

# Saints Alive! Or Beheaded? How Did the “St.” Get in “St. Valentine’s Day” – And Get Forgotten?



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Has anyone seen or heard from St. Valentine lately? Do the rose-growers, rose-orderers, rose-sniffers, candy makers, candy buyers and candy eaters know who he was or what the day really stands for? Like Halloween (All Hallow’s Eve), has the day’s (or night’s) meaning been lost in translation and commercialism? Like Christmas, will the two holidays (origin: holy days) become the next Xmas? Will we be weaned off Halloween and vanquished from Valentine’s Day to Xween and Xtine’s? Even worse Xtines or Xtines’?

Ah, tradition! Ah, context! They add so much to content. If only more of today’s marketers, content creators and readers knew that. If they knew how holidays started, they might appreciate them more.

For example, according to the History Channel, here's the gory and hoary tale of St. Valentine. It's not so romantic. (Simple declarative sentences [are they?] and other edits courtesy of this author.)



On February 14 around the year 278 A.D., Valentine, a holy priest in Rome in the days of Emperor Claudius II, was executed.

Under the rule of Claudius the Cruel, Rome carried out many unpopular and bloody military campaigns. The emperor maintained a strong army, but had a hard time getting soldiers to join his military leagues. Claudius believed Roman men were unwilling to join the army because of their strong attachment to their wives and families.

To solve the problem, Claudius banned all marriages and engagements in Rome. Valentine, realizing the decree's injustice, defied Claudius and performed marriages in secret for young lovers.

When Claudius the Cruel discovered Valentine's actions, he ordered him put to death. Valentine was arrested and dragged before the Prefect of Rome, who condemned him to be beaten to death with clubs and to have his head cut off.

The sentence was carried out on February 14, on or about the year 270. Legend also has it that while in jail, St. Valentine left a farewell note for the jailer's daughter, who had become his friend, and signed it "From Your Valentine."

For his great service, Valentine was named a saint after his death.

In truth, the exact origins and identity of St. Valentine are unclear. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "At least three different Saint Valentines, all of them martyrs, are mentioned in the early martyrologies under the date of 14 February." One was a priest in Rome, the second was a bishop of Interamna (now Terni, Italy), and the third a martyr in the Roman province of Africa.

Legends vary on how the martyr's name became connected with romance. The date of his death may have become mingled with the Feast of Lupercalia, a pagan festival of love. At these events, young women's names were placed in a box, from which they were drawn by men as chance directed. In 496 AD, Pope Gelasius banned the Feast of Lupercalia, and he declared February 14 be celebrated as St. Valentine's Day.

Gradually, February 14 became a date for exchanging love messages, poems and simple gifts such as candy and flowers – and sometimes diamond engagement rings.

As a famous radio commentator once said, "Now you know the rest of the story." If there's a lull or an awkward moment (St.) Valentine's Day night, you have a conversation topic. Or if you want to end the relationship, you can bore your companion. Either way, if you didn't know the context, what would you have done?

Aren't tradition and context romantic? *Happy Xtine's Day!* Even if you lose your heart, don't lose your head.

**About the Author:** Robert F. Noltenmeier has been a full-time clinical assistant professor in the NYUSPS PRCC program since January 2009. Before his full-time appointment, he was an adjunct professor in the program since 2004. He remains executive vice president and principal of Quadrant Communications Co., Inc., a Manhattan-based integrated marketing communications firm that counsels clients like Citibank Private Bank, Polo/Ralph Lauren and AT&T, along with nonprofits and foundations. Before Quadrant, he held senior corporate communication and public relations positions with ExxonMobil, Celanese A.G. and Unisys. His board positions include three terms as president of the New York chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators (NY/IABC). He holds a master's degree in public relations from Boston University.