



Divine Mercy Sunday – April 7, 2024

The Flight and Delight of the Bumblebee

Dear Thomas,

Her uniform is yellow and black. **Wax and honey** are her products and dusty pollen her medium of exchange.

Her incessant buzzing reflects the busy-ness with which she goes about her activities, but **don't be fooled by the commotion**. She's incredibly mild-mannered, in fact, a bit boring by the way she *drones* on about things. She doesn't bother anyone unless you bother her.

That is to say, don't dare get on her bad side: she **carries a sharp weapon** and will defend her queen and hive with a sting you will likely not forget.

Yes, the bumble bee is unassuming and a bit dangerous if provoked, but in a very literal sense, **life on earth is the fruit of her work**.

(The UN's Food and Agriculture [Organization](#) claims that more than a third of the world's food production depends on the work of bees, as well as 75% of fruit and seed trees—wow!)

No wonder **the Bible loves the humble bumble-bees**. They are a window into the providential love of God for humanity, ever working, ever providing for our needs.

Bees in the Bible

Did you know that the word “deborah” in Hebrew means “bee”? The **biblical Deborah** (Judges 4) was the only female judge of Israel before they had a king, and she was a powerhouse. (Image at right: *The Prophecy of Deborah* by Gustave Doré.)

She famously **led the Israelites into battle** and predicted that they would defeat the Canaanites not by the sword alone but by the wiles of another courageous woman named Jael.

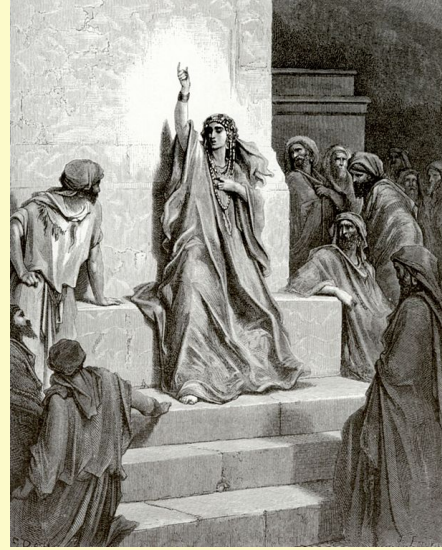
When **the enemy commander, Sisera**, tried to hide out in Jael's tent, she won the day by dispatching him with a

tent peg through the temple (Judges 4:21). Those ladies were queen bees of their tribes, no doubt!

Not counting the proper name Deborah, there are **five occurrences of the word “bee”** in the Old Testament, mostly alluding to the bee as a swarming insect:

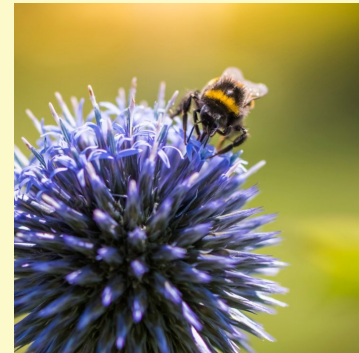
Deuteronomy 1:44 | Judges 14:7-9 and 8 | Psalm 118:12 | and Isaiah 7:18.

Although the word “bee” does not occur in the New Testament, its product does: honey. You will recall the food of John the Baptist—**locusts and wild honey**. Another John, the Apostle, was told to eat the prophetic scroll in the Book of Revelation, which tasted “sweet as honey” in his mouth, though it was bitter in his stomach (Revelation 10:9-10).



I counted **56 other references to honey** in the Old Testament, especially in describing the Promised Land as “a land flowing with milk and honey.”

The Books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, as well as many of the prophets are full of “**honey**” as a **promise**, both literal and metaphorical, of the good things the Lord has in store for those who love Him and follow His commands.



Bee Virtues

You probably won't be surprised, then, to know that the ancient Christian Church picked up the biblical admiration for bees and turned the little creature into **an exemplar of virtue** for all her children to emulate (minus the sting, of course.)

In Christianity, **the bee symbolizes a number of virtues** that are both human as well as specifically Christian:

- **Industriousness and zeal:** Given their single-minded pollination activity, this virtue needs no explanation! The bee is an example of one who carries out a task with untiring vigilance and fervor.
- **Diligence and order:** Bees are always about the work of building the hive so is an example of the person who sets his mind to working a plan that will be productive of something useful for others.
- **Beneficence:** St. Francis de Sales saw the bee as a sort of angelic creature working with total respect for God's creation:



“The bee collects honey from flowers in such a way as to do the least damage or destruction to them, and he leaves them whole, undamaged and fresh, just as he found them.”

- **Loyalty and self-sacrifice:** Bees are loyal to a single queen and hive. They will even sacrifice their lives to defend her and the hive from any misguided creatures who come looking to steal her honey.
- **Community service and the common good:** The bees work together to build their incredible honeycomb structures. They work in an orderly, united, and peaceful fashion that is the envy of human communities and monastic orders, in particular. The work of bees was, in a way, considered “divine” or “holy” because it provides for the common good of a community.
- **Abundance:** In addition to honeybees and bumblebees, there are hundreds of species of bees including stingless bees, carpenter bees, sweat bees, mason bees, plasterer bees, squash bees, dwarf carpenter bees, leafcutter bees, burrowing bees, and digger bees, among others. [[Wikimedia](#)]



In the fifth century, St. Augustine believed that **the Church could be compared to a beehive** and called the converts to the Church at Easter "a new colony of bees."

The work, the harmony, the unity of the Christian community, and the joy they experience all reflect that little institution of nature.

But it was Pope Pius XII, who, in an address in November of 1948, seemed to perfectly summarize **the lesson of the bee** handed down to us by the Christian Tradition:

“In a word, if [men] learned to do by intelligence and wisdom what bees do by instinct—how much better the world would be.” So true!

