

Early morning private call.

Hats off to the inventor of the answering machine. It sure saves a lot of energy and hassle especially in parishes at certain times of the year. It is a Godsend for times of weekend Masses, Christmas and Easter Schedules and most especially, times for ashes on Ash Wednesday.

Our sophisticated phone and answering machine in the parish offices allows a caller to leave a voice mail message for any one of the staff members. It also allows a caller to press a certain number and get the times of weekend Masses. It also gives the caller an emergency phone number to call if there is an emergency. Often people's interpretation of "emergency" is very arbitrary. It is comforting to be working at one's desk on a weekend and have one's reliable answering phone machine spit out the times of Masses.

Some months ago, someone called at 4:30a.m. on Sunday morning. The answering machine picked it up and answered it. Presuming it may be someone who was at one of the local casinos, I didn't pay too much attention to it.

Later that morning, after Communion as I welcomed the visitors, I mentioned that the person who called that morning at 4:30 a.m. was probably not at Mass. Suddenly a hand went up toward the front of church and a middle-aged women spoke out: "I am the guilty one. I'm the one who called." We all laughed.

Last Sunday morning at 4:15 a.m. the phone rang. I glanced over to discover that the number was an out of town number and the person was trying to find out the times of Masses. A few moments later, the phone rang again. It was the same number. I concluded that the person didn't understand the message on the machine and was calling back to clarify. It happened a third time as well.

On Monday morning at 4:15, the phone rang again. I glanced at the number. It looked familiar to the calls the day before around the same time. It also said "Private Number" The answering machine picked it up and answered it. A minute later, the phone rang again. It was the same number. Another minute later, another phone call from the same number. In fact, within a five minute period, the same "Private Number" called five times.

Now, my curiosity had peaked. I had to try and find out who was calling at that ungodly hour and why they were so persistent. I did an area code search and discovered the area code was Arlington, Virginia. I had to try and probe some more. I typed in the actual phone number and discovered it was a land line. If I paid a few dollars to a special search company, they would help me discover the culprit. I declined.

My conclusion is that this particular phone number is a fax phone number that is part of a faxing system that spews out faxes to church entities about special offers and deals. Why they do it at such an ungodly hour is probably because the phone rates are much cheaper then. It doesn't matter what time zone the person lives in who is receiving the fax.

A little more detective work concludes that this company has our original fax number which was the same as our phone number. Now that we have a new fax number, their faxing machine is confused. I am glad that they are confused because I have no intention of presenting them with our new fax number even though the 4:15 a.m. calls may still come on weekend.

Lent is fast approaching and parish answering machines will be tested to their limits. People will be calling and asking "What time is ashes?" Bereft of human contact, they will have to be satisfied with talking to a machine to discover when to come and get their foreheads smudged with ashes.

If there is a phone call at 4:15 a.m. on Ash Wednesday morning from (703) 562-9032, I can bet they are not calling to find out the times of ashes. Instead they may be calling to see if we need to purchase a fresh supply of ashes for Ash Wednesday.