



## Be my Valentine?

**S**t Valentine's Day is supposed to be the most romantic day of the year. Over 12 million cards in the UK will be sent. But the saint in question (or perhaps I should say saints as there were numerous early Christian martyrs called Valentine) have nothing to do with romance.

In 496 AD Pope Gelasius I declared St Valentine a patron saint of love and ordered his feast day to replace the Roman pagan fertility festival called Lupercalia which honoured the gods Pan and Juno and was noted for its licentiousness.

There were three martyrs called Valentinus in the late third century who were martyred around February 14, but nobody is entirely sure which one the day is supposed to commemorate. In 1969 the Vatican removed all the St Valentines'

saints days (as there were 11 in all) from the liturgical calendar apart from martyr Valentinus the Presbyter whose feast day falls in July.

Other St Valentines are allowed to be celebrated under local calendars where they are in possession of relics. The Carmelite Church in Whitefriar Street, Dublin is one such church which houses a relic of St Valentine. The casket given by the Vatican which holds the relic of St Valentine can be seen through a grate. But it is taken out on St Valentine's Day and many engaged couples and individuals visit.

If people are having a big wedding anniversary they can arrange to have a service in front of the shrine of St Valentine and an additional blessing on their marriage.

The particular St Valentine in question is likely to have been a bishop who secretly married soldiers to their lovers against the will of Emperor Claudius II Gothicus. Around 270 AD on February 14, he was beaten with clubs and then beheaded for refusing to renounce Christianity. Apparently on the eve of his martyrdom he sent a note to the jailer's daughter, signed 'from your Valentine', a message that over time was to become romanticised and eventually developed as a hallmark of Valentine cards in the sentimental Victorian era.

However, we are no longer satisfied with receiving a card with these simple words. It has all become a lot more complicated as the purveyors of insincere cards, flowers and chocolates have taught us. As February 14 looms, businesses everywhere will reach fever pitch as they cash in on this spurious day.

Ideally, some of us would prefer to return to medieval times and experience courtly love with romance perfuming the air; beautiful poetry and marriage proposals on bended knee. Despite what is suggested by the medieval poets, there is no recorded association with romantic love before the Middle Ages. Most marriages were economic and practical arrangements, making true-love marriage rare. The first reference to St Valentine's

Day (and it's pretty vague) is in Chaucer's poem *The Parliament of Foules* which encouraged the popular belief that it was in the second week of the second month, when birds selected their mates.

I remember when Valentine's Day merely gave you licence to declare a love you wouldn't normally dare to express and was sent anonymously. But within less than a lifetime Valentine's Day has changed beyond recognition. Now it usually involves eating out, often combined with weekends abroad with activities ranging from balloon flights to supper on the Orient Express.

Restaurants can be sure of filling every available seat several times over and cramming in as many people as possible. Add to this a cheesy soundtrack and an exorbitantly priced menu, and you might start to wonder why you didn't stay at home.

Needless to say, I find Valentine's Day the single most unromantic day of the year.

Oscar Wilde once said that the essence of romance is uncertainty and there is nothing uncertain about the fact that on this one day of the year you are going to exchange pink fluffy stuff. Real romance tends to creep up on you when least expected. It is intimate and personal and something defined wordlessly by the individuals involved.

