made of construction paper were suspended over the heat radiators. Meanwhile, everyone else had a card for each person in the class. Needless to say, I was embarrassed.

Romantic love is certainly part of God's plan. In the beginning God made humans, male and female. Together they cooperate with God in the work of continuing the human race. In the family unit, the young are nourished, and society is enriched. St. Valentine's Day is, therefore, not to be despised. *Eros* has its place.

The other observance that will fall on Feb. 14 is likewise important. Ash Wednesday comes 46 days before Easter Day and marks the start of Lent, traditionally a period of fasting, repentance and reflection. In pre-Reformation times, it was the custom to smudge the forehead of the faithful with a cross on the first day of Lent. The ashes used were from the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday. In many places, the custom has been revived.

The smudged cross is symbolic of love just as surely as is the Valentine heart. *Agapa* is the Greek word for this type of love, which can be summed up as: God so loved that world that He did not send someone else. He came Himself in the person of His Son to lift us out of the pit into which we had dugged ourselves. This love was displayed on the cross. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Jesus is love in its fullness.

Instead of creating a dilemma, might not St. Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday falling on Feb. 14 create an opportunity for celebrating both God's love in creation and in redemption? The heart and the smudged cross can sit comfortably on the same forehead. Send your roses AND begin the journey to Calvary.

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness. may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for Ash Wednesday, Book of Common Prayer)

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