

Gone phishing - for mercy

By Christopher Guntz

If you're engaged in social media such as Facebook, daily invitations come across your news feed to play this game, take this quiz or share a story.

But lately memes - photos or topics that spread virally - have cropped up that seem harmless, but may be more nefarious.

One post asks you to create your "Star Wars" name based on the combination of the first few letters of your first and last names and then a mashup of the first few letters of your mother's maiden name and the city you were born. This yields names such as Steti Fejoh and Wiepe Saroc.

Another asks you to discern your "Positive Energy Name" by selecting an adjective based on your month of birth, a noun based on the day you were born and another noun based on the last digit of your birth year. So someone born Jan. 1 in any year ending in 1 would be Immortal Vitality Weaver and someone born Dec. 25 in any year ending in 0 (Jesus, for example) would be Magnificent Serenity Bird. Harmless fun, right?

What if these are just clever phishing scams? With the year digits, the "Positive Energy" phishers could deduce the decade based on other info in your profile (graduation dates, etc.). With that, they have your name and your birth date.

Combine that with the "Star Wars Name" meme, they could deduce your mother's maiden name and your birthplace, and a scammer would have your key information. We are all too willing to share very private info on social media and we think no harm will come of it. But in the meantime, we don't take the opportunity to share private info in the one place it can bring us peace and redemption - the confessional, in the sacrament of reconciliation (penance).

This "social media" platform puts our sins in the hands of a priest, who, acting in the person of Christ, is able to absolve us of sins.

Though we interact with others through social media, the sacramental interaction with the priest frees us from the burdens on our soul. We must open ourselves in a personal way to receive the Lord's mercy. Unlike social media posts that bounce around the internet forever, once we contritely confess our sins to the priest and receive absolution, the sins are gone. Bound by the seal of the confessional, the priest will never "share" these posts with others. Your information is secure.

Pope Francis is mindful of the need today for God's mercy, so much so that he has declared an extraordinary jubilee Holy Year of Mercy to begin in December.

"I frequently have thought about how the church can make more evident its mission

to be a witness of mercy,” the pope said March 13, marking the second anniversary of his pontificate by leading a Lenten penance service in St. Peter’s Basilica.

The Archdiocese of Baltimore and its parishes offer many opportunities to experience the wideness of God’s mercy. In addition to regular weekly confession times and reconciliation services, almost every parish in the archdiocese will open its doors March 27, 3-8 p.m., for “The Light is on for You,” an opportunity to receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

“Being touched by the tenderness of his hand,” people should not be afraid to approach a priest and confess their sins, Pope Francis said. In the confessional, one has “the certainty of being welcomed in the name of God and understood, despite our misery.”

It is far, far better to share private information in the context of confession than it is to share our foibles on social media. The light is on. Come in, and emulate the “positive energy” of someone born June 9, in a year ending in 8: Perfect Grace Seeker.

Gunty is CEO and associate publisher of the Catholic Review. To read more of his columns, [click here](#).