

Homily 11-8-15 (Widow's mite)

When I was in seminary I would sometimes receive cards thanking me for studying to be a priest. In the cards from time to time there would be money or a check. Once I received a card that was written by an elderly woman. Her handwriting was labored and spidery. But I had tears in my eyes when I saw the money that was in the card. It was seven dollars. It wasn't a round number like ten or five, but seven. It was a sign to me that she had carefully calculated the amount and had lovingly tucked it into the card. It was what she could afford. Of course, the parallel with the story of the widow's mite springs to mind. The quality of a gift isn't measured by value but by the intention of the person making the gift. And when it comes to heavenly things, that is to say, what God values: intention is what matters. It is a commonplace to say that God looks at the heart, not at the gift. This is true in spiritual matters as well as mere material matters.

In the confessional a good priest examines the intention behind the confession. Oftentimes we frail humans do something with the best of intentions but wind up doing unintended harm or hurting feelings. But what was the intent? That's what God is concerned with. It isn't within the realm of human power to calculate all the consequences of any given action. But it is possible to keep our intentions pure. But beware! We can easily fool other

people, or a priest and even ourselves, but isn't possible to fool God. We can wound and hurt people by speaking the truth and try to shield our culpability by smugly saying, 'Well, it was the truth.' But remember the old adage: 'The truth told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent'. So even the truth can be used in the service of evil. The most vicious gossip can be totally true.

When we wrestle with sin in our lives confusion can arise in a lot of ways but I will address two. First, there are things that make us feel guilty but aren't sinful. Secondly, there are things we don't feel guilty about but should because they are sinful. So, our consciences aren't perfect guides to our sinfulness. Consciences should always be guarded by awareness of intent. If the intent is good, there isn't sin. If the intent is evil, sin is present even if the result of the action is an unintended good. I know this sounds confusing, but it really isn't. Just keep focused on whether an action is intended as good or evil and the question of sinfulness will take care of itself. But always remember, you can kid Father Phil, you can even kid yourself, but you can't kid God

Children will often confuse intentionality. For example, I've had a child confess, "I accidentally hit my brother". Whoa! If it is an accident then it isn't a sin. But when I ask a few questions I can ascertain whether or not it was truly an accident or not. I find this little story charming, but this confusion can bleed over into adulthood. For example, I've had people confess that they

missed Mass. I always ask, 'Why did you miss Mass?' More often than not the reason they missed Mass absolves them of sin. They were taking care of a sick child or parent, or it was icy and dangerous for an elderly person to be out. If Mass is missed simply because the person was too lazy, or didn't want to bother or because they wanted to watch the Cowboys then yes there is a sin. But somehow I don't hear that people missed Mass to watch the Cowboys much anymore. I think people may use Mass as a reason to skip watching the Cowboys. By the way, that isn't a sin.

I suspect, but I don't know for certain, but I have the suspicion that part of the experience of Purgatory is working out these conflicts and confusions of the heart. The times when we tell ourselves we are doing good when deep, deep in our heart of hearts we know we are doing evil, that's the divide that keeps us from knowing God as He is. I think Purgatory is the process of not being able to kid ourselves any longer, to come face to face with the true intent of all our actions. Praying for the dead helps them with this progression and lessens the pain they experience. How this works, I don't know. But we are taught that it is so.

What we should strive for is what the Psalmist says in Psalm 51, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God'. Keep your intentions pure, and the rest will take care of itself.