Wednesday of 1st Week of Lent

EMPTY

"If you do not learn to deny yourself, you can make no progress in perfection." St. John of the Cross

ST MARK JI TIANXIANG

St. Mark Ji Tianxiang, was a Chinese layman who was murdered in 1900, along with dozens of other Catholics in his village, in the vicious persecution of Christians during the Boxer rebellion. He was an opium addict and was barred from receiving the sacraments for the last 30 years of his life. The reason St. Mark couldn't receive communion was his addiction was regarded as gravely sinful and scandalous. He prayed for deliverance from his addiction, but deliverance seemed to never come. Nevertheless he remained a believing Catholic. At his trial he was given a chance to renounce his faith, but he refused. It is said that he sang the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary as he was led to his execution.

We learn from St. Mark Ji Tianxiang that anybody can become a saint, even someone who was excluded from the sacraments due to the public scandal of their addiction. Drug abuse is sinful as is all addiction, but addiction is also a disease of the mind and body. Addicts are no longer excluded from the sacraments because they need the grace of the sacraments to fill the empty places of their lives. We can all self-medicate with sin in some way, the self-medication of drug addicts is gluttony. For the addict, their addiction becomes the false god they go to in overwhelming moments. In their pain, a drug addict can feel empty and will use drugs to escape or reduce their pain. The problem with this approach is only God can truly bring an end to our suffering. St. Mark was confident in the mercy of God as we all should be no matter our addiction. He must have felt empty in his futile struggles and perhaps had some bitterness too. But he persevered in his faith. I suspect that in his emptiness he met the suffering Christ.

St. Mark was prepared for his martyrdom because the reality was he had died many times over already. Every time we cry out to God to take some struggle from us we have an opportunity to die to it. Even Jesus cried out to God the Father asking that this cup of suffering be taken from him but he ended that cry with a desire to do God's will. St. Mark shared in the suffering of Christ and so became a sign of hope to all addicts. Countless addicts have heard St. Mark's story and believed they can be saints too. God brought a great glory out of St. Mark's sufferings. Do you believe that God can bring a grace out of the ways that you cry out to God in anguish in those empty moments?

For your prayer

St. Mark would have prayed with Jonah 3:1-10. Use your imagination as you slowly read Jonah 3:1-10. Please reflect on what you go to apart from God to medicate your emptiness. Now repent as the Ninevites did and trust that God will have mercy on you because God loves you.