

Who was St Valentine and why do we celebrate him?

Updated / Friday, 14 Feb 2025 06:00

<https://www.rte.ie/lifestyle/living/2025/0214/1029381-who-was-st-valentine-and-why-do-we-celebrate-him/>

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Love it or loathe it, Valentine's Day comes around every year. While some may claim it's a 'Hallmark holiday', others are counting down the hours asking that someone special to be their Valentine. So, whether your plans involve celebrating the day, or ignoring it entirely, you may as well know a few things about why it exists in the first place.

Why do we have a designated day of love?

Valentine's Day first began as a Christian feast day. The day itself is associated with Christian martyrs, among the most famous of whom was a third century priest, Saint Valentine. However, like most traditional celebrations, there are numerous versions of the story.

Some say Valentine was thrown into prison in Rome for agreeing to marry soldiers to their loved ones even though it was forbidden. At the time, the emperor believed that men who had no romantic attachments or families made for better soldiers for his armed forces.

Others say Valentine said mass for Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans, which made him extremely unpopular with authorities.

Who was St. Valentine?

The origin of Saint Valentine is shrouded in mystery. In fact, although he is recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church, he was actually removed from the General Roman Calendar in 1969 because of the vying stories about him. The general calendar now states that February 14 is the obligatory memorial of Saints Cyril and Methodius, two missionaries known for bringing Christianity to the Slavic peoples.

Historically speaking, there are multiple saints named Valentine or Valentinus - all of whom were martyred. The saint we're speaking of today was said to be martyred on February 14 in 269 AD, with the day of his death formally declared as a holiday by Pope Gelasius I in 496 AD.

Fact and figures aside, it's clear that our patron saint of lovers has remained popular throughout time, with Valentine's Day remaining an exceptionally popular holiday.

In Ireland, couples converge on Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church in Dublin to have their wedding rings blessed at the site of the saints' relics, with many praying to to have their loved ones watched over.

Why are his relics in Dublin?

Initially, Saint Valentine's remains were kept in the church and catacombs of San Valentino in Rome, but some of his relics have since been dispersed, including Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church in Dublin. Throughout the centuries since his death, many basilicas, churches and monasteries were built on the site of his original resting place. In the early 1800s, it's said that restoration work unearthed his remains along with a small vessel tinged with his blood. In 1835, John Spratt, a popular Irish Carmelite, travelled to Rome where he received tokens of esteem from the Church. Pope Gregory XVI is said to have gifted the remains of Saint Valentine. On November 10, 1836, the Reliquary containing the remains arrived in Dublin and were brought in solemn procession to Whitefriar Street Church where they were received by Archbishop Murray of Dublin. Then, during a renovation in the church in the 1950s, they were highlighted once again with an altar and shrine being constructed to house them.

Why do we send cards?

It is rumoured that Valentine fell in love with a young woman while he was captured - supposedly, the daughter of his jailor. The letter he wrote to her before his death is considered the first Valentine's card. By signing off 'from your Valentine' he made famous the now common manner of finishing a Valentines' card, especially those from secret admirers. Other popular gifts include confectionary and flowers, and although women are often the receivers in Western society, women in Japan often making chocolates for the men in their lives on 14 February.

Just friends.

Galentine's day and Palentine's day are a modern creation and are all about celebrating your relationships with friends on 13 February. Made famous by American comedy series Parks and Recreation, the concept Galentine's Day has really grown in popularity in recent years. Just as Valentine's Day is essentially an excuse to do something nice with your significant other, Galentine's day an excellent opportunity to get the girls together for a fun night out or in.

What should I do this Valentine's Day? Engaged couples have their wedding rings blessed at the Carmelite Church in Whitefriar, Dublin, but if you haven't popped the question yet, you are welcome to visit the shrine as a way to mark the occasion. There's even a book where you can write your prayers or wishes in.