St. Valentine is associated with love and romance. He is also the patron saint of beekeepers. It’s unclear why. Maybe it’s the association of honey with happiness and affection, especially in the age before chocolate reached Europe. Or maybe it’s because of the “birds and the bees” as models for explaining sex to children. Whatever the reason, the honey bees and their wild cousins need his protection more than ever. Indeed, In 2021, the federal government began consideration of whether the American bumblebee, whose populations have dropped 90%, should be listed as endangered.

One problem bees face is pesticides. A 2021 article in the journal Science called neonicotinoids the most insidious of the pesticide threats. They disrupt learning and memory in bees, which are crucial to the insects’ capacity to forage for flowers. And at higher levels, they impair reproduction. EPA was very slow to respond to this problem. It was only six months ago that EPA got around to proposing regulations to limit the use of these pesticides.

At that same time, EPA made a formal finding that the pesticides jeopardize the survival or critical habitat of endangered bees. That finding brings into play the Endangered Species Act in addition to EPA’S general authority over pesticides.

In California, the courts took a wildly circuitous route to providing endangered species protection to bees. California’s endangered species law doesn’t cover insects, but an appeals court held that the definition of “fish” in the statute was so broad that it included bees. The reasoning was certainly unexpected, if not fishy, though people may differ about whether the outcome could be considered miraculous.

Who knows?? Could St. Valentine have played a role in nudging the judges toward this unlikely conclusion? Such theological questions are beyond the domain of this blog.

Regardless, let’s spare a few moments to think about the bees and their plight today. Valentine’s Day is not just a day about dating and romance. It’s also a day about the insects that play such a key role in pollinating plants, supporting both wildflowers and human agriculture. Keep that in mind when you give a card to your honey.