

Column020920

Companions on the Journey

February 9, 2020

Dear Friends,

DID YOU KNOW?

“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 her 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—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.”

Peace,

Msgr. McHenry