

Don't believe everything you read on the Internet

Or in your email.

The email that arrived yesterday morning was very convincing. It seemed to come from one of the priests in the archdiocese and mentioned that he and another priest were in Spain for a conference, where they had been robbed of all their cash. It mentioned a very specific conference title. It pointed out that they still had their passports and had contacted the embassy, but needed help.

Hello

How are you doing, I and Rev. [name withheld], Pastor of [his actual parish], came over here to Spain for a program tagged FINDING GOD IN UNSETTLED TIMES: A CONFERENCE ON IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY. unfortunately, We were mugged at the park of the hotel where we stayed, all cash and credit card were stolen off us but luckily for us we still have our passports with us.

We've been to the Embassy and the Police here but they're not helping issues at all and our flight leaves in few hours from now but we're having problems settling the hotel bills and the hotel manager won't let us leave until we settle the bills Well I really need your financial assistance..Please Let me know if you can help us out? Am freaked out at the moment!!

Thanks

Fr. [name withheld].

Pastor.

I've seen this kind of phishing expedition before. In fact, by typing the words "email spoof robbed embassy" into Google, I found several examples, including one in which the second paragraph of the scam email was identical to the one in today's email. You can generally detect these phony by the bad punctuation and grammar.

Still, as a journalist, I check things out. It seemed suspicious, since the Ignatian Spirituality conference was genuine, but it was taking place in Maryland. But I wanted to know: Were the priests actually out of town, and in trouble? I left messages at both rectories, and on the cell phone of the one whose account had

apparently been hacked.

Within a few minutes, a couple other staffers asked me if I'd gotten the email from the priest (whose name is being withheld to protect his privacy, which has suffered enough). In fact, someone had hacked his email account, gotten a hold of his online address book and spammed his contacts in hopes of getting at least one gullible helper. This is how online phishing works.

When the secretary at one priest's parish called back, she said they had been getting all sorts of calls that day. She wondered why whoever did this didn't take the energy it took to send email spam and instead "go out and help somebody. They could have gone to Our Daily Bread for two hours," she noted, but instead, they made life difficult for two unsuspecting, hard-working priests. You could almost hear her sigh. When the priest from whom the email supposedly came called back later in the day, he sounded exasperated, but his infectious laugh was still present. Yes, he admitted, it was a very convincing email, and he had gotten a lot of calls about it. He didn't think most people would be fooled by it.

I pointed out that all it takes is a one or two well-intentioned people who want to help out their friends or a couple of good priests to respond. If they take the bait, then they'll become victims of the scam.

"The point is that all those who would have responded have gotten in touch with me today," the pastor said with a laugh.

Then he looked at the bright side: "Am I not lucky to have so many people to love me that much?"

Yes, he is. But we all also ought to learn a lesson.

Don't respond to email scams. If it seems fishy - or phishy - it probably is. Check it out, on Google or snopes.com (a great site for debunking Internet rumors and hoaxes).

And change your passwords often, especially on gmail and other such sites. In fact, I think I'll do that right now.