021410homily

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SAINT VALENTINE?

(It was the middle of the third century in Rome,
Valentine was both doctor and priest. What happened?)

"He had been born into a noble Roman family. He lived in a home with servants and had many of life's comforts. When he was a young man, he became a physician. As a doctor he enjoyed his work, helping people to regain their health. But there was something missing in his life; that was the feeling that he had. He found what he was looking for in a new religion that was just coming into its own—Christianity. It was a religion that said we should love our neighbor as ourselves and that when you die you rose to a new life with God. And so the young doctor embraced this new faith. He grew to love this new faith, so much so that he sought to become a priest. And he did so.

Being a priest at that time in the Roman Empire, however, was something that he had to do in secret. In public he was a respected doctor. As part of his medical practice he tended to those in the city jails. Prisoners, at that time, were subject to harsh and cruel treatment. Christians were treated most harshly of all.

This doctor/priest did what little he could to help his fellow Christians. He smuggled food into them. He slipped them medicines from his supply. All of this put his life in danger because the Emperor Claudius had many spies all over the city. In time, the doctor/priest was caught helping the inmates and Christians. The soldiers who arrested him demanded that he offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. When he refused to do so he was thrown into jail with the very ones he had sought to help.

While in jail he befriended the jailer's daughter, a young girl who was blind. The physician/priest treated her and prayed over her and was able to cure her of this blindness. He realized, though, that his time was short and that he was soon to die. He wrote to the young girl to encourage her and to thank her for her kindness to him. He signed the letter—With affection and love, Your Valentine.

Soldiers came and took Valentine to the Palatine Hill in Rome where there was an altar to one of the Roman gods. Refusing to worship, on that hill, on the fourteenth day of February, Valentine was beheaded. He was buried in Rome near one of the gates that eventually came to bear his name—Porto Valentini. Almost two hundred years later a church was built upon the site where he was buried. About that time the Pope declared that February 14th would be known as Saint Valentine's Day. February 14th was already a day on which there was a Roman festival to celebrate love. As part of the festival celebration, young men and women chose partners by drawing names from a box. The partners danced together and exchanged gifts as a sign of their affection. Some of the young people continued to see each other after the festival and many of them married. As Christianity spread, Church officials wanted to give Christian meaning to this

pagan festival and so it was named Saint Valentine's Day. The Valentine cards were to serve as a reminder of the one who died because of his love and concern for others.

Some of the Valentine legend is true and factual while some may be embellishment. And because the Church did not have sufficient historical proof for all the particulars concerning Saint Valentine she opted to remove him from the universal calendar of the saints in favor of saints for whom she had actual historical proof. But the reality of Saint Valentine's Day had then taken hold in the popular imagination.

What strikes me from the story is how Valentine was willing to take risks because of what he believed. There were things that he did so the Lord could work in him and through him to help others. He is called a saint because God's grace made him holy. But God's grace does not enter unless we allow it to and unless we dispose ourselves to receive it and cooperate with it.

God desires to make us holy. We must allow God to do this. We must prepare ourselves and dispose ourselves to receive God's grace. On Wednesday of this week we begin the season of Lent. Six weeks of preparation in order to prepare us to focus more wholeheartedly on the passion, suffering, death and resurrection of Our Lord. How are you going to get ready? The three traditional pillars of Lenten penance are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. You cannot just pick one of these and be content with that. You must pick something from within each of those categories and strive for that. There must be additional time for prayer—each day. This means prayer from the heart. It may include a rosary while driving the car or even daily Mass or Stations of the Cross. There must be fasting—from food—each day. It doesn't necessarily have to be from a lot of food but it has to be enough so that you feel the uncomfortableness of it and allow it to remind you of those who live without enough to eat every day. And there must be some doing without so that the money saved can then be used to help someone in need.

It is Saint Valentine's Day. The Hallmark Corporation is happy. Those who make Whitman Samplers are happy. FTD Florists are happy. What about the Lord? What do we do for Our Lord to express our love? Use this Lent in such a way as to express your love for the Lord. It is in the little things that we so often show our love.