



"To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek Him, the greatest adventure, to find Him, the greatest human achievement."

Saint Augustine

STEWARDSHIP IN MOTION

St. Valentine/Ash Wednesday

"Does this mean our romantic dinner must include fish?"

This is not a quotation from a famous novel, but it is a likely sentence one might hear somewhere this year, as February 14th begins the season of Lent in 2018, sharing the day with the feast of Saint Valentine.

While given the nature of Valentine's Day celebrations in modern America, this would seem a head-on clash of two very different lifestyle choices. Our secular culture promotes the satiation of desires on that day, while our Lenten season asks just the opposite – that we temper the urges we have to indulge our senses.

This collision of stimuli is a microcosm of the challenge of daily life for the modern Christian. While the human desire to seek pleasure certainly isn't new to our age, we are bombarded with temptation today in more ways than even our parents' generation could imagine. The pleasing ability to communicate widely and instantly with our friends and family is countered by the need to confront the often unwelcome onslaught of advertising that bombards all of our devices.

When viewed from a deeply faithful perspective, then, Saint Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday are not polar opposites; they are both opportunities to integrate others into our spiritual lives.

We should not – even assuming that we could – avoid the connection that secular society makes with February and love, nor should we treat the Saint Valentine's Day spirit and the Ash Wednesday focus on Lent as mutually exclusive. Let's suggest that we approach both from the perspective of what the Church calls the "evangelical counsels" – poverty, chastity and obedience. These precepts are fundamental to the Christian life. **"... Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'" (Mt 19:21)** Throughout Sacred Scripture, we as Christians are called to discipline our natural desires and inclinations. Of course, the manner in which these counsels are practiced differ based on our particular state in life; clergy have different approaches than lay people, while in turn those in the married state differ from those who are single. Yet, each of us is called to cultivate these virtuous practices in season and out.

From a stewardship perspective, the Church's Dogmatic Constitution document, "Lumen Gentium" ("Light of the Nations") counsels us, *"All Christ's faithful are to direct their affections rightly, lest they be hindered in the pursuit of perfect charity by the use of worldly things and by adherence to riches which is contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty."*

So we need to orient ourselves to service instead of consumption. Again, this is not to diminish the value of either giving or getting fine gifts, nor of celebrating heartily among friends and family. Simply put, our ultimate aim is not to experience pleasure at all times in this realm, but to join the saints and angels in heaven for eternity.

If we contemplate our lives, often we understand that the most treasured moments are not tethered to an object, no matter how splendid, or a location, no matter how spectacular, but instead to the company we are keeping in those situations. Those special moments come at serendipitous times, too, not always on holidays or vacations. Whether in those times we are the ones offering consolation, or are the recipients of treasured advice and kindness, we realize how critical our relationships are to our spiritual lives.

Saint Aelred of Rievaulx lived in the 12th century and was for much of his adult life the abbot of a large Cistercian abbey in the Yorkshire region of Northern England. He was noted for not only his able administrative skills, but for his gentle and kind manner. He also was greatly influenced by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who encouraged him to share his thoughts and insights in book form. One of the books he wrote was **"On Spiritual Friendship."** This volume's insight into the linkage between spiritual friendship and our faith formation can be very instructive for us, too. He wrote: *"It is no small consolation in this life to have someone who can unite with you in an intimate affection and the embrace of a holy love. Someone in whom your spirit can rest, to whom you can pour out your soul, to whose pleasant exchanges, as to soothing songs, you can fly to in sorrow. To the dear breast of whose friendship,*

amidst the many troubles of the world, you can safely retire." He goes further in describing the fullness of friendship and its impact on our lives. *"A person who can shed tears with you in your worries, be happy with you when things go well, search out with you the answers to your problems, whom with the ties of charity you can lead into the depths of your heart. A person who, though absent in body, is yet present in spirit... where the sweetness of the Holy Spirit flows between you..."*

He then explains how this human relationship opens us to Christ in a special way... *"And so praying to Christ for your friend, and longing to be heard by Christ for your friend's sake, you reach out with devotion and desire to Christ himself. And suddenly and insensibly, as though touched by the gentleness of Christ close at hand, you begin to taste how sweet and lovely Christ is. Thus from that holy love with which you embrace your friend, you rise to that love by which you embrace Christ."*

When viewed from a deeply faithful perspective, then, Saint Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday are not polar opposites; they are both opportunities to integrate others into our spiritual lives. In one instance, we can be celebratory and even festive, while Lent's beginning also offers us the chance to join with our loved ones and fellow parishioners in the preparation of our hearts, minds and souls. Together we strengthen each other in our quenching of earthly desires so that we can best approach that most important event in Christian history – the Resurrection we celebrates on Easter morning.

DID YOU KNOW?

It was Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine, who is credited with finding the true cross of Christ in 326 A.D. She oversaw a major dig in the vicinity of the Holy Sepulcher, and the remains of the cross were discovered. It was declared the wood of the true cross when a miraculous cure was granted to a woman upon whom she had applied the cross.

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