An Interesting Side Note

If you travel to **the city of Rome**, you will likely see the bee symbol all over the place. It’s not that the Italians love the little insect more than any other culture. It’s rather that the bee was a symbol of a powerful Italian noble family called **the Barberinis**.

It just so happened that **Pope Urban VIII** was a Barberini who reigned (1623-44) during the final stages of building St. Peter’s Basilica. He commissioned the famous Baroque artist, **Gianlorenzo Bernini**, to create the canopy (baldacchio) over the high altar.

Fun Fact: He was also the pope who pilfered every ounce of bronze from the ancient Pantheon to get enough metal to build the **66-foot tall columns**. The Romans at the time had a saying: *“What the barbarians did not do, the Barberinis did!”*



Bernini's famous *baldacchino* over the high altar in St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.



He then proceeded to splash **his family’s emblem** all over the columns (bee with laurel

leaves) so that everyone would know that it was built by a Barberini.

They, of course, made no mention of the fact that their **original family insect was a horsefly**. Somehow, the horsefly miraculously transformed itself into a noble bee when one of their own became pope. Wonders never cease, right?



Aroma of Candles

I noted in [a recent post](#) that the yearly Easter Proclamation makes a **privileged mention** of the “mother bees” who produce the wax to make the Easter candle.

But it’s not just the magnificent Easter candle that they produce. Church candles have traditionally been made of 100% beeswax, which is considered the purest material for use in the Mass and that which burns the longest.

What I like about beeswax is that it has a **delicate but distinct sweet smell** that fills a religious environment with a subtle sense of the sacred wherever candles are burned.

You can sometimes walk into an old church and catch a *faint whiff of the beeswax fragrance* that pervades the air. The scent of incense is easy to identify but it takes a bit of attention to pick up the beeswax smell.

Yet, **once you know the aroma**, you tend to sniff for it every time you enter a church! Now let’s go from smells to sounds.

One-Minute Russian Masterpiece

Old timers will remember the radio show called *The Green Hornet* that opened and closed with the sound of a bee in flight. That’s because the episodes were playing “**The Flight of the Bumble Bee**” by the Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908).

He composed the short, dynamic violin piece as an interlude between scenes in his 1899 opera, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. It was so inconsequential to him that **he didn’t even give the piece its own title**.

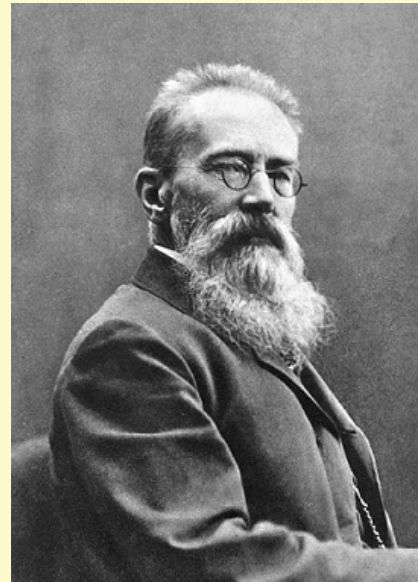
In the opera’s tale, Rimsky-Korsakov depicted a benevolent and magical queen bird who turns a Russian prince into a bee to escape his persecutors and **return to his father, the Tsar**, who did not know he was still alive.

One wave of the magic wand and the prince became a buzzing bee who flew off to inaugurate the next scene. He exited the stage to the tune that **later came to be known as** “The Flight of the Bumble Bee.”

As you can imagine, **the lively piece caught on instantly**. It is an absolutely brilliant masterwork of music. It’s also short, lasting a little over a minute.

Since then, it has been adapted to any number of other musical instruments...that is, if the musician has enough talent to **avoid getting “stung”** (pardon the pun) by the difficulty of the piece.

May these amazing performances fill your heart with the zeal of the bee and the sweet honey of Easter joy!



"The Flight of the Bumblebee" by Rimsky-Korsakov

Two Double Basses (1:05)

Violin and Orchestra (1:47)

The two men in this video are **not actually twins** but a clever splicing of the performance of one man playing two parts into a single video!

This performance is undoubtedly closest to the **composer's original intent**, and it's marvelous. Watch the conductor pull out a *fly swatter* at end!

Piano (1:42)

This one is **utterly incredible**, the kind of thing you have to see to believe. It will have you wondering how human hands can move so fast.

Flute (1:04)

9-year-old musical prodigy **Emma He** performs this amazing work, and don't miss the cute smile at the end.

Other Links for Diehard "Flight of the Bumblebee" Fans

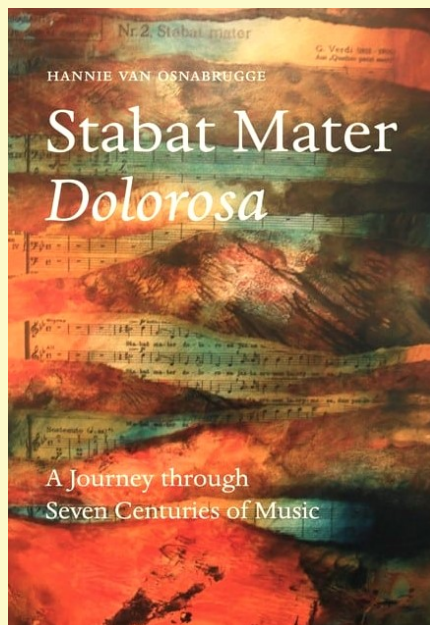
Xylophone (1:26)

Trumpet (1:57)

Brass Quintet (1:59)

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Wishing you and yours a blessed Divine Mercy Sunday.

Peter Darcy

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