

Sr. Margaret Dorgan's Weekly

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A BITE WITH A MESSAGE

It is black fly season in Maine. Our chosen state hosts about 40 species and we can expect these annual guests to stay through July. Their movement on the wing is usually from south to north and from coast to interior. The lands described in Scripture do not harbor these neighbors of ours, nibbling on our skin. If the Middle East did, you can be sure they would have been mentioned. And not favorably.

Black flies go for moving water. Anyone who walks near lakes and ponds, be especially prepared. When we are rejoicing in the springtime sunshine and later a soft summer breeze, it is easy to praise God. "Come let us sing joyfully to the Lord...Let us greet God with thanksgiving.... In God's hands are the depths of the earth...the tops of the mountains, the sea and the dry land which God's hands have formed" (Ps 95: 1-5). But then we look at tiny specks gathering around us. Bite. Bite. All of them circle but only the females bite. They are responsible for many tasks that keep the family going.

Human living often contains joyous moments that seem to be blighted by the presence of something we want to go away. We wish it had never arrived on the scene. As very young children, we complain mightily and cry out against what invades our territory and inflicts pain. As we grow older, our laments are somewhat tempered, but basically the child's early cry stays with us. We have an abundance of expressions, even curses, for what we do not like.

The Psalmist is full of praise and gratitude in lines of cheerful acclimation. But not always. The theme of "Why do things have to be this way?" resounds in many Scripture passages. It's the black fly mentality. "You are very good to us, God. But why add black flies to the setting?"

Complaining to God is a human habit that started with Adam, who shifted blame to "the woman You put here with me" (Gn 3:12) . Most of their descendants applaud the created universe but see many areas that could take improvement. We are told that original sin is responsible for all the negative aspects of our world.

The first European adventurers who came to North America gave black flies their obvious name, one in common usage by the late eighteenth century. Also known as buffalo gnats, they won't usually appear until the temperature reaches at least fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Unlike mosquitoes, these winged insects don't fly at night and seldom attack indoors. If trapped inside, they tend to crawl up a screen or window.

We can ponder the short life span of this small creature, so easily dispersed by a strong wind, and see the marvel of a living being—even as we whack it away. May we look at it as more than a bothersome nuisance, making us wear net hats while we add special ointment to our extremities?

The black fly could seem like a symbol of lots we don't appreciate in our ordinary existence. Something we'd like to brush off, but God allows it to be there for us to deal with. A human situation can be filled with many good things, but a provoking addition we strongly dislike absorbs our attention. We focus on what irritates us instead of celebrating the good things at hand. In fact, attention to our displeasure eats up our enjoyment. "Better is the patient spirit than the lofty spirit. Do not in spirit become quickly discontented"(Ecc 7:8,9).

Petty annoyances, unexpected delays, stretches of boredom, the unannounced arrival of a least favorite relative who says he's got only the next two hours to stay around. Everybody has a personal list of grievances that circle and bite like black flies. Can such small things that gnaw at my good disposition have any value one way or the other? The saints would say they do. Saints know how to make use of all that seems like a minus and turn it into a plus. They don't refuse to acknowledge what goes awry but they do find the mark of God in everything they encounter.

I sigh over what I cannot change, but let my sighing move into acceptance. I use the small grievances as a way to understand myself better, to know my limitations and where I need to recognize my own shortcomings. I try to expand my willingness to handle positively what bothers me. Is it easy to do? No, it's even harder than dealing with black flies. But to respond with anger is to make the bite go deeper.

Mother Aloysius of Concord Carmel gave this advice to a young nun, "Be generous in cooperating with God, whatever the moments hold of things pleasant or painful. It can be an unlooked-for service asked when your day is already planned, an experience when all seems to go wrong. Look upon such an occasion not as a trial but as an opportunity and embrace it" (Fragrance from Alabaster, p 35).

The small irksome happenings are an early training ground for the greater demands the future may ask. When you see a swarm of black flies moving your way, don't let their swirling make you too irate. After all, you have the blessing of being in Maine! Say to yourself, "**Return, O my soul, to your tranquillity. For the Lord has been good to you**" (Ps 116:7).

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