Gluttony

Last week we talked about Lust, according to Dante the top of the mountain of the deadly sins. This week, we will go over the Deadly vice of Gluttony. The word glutton comes from the Latin gluttire, meaning to gulp down or swallow, and means over-indulgence and over-consumption of anything to the point of waste. Often we connect this sin with food, but the meaning is much more expansive and we can actually over-indulge in many areas. This sin is so deadly and difficult to deal with because it takes a good thing and makes it sinful. Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Serpent encouraging them to eat of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. He urges them to desire that which is just beyond what God has said is good for them.

Let's go with eating as our example to explain further. Food is not a bad thing. Eating is not wrong. It is how we approach it that can make it sinful. St. Thomas Aquinas gives us 6 ways in which we can commit sin: eating too soon, too expensively, too much, too eagerly, too daintily, and eating wildly.

Pope Gregory I, a doctor of the Church, goes into some of these in more detail.

1. Eating before the time of meals in order to satisfy the palate. In the scriptures, King Saul's son Jonathan helped himself to a little honey even though his father commanded no food to be taken before the evening. You and I could easily have this problem on fast days and during the 1 hour fast before mass.

2. Seeking delicacies and better quality of food to gratify the "vile sense of taste." When the Israelites were in the desert having just escaped slavery in Egypt, they complained, "Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers and the melons, and the leeks and the onions and the garlic." Their desire here was quite literally tempting them back into slavery. The sin isn't eating good tasting, healthy food, but the willingness to give their lives away in order to have it.

3. Exceeding the necessary quantity of food. You might remember that one of the sins of the people of Sodom was "fullness of bread." We all know what we need to eat to be healthy; let us try to stay in that range.

4. Taking food with too much eagerness, even when eating the proper amount, and even if the food is not luxurious. For example, Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup because he couldn't wait! The food had become more important to him than everything else.

I want to mention a very important point before we move on, because often we think of gluttony in the wrong way. We link it immediately with only food and then we consider that if our weight is under control that this one doesn't apply to us. First, gluttony is about much more than food. Second, most of the ways of committing gluttony we've just listed have nothing to do with weight. In fact, none of them do. A very thin person could easily be gluttonous in all of the ways we have mentioned; something to think about, because I worry that we often judge wrongly on this.

Let us take the example of food and apply it to all of the areas of our life. Are we over-indulging in anything? Pope Gregory says (Moral. xxx, 18) that “unless we first tame the enemy dwelling within us, namely our gluttonous appetite, we have not even stood up to engage in the spiritual combat.”

Think about that for a moment, if we cannot even tame an inward appetite, or desire, we will not begin to be able to combat Satan’s grip on the world around us or effectively deal with our other sins. Food, or any other thing, is not the problem, it is our inordinate, unreasonable desire. It causes us to lose control, thinking not about others, not about God, but only about fulfilling the desire. Gluttony can even lead to
mortal sin by causing us to turn away from God completely so that we can follow a different goal for life. This happens all the time. Gluttonous desire for wealth, power, fame, pleasure...these turn us away from the greatest good, which is achieving our destiny of living forever with God and they turn us toward these lesser, limited goods. We then twist what was good into something bad. That is how Satan works at us and this is how most of us fall into sinful habits. In order to combat this, let us ask God to increase in us the virtue of temperance, moderation in all things. Ask him, and he will help you to enjoy the good things of this life within proper reason. In this way we will live in perfect freedom, no longer chasing desires that cannot satisfy. In God alone we find our perfect happiness.