

# 'Phishy' scam targets Catholics across Canada

A recent email and text message scam is devastating pastors and cheating B.C. churchgoers out of thousands of dollars.

This summer, Catholics across the province have received electronic messages asking for money transfers or gift cards from someone posing as their local priest. The request is always urgent, always by email or text, and always fake.

"It was harrowing," said Father Patrick Tepoorten, the pastor of Church of the Assumption in Powell River. Within one day, he received 10 messages from parishioners trying to verify if he'd just asked them for money. He has no way of knowing how many others sent money to an imposter before they realized it was a scam.

"It's devastating because it's your own integrity on the line," he said. Priests in the Archdiocese of Vancouver do not ask for money over email or text message – it's against several policies – but whoever is behind these scams is preying on people who trust their pastors, he said.

The scam is not only targeting his community, consisting mostly of seniors, but across B.C., affecting priests throughout the Dioceses of Victoria and Nelson.

"Most of the priests I know have been attacked," said Father Tepoorten.

Some of the phony email addresses have been generic enough to be suspect – such as "parishpastor" followed by a random number – but others, like at St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Richmond, have included the pastor's real name.

The deceptive emails and texts follow a similar pattern. They start out with a message like "I need a favour from you, respond as soon as you get this," signed with the pastor's name. When a person responds, the scammer replies that he is too busy to call, but to please buy several hundred dollars' worth of gift cards for an emergency (usually, for someone who is sick in hospital, or some variation on this). If someone sends the funds, the "pastor" will respond asking for more.

Individuals, who receive messages like "God bless you for what you are doing," have been tricked out of \$300 to \$1,500.

About three months ago, Julia\* received a text message from an unfamiliar number personally addressed to her and signed with her pastor's name. She believed the message was legitimate and sent \$1,500 in gift cards for what she believed was a good cause before she caught on to the scam.

"I felt really violated," she said. An active member of her B.C. parish, she believes someone lifted her name and phone number from a weekly bulletin and used it to trick her into spending the money.

"I heard of Facebook and messenger scams, but because it was through text, I didn't clue in," she said. "People believe their priests. They don't want to be bad people for not helping out a priest."

Julia approached her local RCMP and told all of her friends about the fraudulent messages, saying while she was embarrassed about the mistake, she didn't want anyone else to be a victim. "Always confirm when someone asks for money. Call them. That would be the most secure way of doing it. Hear their voice and know who you are talking to."

"So sad that people are preying on the good nature of parishioners to extort funds in this way."

–Neil McCarthy

The issue affects parishes across the country. Communications directors in Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto told The B.C. Catholic scammers have repeatedly targeted their people, too.

"It happened last year, and again in the last few weeks," said the Archdiocese of Toronto's Neil McCarthy. "So sad that people are preying on the good nature of parishioners to extort funds in this way."

Meanwhile in Edmonton, Lorraine Turchansky said she received reports of nine parishes and one college who were targeted by the scam, though there could be more. "I suspect there may be more victims we have not heard about, as they may be embarrassed," she said.

She and others suspect whoever is behind the fraud is taking names and numbers from parish bulletins (which are available to the public) and not hacking directly into email or phone contacts of priests. Still, Father Tepoorten is changing the passwords and privacy settings on his online accounts just in case.

Father Joseph Le, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, confirmed no priest in the Lower Mainland should be asking for money via email or text message.

According to local policies, clergy "must not solicit in any way, directly or indirectly, by word or action, any gift, bequest, loan, or endowment for his personal benefit from a person with whom he has, or has had, a pastoral relationship," without permission from the archbishop.

If people want to donate money to the parish, "they can give to the parish

directly in their Sunday collection or to Project Advance,” Father Le said. “Priests are not allowed to solicit money from people.”

The Archdiocese of Vancouver released a statement to all priests and parish staff saying anyone receiving suspicious requests should ask the sender about them in a phone call or in person and report any fraud to the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre. The Archdioceses of Edmonton and Toronto have also issued warnings to their clergy and parishes.

There is some evidence of a similar scam happening in the United States.

In hindsight, Julia said, she should have seen the signs: the unknown number, the grammatical errors, the odd request to urgently purchase gift cards. She received another text message from someone posing as her pastor a few weeks ago. This time, she knew what to do. She ignored it.

\*The victim’s name has been changed for privacy reasons.

(The BC Catholic)