You might think what I dread the most in Venezuela would be malarial mosquitoes, piranha, poisonous snakes, killer bees, electric eels...all of which we do have here...or perhaps being robbed by the gangs in our barrios. No, none of the above. It’s ants, “wasmannia auropunctata” to be exact, better known as electric ants or little fire ants. With an average length about the thickness of a penny, the bigger ones the thickness of a quarter, you might not even notice them, and you wouldn’t think such tiny creatures could inflict much damage. Wrong. They are very aggressive when disturbed, swarm like an army on your skin, bite and then sting repeatedly with venom. They definitely earn their name from the burning pain inflicted relative to their size. Their sting forms a welt, then a blister, often with a swelling and reddening in the area that itches fiercely for over a week. I can attest to this from first-hand experience in not just one but several encounters.

Imagine stepping out of the shower, grabbing your towel, and beginning to dry off, only to discover that, since the day before, your towel had become home to a couple hundred little fire ants with mean dispositions. After a couple such occurrences, I now drape my towel on a clothes hanger suspended by a wire from the ceiling. Whenever I had food or sugary drink in my room, they would appear in single file formation and then spread out to reconnoiter my desktop. I heard that aspartame artificial sweetener might kill or deter them. Most studies on the internet suggested that not to be true, but after I set out little piles of artificial sweetener on my window ledge where they were coming in, I now only get an occasional visitor to my room.

One of my favorite hiking and biking routes takes me over the Angosturita Bridge, affording me a great view of the confluence of the Caroni River with the Orinoco, ocean-going ships docked at the Ferrominera wharf, fishermen in their canoes dotting the expanse of waters, and verdant woods as far as the eye can see. The gutters and walkways of the bridge were a different picture, however, with accumulations of dirt several inches thick, weeds a couple feet high, and trash from one end of the bridge to the other. Not only was it an eyesore, but a danger as well. “Someone should clean this up,” I thought. Around the beginning of August, needing some project with which to occupy myself during this time of social distancing and no public Masses, I decided that someone was me. The roots of the weeds in the gutter were all intertwined, and I found it easiest to dislodge sections a couple feet long with my shovel and heft the large clumps over the bridge railing. It didn’t take long to learn that some of those clumps had been home to nests of little fire ants not at all happy with the disruption and change of location. They sent battalions charging up my legs and the shovel handle to my hands in protest and to punish me for destroying their home. I’ve gotten better at identifying the presence of a nest and taking precautions, but it’s a rare confrontation when they go down to the water below without inflicting some damage.

As I sit here writing this article, I know I shouldn’t scratch the itchy blisters and swelling on my arms and legs, but it sure feels good for a moment. It reminds me once again what a blessing it is to live in Minnesota where little fire ant colonies can’t survive the winter cold, and their mild-mannered distant cousins, pavement ants, so named for building their nests in sidewalk and driveway cracks, rarely sting people. They are not venomous, and even when they do sting, it is generally too weak to penetrate the skin.

Sometimes I wonder why God created fire ants, mosquitoes, flies and hundreds of other pests which it would not bother me were they to be included in the ranks of endangered or extinct species. I read that in Thailand and Papua New Guinea natives stick their hands into fire ant nests to harvest and eat them, savoring their flavor as we might a bowl of ice cream. Even in the midst of major food shortages in Venezuela a few years back, I’m not aware of anyone here eating ants to supplement their diet. The only justification for their existence that makes sense to me is as a reminder that we live in an imperfect world. We who are called to be in the world but not of the world have a perfect one to which we can look forward. If little red ant bites motivate me to live each day for that world to come, I guess they have a purpose after all.

**Points to ponder**

What insects “bug” you in and around your house? What do you do to get rid of them and protect yourself?

*The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.*