

6th Sunday Ordinary A 2-13

Happy Valentine's Day, one day early. Valentine's is a good day for Hallmark, Hershey PA, and floral shops—but it wasn't a real lucky day for Valentine himself. Turns out he was a priest in Rome who was actually beheaded on February 14, 269—hopefully not for a bad sermon. (Don't think about him too much as you chomp into the Esther Price.)

And why are lovers associated with Valentine's Day? Because it was believed that in Rome, February 14 was the day that birds mated. ("Dear, I think of you on this special day when the priest got decapitated and pigeons get together to make little buzzards!" In fact, that's what's on your card!")

On this Sunday before February 14, we think of love—but we also ponder lust: "Whoever looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." LOVE sees the other as a person, and love seeks the good of that person. LUST reduces the other to just the surface, just an object, and lust is thinking only of oneself. And sometimes the two get mixed together: "Mom, he says he loves me, that this is the real thing! And we are 16, after all." LOVE understands renunciation; LUST wants it all—now!

Birds mated on February 14, but true love and Purity is a challenge year-round, as has been since the days of Jesus. I suspect that a priest in 1011 AD listened to pretty much the same moral failings that a priest in 2011 might hear and the same in 3011. In the Book of Sirach, we read, "If you choose, you can keep the

commandments,”—but men know that it is not always so easy, especially in our society and with the internet to add to our temptations.

Jesus suggested we might claw out our eye if it makes us sin, or cut off our hand if it gets us in trouble. These are standard exaggerations, but Our Lord is obviously serious about chastity. Islam deals with this very directly: Muslim women have their legs, arms, and shoulders completely covered, and many wear a veil. At the Islamic Center of Cincinnati in West Chester, the men pray on the main floor and the women fill the balcony behind them. Human weakness. Custody of the eyes. Purity. The near occasion of sin. Every religion, every era—including at the time of Jesus.

Jesus, of course, is our model. Jesus loved Martha and Mary very much, we are told. Purely. Prostitutes gathered around him, because they sensed that he actually cared for them as persons. In the end, he gave his life for all our failings, all the wandering eyes, all our foolish decisions, all the sins of our youth and maybe older years too.

“Jesus, give us all pure hearts. Help us to see beyond the surface to the person before us. Liberate us from bondage of any kind. Help us to love as you love. Amen.”