8 simple ways to celebrate St. Valentine's day with your kids

1. Emphasize the Saint in St. Valentine's day

Today, most people celebrate St. Valentine's day by exchanging tokens of love—cards, candy, flowers and the like. But the holiday began as a saint's feast day, which means its original purpose was to celebrate Christian love and devotion to Christ—in the case of St. Valentine, love even in the face of death.

Who was St. Valentine? Early Christian sources speak of three different men who went by that name. The most popular of the three was a priest who comforted Christian martyrs during the persecution of Emperor Claudius II. Eventually, he was martyred, too, beheaded on February 14, 270. This saint was so popular that Pope Julius I built a basilica over his gravesite in the fourth century.

Less is known about the other two Valentines, one of whom was a bishop who was also beheaded under Emperor Claudius II; the third Valentine was martyred in Africa.

Later, various stories grew up around the devotion to St. Valentine, most notably that he helped Christian soldiers get married in spite of a law forbidding Roman soldiers being married. This is one of the popular explanations for the feast day's association with romantic love.

Father William Saunders, writing at the Catholic Education Resource Center, makes a convincing argument that the association has more to do with the medieval belief that birds chose their mates in the middle of the second month of

winter—February 14. You can read his article for a more detailed history of St. Valentine.

What's the takeaway for Christian families? Regardless of the details of St. Valentine's life, he was one of many Christians who valued Christ's love even above their own lives. While it's fun to celebrate friendship and romantic love on St. Valentine's day, Christians believe that God's selfless, generous, life-giving love is the standard against which all other forms of love are measured.

2. Make an urn of saintly role models

Materials

- index cards
- book on saints or other online resource with information about saints
- bowl large enough to hold index cards

Activity

Here's an activity to help kids connect to Christian models of "true love," the saints. It's inspired by the ancient Roman purification and fertility festival Lupercalia, also known as dies Februatus, celebrated around February 15.

One event associated with the festival involved young men running around the city naked, striking young women with a bloody leather thong, an act that was thought to promote fertility. This isn't the tradition we want to recommend to your kids, though. Instead, another Lupercalia tradition involved young maidens placing their names in an urn; later, young unmarried men would choose names out of the urn at random, and the
two would be paired for the rest of the year.

Here's our Catholic twist: In the days or weeks leading up to

St. Valentine’s Day, have your children write the names of their favorite saints on slips of paper. Put the names in a bowl. On St. Valentine’s Day, have the kids choose a saint’s name at random from the bowl—and that’s the saint they’re “paired” with for the year. Encourage them to learn about the saint’s life, and to ask for the saint’s prayers.

3. Write love letters and deliver valentines

Materials

- paper
- pencils
- crayons
- scissors
- stickers, glue

Activity

Set aside time in the coming week for everyone (including moms and dads) to write love letters to other members of the family. The love letters can be simple, two- or three-line affairs, or more involved. You can provide stickers and craft materials for decorating them.

The important thing is to help your kids practice saying “I love you”—and recognizing what they love about the people closest to them. Help them along by brainstorming with them some positive traits about other people in the family. Save the love letters to be exchanged on Valentine’s Day.

Bonus activity: Encourage your children to make and deliver Valentine cards to:

- God, giving thanks and praise for all he has given your family. You can read these aloud as part of your dinnertime prayer routine.
- Grocery store shoppers: What a better way to delight someone who might not otherwise receive a Valentine?

- People in a nursing home: You might need to coordinate a drop-off with the residential staff prior to your visit.

4. Decorate the house with quotes about love

Materials

- printable hearts found online at “God Loves You Hearts” from the Peanut Butter & Grace website
- pencils, crayons, markers
- scissors
- tape

Activity

Decorate the house with quotes about love from the Scriptures and from the saints, putting them on cut-out hearts or colored construction paper. Better yet, have your older kids and teens find quotes and make the decorations.

Use these printable hearts as a starting point.

5. Hugs!

Materials

- paper
- scissors
- pencils, crayons, markers

Activity

Make it a day for hugs! Encourage hugs all around by making up hug tickets (cut-out hearts work well). Pass them out at the beginning of the day, and let kids redeem them throughout the day (or week).

6. Tell the story of how you met

Over a meal, tell your kids the story of how you met your spouse. Or, if you’re not married, tell a funny or interesting love story from your own life. Bonus: If you considered

another vocation, such as the religious life, tell about that, too, emphasizing that there are many ways to love others.

7. Consecrate your family to the Sacred Heart of Jesus or the Immaculate Heart of Mary

Nothing says Valentine's Day like a big, red heart. But Catholics hold two hearts above all others as symbols of undying love: the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. So why not make a prayer to the Sacred Heart of Jesus a centerpiece of your family prayer on Valentine's Day?

You can find out more about these devotions, including prayers of consecration, in the Peanut Butter & Grace article, "Celebrate the Feasts of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

8. Start the day with an Act of Love

The Act of Love is a traditional prayer that goes like this:

O Lord God, I love you above all things
and I love my neighbor for your sake
because you are the highest, infinite and perfect good,
worthy of all my love.
In this love I intend to live and die.
Amen.

If this feels too formal, make your own Act of Love . . . you can even post it on your refrigerator for the week. Either way, it's a reminder that all love has its origins and destiny in God.

More resources

For more involved Valentine's Day celebration ideas and recipes, visit the extensive list of ideas over at Shower of Roses or the many craft ideas at Catholic Icing.