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Unlike humans, God's love endures forever

Valentine's Day gets its name from a bishop who died on this day centuries ago. The martyr meekly submitted himself to torture rather than renounce his faith in Jesus. How a day famous for someone's death became an occasion for lovers to exchange Valentines is a long story someone else can tell. Let's focus instead on the connection between Christian faith and the mystery of romantic love between a man and a woman.

02/12/2025

Remember what ancient times were like—those thousands upon thousands of years before Jesus was born. Not many pieces of literature have survived from ancient history. Those we have are all tinged with dark hues of despair and tragedy. In the ancient world (to use the words of a famous British apologist), “sorrow was the big thing and joy was the little thing.” By enduring the most tragic of all deaths, Jesus turns the world upside down. From now on, wherever Christians live their faith, “joy is the big thing and sorrow is the little thing.”

It is not surprising to find stories even in modern times like the one of Romeo and Juliet. Two lovers get married but die before their honeymoon has ended because such

love cannot survive in a world dominated by greed, vengeance and tribal wars. That is the refrain written on the pages of all the ancient myths. Romeo and Juliet was an ingenious re-working of Roman, Greek and Celtic tragedies: Aeneas and Dido, Cupid and Psyche, Tristan and Isolde. Every example of passionate love in the old days was a story of a man and woman destined to be separated, destined to be frustrated, destined to suffer. The story of lovers and happy endings was unheard of in ancient times.

Then comes Christ and a whole new way of looking at the world. As just mentioned, it is not surprising to find tragic endings even in modern times, like Romeo and Juliet. It is a reminder that we live in a world where Satan still tempts us to despair. The surprising thing, measured against thousands of years of human history, is to find romantic

novels like the ones of Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens and Jane Austin. It is a Christian world where people have the daring to envision a passionate love that endures the forces of evil.

It is the world foreseen in the Songs of Songs, where the Bridegroom says to his Bride on their wedding day: “Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is strong as death ... a flame of Yahweh himself. Love no flood can quench, no torrents drown.”

This article by Fr. Joe Babendreier first appeared in the Sunday Nation in February 2016.

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