

It's almost February, and in this dreary month we look forward to the 14th when we can hope to get all those cards which express devotion, affection and sometimes jokes and nonsense. We all know that St. Valentine presides over this day.

Valentine, or Valentinus, was a third century Christian martyr. Actually, both of them were. There were two Valentines, one a third century Roman priest who was martyred on the Flaminian Way under Claudius Gothicus, and the other was the Bishop of Terni. Some scholars think they are one and the same, others that there were two. Neither one seems to have had any connection with lovers or courtship. Nor would one really expect them to have. Christian clergy of the third century were most certainly not supposed to promote erotic love, especially Christian clergy on their way to sainthood.

So, how did such a sexy holiday acquire a Christian saint for a patron?

There are several possibilities. One is the superstitious belief that on the 14th of February birds were supposed to mate. Perhaps this is true in the warmer Mediterranean. It's unlikely in Canada! This belief is mentioned by Chaucer, but it is probably a far older superstition.

The likeliest possibility is that the 14th of February is associated with love because it was the day of a very ancient fertility festival. February was a pretty dreary month to the ancient Romans, even if it didn't get as cold in Rome as it does in Canada. The name of the month February is cognate to many words which have to do with fever, e.g., *febro*, to catch a fever; *febriculosus*, feverish; *febrilis*, to be ill with fever, and so on. Fever might have been, as far as some ancients were concerned, associated with atonement, cleansing, expiation; witness *febraum*, a means of purification, *februo*, to purify, expiate. February was the month for flu as it is now for some. It was also considered the month of atonement. I suppose having the flu punishes one for anything bad done in the past year, but like all bad things it came to an end with the drearier part of the Roman winter.

Spring comes at the end of winter. And with spring comes thoughts of budding young shoots and leaves, sowing seed and waiting for it to grow, and watching the lambs and other young animals be born. What better occasion to have a holiday? The Lupercalia was held in mid-February. The purpose was to purify society, to prepare it for new growth as it were. Everyone cleaned their houses, and to purify the whole town there was a group of young men. These were the Luperci. Aristocratic young men were chosen for this duty. Lupercalia/Luperci are of course related to the word for wolf, *lupus*, and the festival proceedings began at that very spot where the twins, Romulus and Remus, were abandoned and later found by the she-wolf who brought them up.

The ceremony began with the sacrifice of goats. Then two young aristocrats were presented to the priest who touched their foreheads with the bloody sacrifice-knife. Another priest wiped their foreheads clean with a piece of wool soaked in milk. At this point the young men were required to laugh, and then they cut the goatskins into thin strips and proceeded to virtually streak through the city: they were naked save for minimal covering where it counted the most. With the rawhide strips they lashed all in their path. Young girls especially were eager to be hit by the nearly naked young men: the belief was that the lashing would aid in fertility and help them have many healthy children.

Apparently a good time was had by all. Everyone gathered "downtown", in the Roman Forum, that is, to watch these young men streak by. There were many jokes as one can imagine and much laughter and merriment.

The Lupercalia was one of the best-loved holidays of the year. You may find this hard to believe after the bizarre description I have just given you! I think it is easy to see why, though, if one remembers that mid-February was probably the first warmish weather and sunshine after the winter and people naturally felt extremely festive, wanted to celebrate and were a little crazy about how they did it.

So where does the Christian saint come in? The early church fathers were not very happy about people celebrating a pagan fertility rite, especially if they were having a good time. The early church fathers tried mightily to take over the Lupercalia and give it a more sombre and respectable aspect. In 494 Pope Gelasius I declared the day the Festival of the

Purification of the Virgin Mary. And somewhere along the line one, or two, Christian martyrs by the name of Valentinus were found to help crowd out the paganism still a bit more.

But what happened, of course, was that the early church fathers never did succeed in completely eradicating the fertility aspect; it is still a holiday associated with love, and generally the erotic, romantic sort. In fact we now send "valentines" as an expression of this love. It really rather looks as if the ancient fertility rite has overtaken the sombre respectability the early church fathers tried so very hard to impose.

Correction:

In *Labyrinth* No. 63, p. 17, in C. Mundigler's article on "Ancient Agricultural Hand-Mills", in the statement "Further mechanization of the mill came perhaps as early as 100 BC", the date should be "1000 BC". The editor apologizes for this mistake in the printing.