

## **ANTS**

As is her habit, my wife Marlene asked me about a week ago what I was going to talk about at this Knights of Columbus Council meeting. I thought for a moment and then said “I think I’ll talk about St. Francis - I like St. Francis.”

As I was thinking about this topic and multitasking by doing a fall cleaning of my barbecue I accidentally came upon a line of ants going in and out of the underneath section of the barbecue. Now I had another project: get rid of ants.

Despite their usual annoyance, ants are really fascinating little creatures. There are about a million ants per human in the world so we should be glad we are bigger than they are.

The word “ant” comes from a Middle English word, In Italian they are known as “formica” probably because they can secrete formic acid.

They are called “eusocial” because of their complex social characteristics. The ant is dedicated to the colony communicating by complex behaviors that involves multiple senses. They can solve complex problems with their division of labor and social interaction. There are workers, some of which maintain hygiene and some are undertakers. There are soldiers and there are queens. Workers live 1 to 3 years and queens can live up to 30 years.

Interestingly, ants are one of nature's creatures that can reproduce without sexual fertilization as we know it — a process called “parthenogenesis,” literally, “virgin creation.”

There are even biblical references to ants: for example, warning against laziness, Proverbs 6:6 says:

Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways and be wise.

And Proverbs 30:24-25:

(Some creatures) on earth are exceedingly wise: the ants are a people without strength, yet they provide their food (for the winter) in the summer.

From my perspective, this “everything for the colony” orientation is a little disconcerting. I am reminded of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World with its caste system of Alpha, Betas, and so forth and lack of individuality. Plus, although fascinating, ants are pests.

Which bring us back to St. Francis. He was known for, among other things, caring for all of God's creatures. Nature is the mirror of God and he called its creatures “brother” and “sister.”

However, I had heard that St. Francis was not a particular fan of ants. Upon reading about him I discovered that his close contemporary friend and commentator, Brother Giles, had noted that St. Francis loved ants less than any other animal **because** (contrary to the Proverbs quotations) they took great care in gathering and storing food during the summer for the winter; unlike birds, for example, who just lived day to day.

I suppose that could make some sense. But then I remembered a Franciscan priest who told me that the probable reason St. Francis didn't like ants was that the holy man used to recline under a tree for contemplation but would occasionally be disrupted by ants crawling over him — thus his antipathy.

That makes sense.

On my way to Council tonight, Marlene asked me “So did you write about St. Francis?” I said “Sort of — and ants.”

She just looked at me.