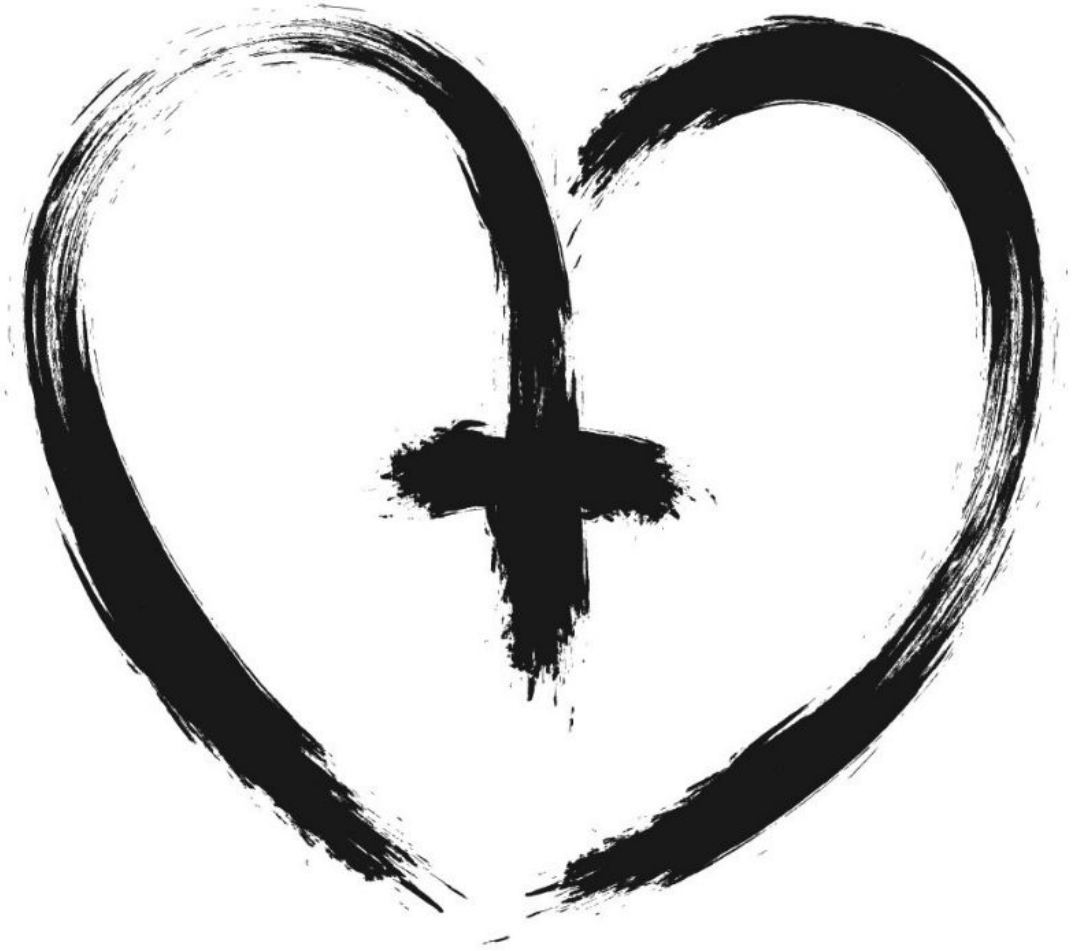
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Artwork depicting the coincidence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, 2018 (CNS illustration/Elizabeth Butterfield, Diocese of Erie)

by Thomas Tobin

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The impending collision of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day on the calendar this year might seem like in insurmountable conflict to some, and understandably so, for after all, the themes of one day are totally incompatible with the themes of the other.

For example, Valentine's Day is all about romantic love, opulent dinners, decadent chocolates, beautiful flowers and mushy poetry. ("How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.") Ash Wednesday, on the other hand, insists on penance, prayer, mortification, simplicity and dire warnings. ("Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou will return.")

