

How do you recognize a phony?

On Mardi Gras day, the phone calls began to pour in as people began enquiring about times of ashes for Ash Wednesday. Being nice to the staff, I gave them the day off. The answering machine took care of the calls.

Later in the afternoon, I checked the messages. Lauren had called from the bank. She asked me to drop by the bank as there was some issue with our recently deposited weekend collection. She mentioned what it was and asked that I call her.

I stopped by the bank only to discover that someone had put a counterfeit one dollar bill in our weekend collection. It seems that the bank dollar counting machine discovered the fake dollar bill as it was counting the rest of the dollar bills.

The staff at the bank wondered why someone would go to so much trouble to counterfeit a one dollar bill. Why not try one's hand at a twenty or a hundred dollar bill rather than a one dollar one?

We mused as to how long that counterfeit dollar bill might be in circulation; the many places it had been and the many hands it had passed through. Now, it had come to the end of its journey of circulation.

I initialed the fake bill and dated it. Lauren put it in its plastic envelope and indicated it was being sent to Washington to be checked out.

The incident reminded me of how stores use that special deciphering pen to check the authenticity of a twenty or a hundred dollar bill.

On Ash Wednesday, the British Sky News had a live feed of Vice President Biden waiting to introduce the President at a news conference. The female reporter noticed that the Vice President had a black spot on his forehead and was trying to ascertain what might have caused it. She suggested that, seeing he was at the Winter Olympics, he might have fallen while skiing there. She played out other scenarios as well. Finally, it dawned on her that the black spot on the Vice President's forehead was ashes. Then, she admitted that she was a terribly dumb and ignorant Catholic.

Some of my most amusing encounters happen at Christmas Masses. It is not unusual for total strangers, decked out in their finest attire, come into church, stop to greet me with a very definite handshake or hug and say "Father, it is so good to see you. Have a wonderful Christmas." I look at them, trying not to be too surprised and wonder, "Who are these people? I have never seen them before. Why are they so friendly? They probably don't even know my name."

As we go through life, we would like to think that everyone is genuine and sincere but tried and true experience teaches us to have a healthy suspicion about people. If we are burned a few times by giving our trust carte blanche to some, we become a lot less trusting and realize that trust is not always a given; it has to be earned.

Jesus was an astute observer of people. He could read not only people's faces but also their hearts and minds. He gave the benefit of the doubt to those on the fringes of society and took away his blessing from those who were supposed to lead.

He didn't have much time for the Scribes and Pharisees. They were the leaders who were more interested in being noticed, recognized, respected and honored rather than leading by example. He also had some choice words for them at times, calling them a "Brood of Vipers. They wore their phylacteries on their breasts but their hearts were filled with empty gestures and promises.

I may have to do some research and find one of those special pens which will help me discover any counterfeit bills. But I will have to continue to wrestle with the personal question: "How do you recognize a phony?"