Thursday of 4th Week of Lent

POSSESIONS

"As a moth gnaws a garment, so doth envy consume a man." - Saint John Chrysostom

ST BENEDICT

St. Benedict struggled with envy in his early life. In the fifth century, the young Benedict was sent to Rome to finish his education with a nurse/housekeeper. There he started to struggle with wanting the possessions of others due to the influence of his classmates. The subject that dominated a young man's study then was rhetoric or the art of persuasive speaking. A successful speaker was not one who conveyed the truth but was the most convincing in getting the possessions they wanted. The power of the voice without foundation in the heart was the goal of the student's education. Benedict's classmates had much wealth and used it on possessions since they thought having certain possessions would bring them joy. Benedict's conversion came as he watched in horror as envy unraveled the lives and ethics of his friends. Afraid for his soul, Benedict gave up his possessions and eventually became a hermit in the mountains of Subiaco.

After years of prayer, word of his holiness brought nearby monks to ask for his leadership. He warned them he would make them leave their possessions, but they insisted and then tried to poison him when his warning proved true. The story goes, the monks attempted to poison Benedict's drink, but when he prayed a blessing over the cup it shattered. So Benedict was on his own again but not for long. The next set of followers were more sincere and he set up twelve monasteries in Subiaco where monks lived in separate communities of twelve. He left these monasteries abruptly when the envious attacks of another hermit made it impossible to continue the spiritual leadership he had taken on. But it was in Monte Cassino where he founded the monastery that became the roots of the Church's monastic system. Instead of founding small separate communities he gathered his disciples into one whole community. They made a commitment to leave behind any personal possessions and only share possessions in a communal sense.

The deadly sin of envy involves making possessions a false God. One becomes convinced that having a particular possession will cause them to become the person they want to be. A lot of modern advertising is designed to convince us that having certain clothing will make one beautiful or certain merchandise will make one strong. Our identity becomes wrapped up in what we feel we need to have rather than in gratitude for what we have been given. How have you desired to have certain possessions by becoming convinced that these possessions will make you who you desire to be?

For your prayer

St. Benedict would have prayed with Exodus 32:7-14. Use your imagination as you slowly read Exodus 32:7-14. Please reflect on how possession of the golden calf caused the Jews to forget who they were. Reflect on how your desire to have certain possessions might have caused you to forget who you really were and who your true God is.