

LOVE MAKES THE WORLD GO ROUND

by Lucy Gordan | Travel, Travel blog

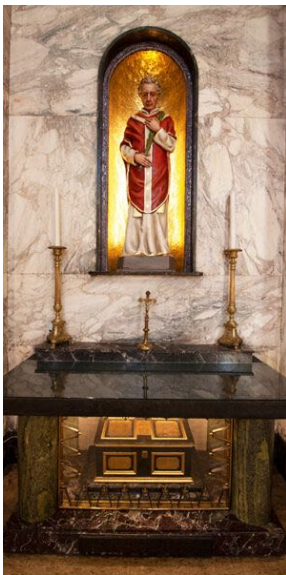


St. Valentine Relic in Rome's Santa Maria in Cosmedin

Numerous (at least 11) early Christian martyrs were named Valentine, which derives from the Latin *valens* meaning strong, worthy and powerful. Of these the Valentines honored in Western Christianity on February 14th are possibly two: Valentine of Rome (*Valentinus presb. m. Romae*) and Valentine of Terni (*Valentinus ep. Interamnensis m. Romae*), or maybe even three.

Valentine of Rome was a priest or a physician in Rome, who, after being interrogated by the emperor Claudius II in person, was martyred for curing his fellow Christians and performing weddings for Christian soldiers (married men could avoid conscription). He was buried at the beginning of Via Flaminia in 269. The catacomb named for him is part of a 4th-century complex located Viale Maresciallo Pilsudski 2 near Rome's soccer stadium, but, because its passageways are crumbling, it's not open to the public. Pope Gelsius I added him to the calendar of saints, 200 years after his death, in 469. His relics were kept in his namesake catacombs which,

although crumbling now, remained an important pilgrimage site throughout the Middle Ages. They were transferred to Rome's medieval church of Santa Prassede either by Pope Paschal in 822 or sometime during the pontificate of Pope Nicholas IV (1288-92). Today his flower-crowned skull is exhibited in the medieval Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, also the site of the world-famous *Bocca della Verità* (The Mouth of Truth). Other of his relics are found at St. Antón's Church in Madrid; at Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church in Dublin, Ireland, a gift in 1837 of Pope Gregory XVI (r. 1831-46) (previously they'd been buried in Rome's Catacomb of St. Hippolytus; one of the saint's shoulder blades in Prague's Church of Peter and Paul at Vyšehrad, a gift of native-son Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (r. 1346-78), apparently from his large collection of relics; perhaps a fragment of his skull in the parish church of St. Mary's Assumption in Chelmno, Poland; in Mytilene on the Greek island of Lesbos; and in the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta in Savona, Italy.



Relics of St. Valentine in
Dublin



St. Valentine relics in Prague

Instead, Valentine of Terni became bishop of *Interamma* (now the city of Terni in Umbria). He is said to have been martyred during the persecution of Christians under Emperor Aurelian in 273.



A medieval manuscript
showing St. Valentine of
Terni overseeing the
construction of his
basilica

Like St. Valentine of Rome, he was buried on the Via Flaminia, but some 60 miles north of Rome. His relics are in his namesake basilica in Terni, although his head may be preserved in the Abbey of New Minster, in Winchester, England.



The Church of St. Valentine in Terni

The Catholic Encyclopedia lists a third St. Valentine who was mentioned in early martyrologies. He was martyred in Africa, but nothing else is known of him.

Actually because of their similar martyrdoms on dates (maybe both

February 14th) not too far apart and on the same Roman road not far from the city, it may be that there is only one St. Valentine, one and the same person. In fact, these similarities led to such confusion about the saint's identity, that, although The Roman Catholic Church continues to recognize him as a saint, he was removed from the General Roman Calendar in 1969. Then, the revised Roman martyrology (2001) decided that the Roman St. Valentine was the authentic one and deleted the other.



St. Valentine relics in Terni

In any case, no matter what, in addition to Rome and elsewhere in Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States, St. Valentine's Day, although no longer a religious or public holiday anywhere, is celebrated by some 14 million people around the world: in Latin America, Bangladesh, China, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, India (only half-heartedly), Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Norway, the Philippines, Romania, Singapore (the biggest spenders), Slovenia, Slovakia, South Korea, Spain, and Taiwan, and until recently in Afghanistan, although he's banned in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in addition to lovers, Valentine is the patron saint of epileptics, of the blind, and of beekeepers.

Thus, his saint's day was, and still is celebrated, although more secularly, on February 14. This is because Pope Gelsius I hoped to suppress once and for all the celebration of the pagan *Lupercalia*, a wild and often violent fertility festivity in ancient Rome celebrated between February 13th and 15th, so he purposefully chose February 14, also the date of the feast day of SS Cyril and Methodius, the patron saints of Europe.



Portrait of Chaucer

Thus, since the Late Middle Ages, probably first mentioned in the *Parliament of Fowls* by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400), a 699-line dream vision portraying a parliament for birds to choose their mates, the February 14th celebration has been associated with love. St.

Valentine's entry in *Saints Preserve Us!* by Sean Kelly and Rosemary Rogers (Random House 1993) confirms the two reasons for this date. Besides Chaucer, some other early literary references to St. Valentine's Day include the 15th-century (1415) *rondeau* by Charles, Duke of Orléans, to his wife while he was a prisoner in the Tower of London; Ophelia in *Hamlet*; a poem by John Donne; and in Edmund Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queen* (1590).

The custom of sending handwritten notes expressing love on February 14th dates to 18th-century England, but it may stem from an ancient Roman legend.

Rome's St. Valentine is said to have restored the sight of the blind daughter Julia of his jailer/ judge Asterius and sent her a letter signed "Your Valentine" as a farewell the night before his execution by decapitation.

According to Bede's *Martyrology*, compiled in the 8th century, Julia, Asterius, and 46 members of their household then converted to Christianity.

Since the 19th century, handwritten notes have been replaced by mass-produced greeting cards. Our most recent statistics report that in 2024 Americans spent just under \$26 billion for Valentine Day gifts-from greeting cards, candy (a tradition introduced by the British chocolate producer Cadbury in 1868), flowers (particularly red roses), an evening out, jewelry, gift cards and clothing (in order of popularity). This was an increase of c. \$2 billion from 2022. In short, the average St. Valentine's Day spending increased every year from \$108 in 2010, to \$175 in 2022 to \$192 in 2023.

A recent article in *Il Messaggero*, one of Rome's daily newspapers, reported that, although the price of cocoa beans and chocolates has increased considerably during the last year, for

Valentine's Day Romans are spending 15% more this year than last on chocolates, those heart-shaped being the most popular, especially those cream-filled or with pralines. Over 2,000 people working in 500 businesses will be producing 200 tons of chocolates in St. Valentine's birthplace alone for a turnover of 10 million euros.

In addition to chocolate, peppercorns, honey, and strawberries are popular ingredients worldwide in St. Valentine Day's recipes, but I, somewhat disappointedly, found no particular celebration dish.

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