

# Question Corner: Substituting penitential practice?/Creating fake identity

**By Father Kenneth Doyle**

*Catholic News Service*

*Q. I have always observed the fast and abstinence rules during Lent, but this year I find myself in a weird situation. Last summer, I decided no longer to eat any animal products – a decision I made for my health.*

*So abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent is no longer a sacrifice for me. Is there something else that I should do instead? (Virginia Beach, Virginia)*

A. I am edified by your question; it shows that you have captured the spirit of Lent as a season of special penitence – with a particular focus on the Fridays, in order to unite ourselves with the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

In 1966, when the church was moving away from the age-old rule of Friday abstinence (except on the Fridays of Lent), the U.S. bishops noted that “the spirit of penance primarily suggests that we discipline ourselves in that which we enjoy most.”

Since, for you, abstinence from meat no longer represents a burden, you would do well to go beyond the specific regulations prescribed by law and adopt a discipline of your own choosing – perhaps by staying away from alcoholic beverages on Lenten Fridays or cutting back generally on food consumption during those days.

Or how about – if your work situation allows it – simply taking five minutes at 3:00 in the afternoon on Lenten Fridays to speak with Jesus quietly and thank him for his sacrifice?

*Q. I apologize for the length of this question, but I want you to understand the complete context. I am a 21-year-old male from Africa. About a year ago I joined an online freelancing site and created my profile, in an attempt to develop business.*

*It was not successful at all, and I began to suspect the reason was that I am from a Third-World country. So I created a fake profile that said that I was from Canada, and I used someone else’s picture. No sooner had I done this than the work started flowing in. I deliver good-quality work and my clients have been nothing but satisfied.*

*(In fact, I now have three long-term clients that I work with every week.) I know that I’m not scamming them, but the issue is that they don’t know my real identity. So my*

*question is this: Am I committing a mortal sin?*

*Would it help if I were to tithe these earnings, or would that be an insult to God? I am conflicted - I am getting the job done, and it's not as though I were lying on a dating site and playing with someone's feelings. Please advise. (Africa)*

A. Believe me, I sympathize with your plight - especially since a cultural bias seems to have created it. I would almost like to be able to condone your fabrication, but I just can't do that. Truth is sacred, and the whole human enterprise hangs on our ability to trust in the word of another.

I do think that, in very rare cases, untruthfulness can be justified - for example, when a landlord shielding a Jewish family during the Nazi era tells a Gestapo interrogator at the door, "There are no Jews here."

But your own action in creating a false identity would not seem to match that situation. I don't believe that what you have done constitutes a mortal sin, given the circumstances, but I would feel much more comfortable - and you probably would, too - if you could return to the path of truth.

Here is my suggestion: Why not create a new profile, revealing your true identity and noting your recent successes with the three long-term clients? Then, why not level with those three clients: Tell them who you are, why you shielded your identity at first and the discomfort you feel in having been untruthful? If, as you say, they are already well-satisfied with your work, they may retain you.

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