



"He's no saint."

We use this idiom to remind ourselves that, despite our best intentions, we are flawed.

With respect to Valentine, the man, the statement doesn't apply, because he IS a saint, even though Pope Paul VI and the Catholic Church removed him (and roughly 200 others) from the General Roman Calendar in 1969. The pope's decision cited a lack of verifiable evidence about Valentine's deeds (he died in the 3rd Century, so the information gaps are understandable) and a desire to make room for more "universally significant" saints. To further complicate matters, for a long time, Valentine was a more common handle than you might think. Ecclesiastical teachings acknowledge 22 canonized saints with the name. Nine were bishops and most were priests of some level, 12 died in martyr style, while one was an officer in the army of 3rd Century co-Emperor Maximian. There are Italians, French, Spaniards, Germans, and Belgians among the lot.

What do we believe we know about the OV (Original Valentine)? He was a priest. Or, perhaps, two priests with the same name who improbably died on the same day, purported to be February 14. Valentine – or the two Valentines (not to be confused with the oft-and-particularly-by-children-misspoken "Valentines" in reference to the lovers' holiday) – was/were beheaded by orders of Emperor Claudius Gothicus (not the I Claudius guy) as punishment for his/their Christian beliefs. Given the low statistical likelihood of two same-named martyrs facing execution on the same day, I'll risk the modern-day offense of mis-pronouncing the saint(s); rather than "they/them," I'll go with "he/him" for the rest of this story.

From where does Valentine's link to love derive? There seem to be three main branches to this tree. First, some historians suggest that Valentine secretly officiated at wedding ceremonies for Roman soldiers who were forbidden to marry. He was the go-to clandestine cleric for amorous warriors and their wives-in-waiting. Additionally, there's a tale concerning Valentine's pre-beheading imprisonment...antiquarian death-row scuttlebutt. Valentine's jailer had a daughter, and she was blind. The prisoner wrote the girl letters, prayed for her, and her sight was restored. The girl was suddenly able to read Valentine's letters, which were filled with messages of

encouragement and Christian love. He signed the final letter, written on the day of his death, "From Your Valentine." In a 17-centuries-long game of telephone, this act morphed into kindergartners bringing boxes full of folded heart-cards to school and men rushing last minute to jewelry stores. Lastly, some religious scholars suggest that Valentine's tragic fate – murder as punishment for his Christian beliefs – is a metaphor for the ultimate undying love – the love of and for God.

Hokey as it might be, it's never a bad idea to reflect on the love we have for those who are dearest to us. This kind of love, because of its enduring nature, is especially comfortable and familiar, which are feelings that can claim close cousinship to complacency. In ironic cruelty, complacency can become the archenemy of long-term love. So, resist the temptation to rue the commercial evolution of the martyred-priest's formerly-papal-official feast day and spring for the chocolates and flowers and, if you're having a good year, caviar (I got some for 20 percent off).

I'm old-fashioned, in some ways, so I'll focused on the ladies whom I love in ways that will forever differentiate them to me. My wife: She's steadfast and adorable and idiosyncratic and clever and wonderful and uniquely suited to magnify the joy in my life. My daughters: They will not understand the all-consuming, unrelenting, impossible-to-properly-convey and infinitely rewarding and sometimes painful nature of my love for them until they have children of their own. My mom: Without her, I am, literally, nothing. My children's mother: She gave the world the great gift of our girls and the legacy of a life lived with purpose and courage until the end. As the girl in the jail received the gift of vision from Valentine, I SEE YOU, each one of you, today and every day, even when I'm foolishly hesitant to say it out loud.

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