For Catholics though, in the convergence of the two days, Ash Wednesday clearly has precedence; it is one of the most solemn days of the year. Ash Wednesday is the doorway of the entire Lenten Season. It is a day of intense faith; a day on which we strive for repentance and renewal; a day of conversion, of turning away from sin and back to God. And who among us doesn't need to hear and heed that message?

It's for that reason that the church is not inclined to grant a dispensation from the obligations of Ash Wednesday, the obligation to fast and abstain from meat. You want to celebrate Valentine's Day? Go for dinner the night before, Mardi Gras, or on some other enchanted evening. But Ash Wednesday belongs to God, and it shouldn't be taken away from him.

Having said all that, it seems to me that upon reflection, the two days do in fact have a lot in common. In a simple equation, Ash Wednesday is to God, what Valentine's Day is to lovers.

Think about it. What do human lovers do to express their affection, to keep their passion alive?

Well, first they have to communicate. They need to speak honestly to one another, sharing their hopes and fears, their disappointments and dreams. They need to speak from the heart, without distraction. And they need to develop the art of listening, to be great listeners, so that the conversation isn't always a one-way street.

Lovers have to make sacrifices for one another, often giving up their own priorities, preferences and pleasures for the happiness and well-being of the other. And they

should do so willingly and joyfully, not begrudgingly. "Yes dear, I'll be happy to skip the football game to go to the theater with you." Or, "Sweetheart, we just had meatloaf last week, but if that's what you want for your birthday dinner, that's what it'll be." And, of course, love sometimes demands far more profound sacrifices than that, doesn't it?

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And lovers also freely offer spontaneous little acts of thoughtfulness and kindness to one another — a few kind words, a thoughtful gesture, a surprise gift. And lovers sometimes need to seek forgiveness from the other, don't they? And freely grant forgiveness, too. As Pope Francis has said so often, the secret to having a good marriage is found in three simple expressions: "please, thank-you, I'm sorry."

Hmm … the keys to a romantic relationship: communication, sacrifice and love. Sound familiar? Reminds me of the prayer, fasting and good works that are the hallmarks of Lent.

If we're going to nurture our romance with God, we need to renew and refresh our passion for him, and in Lent we do it especially with prayer, fasting and good works.

Lent should be a time of more intense prayer, and it is nothing more than communication with God. There are various types of prayer, of course: personal and public, liturgical and devotional. But whenever we speak to God in prayer, we share our hopes and fears, our disappointments and dreams. And we listen to God, seeking to know his will more clearly so that we can do his will more faithfully every day. Silence is such an essential element of the spiritual life, for it quiets the heart, mind and soul, allowing God to break through the incessant clatter of our culture.

Lent is also a time of sacrifice — of reasonable fasting and abstaining from meat when the church requires us to do so. And most of us "give up" other little things too — dessert, coffee, alcohol, technology — those simple attachments that keep us tied to Earth and prevent us from lifting our hearts and minds to heaven. Our disciplines eliminate vice, increase virtue, purify our souls and strengthen us in our daily struggle against evil.

And Lent is also a time of good works, of almsgiving. Perhaps we give some extra money to charity, or visit someone who is ill, or welcome the stranger, a new family,

into our neighborhood. Or maybe we seek reconciliation with a former friend or family member from whom we've been alienated for a long time. Our works of charity allow us to share our blessings with others and keep us attuned to the pressing needs of our brothers and sisters, at home and around the world.

You see, our faith is nothing more than our longing for God, and his for us. But like any romance, it too has to be nurtured and nourished if it is to prosper and grow. And it's what the faithful observance of Lent, with its prayer, fasting and good works, helps us to do.

It seems to me, then, that Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day have a lot in common after all, for the goal of both is to renew our passion for the one we love.

[Thomas Tobin is bishop of the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island. A version of this column appeared in his diocesan newspaper, The Rhode Island Catholic. Follow the diocese on Twitter @dioprovidence and Facebook.]