Opinion

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The calendar supplies the mischief: pairing Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday on the Feb. 14. Whimsy is optional but not unreasonable.

The two occasions appear oddly matched. Ashes speak of the inner self: quiet, somber and watchful, tinged with spiritual foreboding and a summons to self-honesty. The valentine signals an opposite impulse for outward expressions of affection conveyed by words and sweet tokens.

The black mark of the cross on the forehead is the most conspicuous sign of Christian faith that believers are subject to during the whole year. For growing numbers of non-religious people, it can be baffling and startling. Not long ago it was common; now it can be strange. Not all churches adopt that practice, of course, but the meaning of the day as the beginning of the most sacred season of self-examination is virtually universal. It is a call to aspire to union with Christ's suffering and death in fidelity to the Gospel's promise of new life.

The valentine self has a more ambiguous set of pushes and pulls. At its most refined, as a tribute and enactment of human love as a reflection of God's love, it has a sublime quality. It is manifest in the purest and rarest form in the Greek sense of self-less agape and perhaps in its most stable form as platonic, as in lasting friendship. In our era, however, the third option, eroticism, has saturated the valentine scene, investing the day with pronounced sensuality marked by promises

of fun and ecstasy. Some of it related to what most of us might call committed wholesomeness; some of it aimed at not-always-honorable submission. The theme is celebration and joy.

So how to cope with this odd couple?

The first step is to see where each bears characteristics of the other. Penitents with smudges may enter into the mystery of Lent with a joy that passes understanding, taking hold of the invitation to devote themselves to Christ with self-giving intentions. They experience an ineffable, even paradoxical, happiness in the privilege of sharing a divine mission. Its source isn't the joy of sex but its mysterious impact may share spiritual space with the pleasure emanating from deeply committed, self-giving sexual love.

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Likewise, devotees of hearts and flowers have much need for the self-scrutiny and forgiveness central to the Lenten message. It's not a new component but it's usually camouflaged in gifts. The flurry of chocolates, flowers, jewelry and champagne dinners often bear witness to efforts to appease guilty consciences, however covertly. To many it serves as "make-up" day on both sides whether or not it's openly acknowledged.

Otherwise, it's unlikely that this intriguing confluence of events will cause much head scratching. I imagine the instinct for putting everything in its appropriate compartment greatly outweighs interest in comparing and contrasting them. But we don't get presented this kind of opportunity very often, so that kind of moment is at hand.

It's just as well that they don't normally get posted together. So far as I know, Ash Wednesday has yet to be burdened, as has Valentine's Day, by rank commercialism.