

Meeting St. Valentine in Dublin

by Susan McKinley



ucked away in the corner of a Carmelite Church in Dublin stands a statue I did not immediately recognize as St. Valentine. Below the statue is a glass case and within that case is a box containing St. Valentine's body and, as a letter from the Vatican explains, "a small vessel tinged with his blood."

The relics were a gift to Dr. John Spratt from Pope Gregory XVI in December of 1835. Apparently, the Holy Father was so impressed with Fr. Spratt's teaching when the Irish Carmelite visited Rome that he had St. Valentine's remains dug up and sent to Dublin to be installed in Fr. Spratt's Parish of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel on Whitefriar Street.

Never having been a fan of St. Valentine's Day and the consumerism that it entails, I'd never taken the time to investigate his story. Now, standing within the gaze of his statue, I felt like I was in the presence of a good and holy man.

In ancient Rome, February 14th was a holiday in honor of Juno, the Queen of Roman gods and goddesses, women and marriage. Emperor Claudius II was having trouble recruiting young soldiers to join in his bloody campaigns and blamed the allure of sweethearts and wives for keeping men from his army. Accordingly he forbade betrothals and marriages. "Claudius the Cruel" also demanded that all Romans worship certain idols; to be Christian was a crime punishable by death.

However, a Christian priest, Valentine, was not to be deterred. He blessed marriages, prayed with those about to be martyred and continued to minister to the Christian community. Legend has it that when Valentine was jailed for his actions he restored the sight of his jailer's blind daughter,



signing a note to her "from your Valentine." He also gave flowers to his many young visitors ostensibly beginning the tradition that puts florists into a frenzy every February.

The prefect of Rome condemned Valentine for his defiance of the Emperor's instructions. He had him clubbed and later beheaded so that he died a martyr's death on the 14th of February 270 AD.

After learning all this, I felt the need to apologize for resenting his feast day every year that I didn't receive flowers.

I lit some candles and knelt before St. Valentine's remains and, in my imagination, spoke with him about men in and out my life, especially regarding

a relationship that seemed just about to blossom. I felt hope, clarity and peace as though he was reassuring me that all the confusing journeying of my heart would lead somewhere beautiful in the end.

I prayed for my female friends waiting (some not so) patiently for God's will to unfold in their lives. I prayed for male friends whose hearts have been tortured by shattered relationships and the confusing 'mating rituals' of our over-sexualized culture.

St. Valentine suffered greatly in being faithful to Christ at a time when following false idols was the law of the land. He remains an example to us to stay faithful to Christ as other idols assail us today – especially in regards to dating and courtship - and not to compromise our values, but to live courageously in a counter-cultural way.

As I got up to go, I discovered a message from the 'relationship-just-about-to-blossom' man asking me to lunch. I was greatly impressed by St. Valentine's speedy intercession! From now on I will definitely celebrate February 14th, with or without a man in my life, in honor of the long dead Roman saint I encountered in a beautiful Carmelite church in Dublin City.

Susan McKinley is an Australian writer who visited the Dublin shrine during a nine-month pilgrimage through Europe in 2009.