

Is it for real?

The FedEx driver brought the package a few days before Christmas. The FedEx box was rather large and rectangular. The box was addressed to me. I glanced at sender's name. The address was in Laurel, Mississippi. Immediately, I went through the rolodex of names in my head, wondering if I connect with the sender. A few minutes later, I made the right connection. I had known the sender when I was stationed in Hattiesburg more than ten years ago. Before Hurricane Katrina, he arrived at my present rectory with a gift for me. It was a Greek icon. Meticulously, he explained its history, meaning and background. I thanked him for the gift. Some time later, Katrina came along and relieved me of my icon.

On opening the box, I was confronted with several layers of bubble wrap that was taped securely on all sides. As I unraveled the wrap, I found the gem. It was a painting by a famous artist. The painting was titled, "The Young Virgin," a portrait of a young Virgin Mary.

Digging further into the box, I found a large vanilla envelope. On opening it, I discovered that the painting was bought by the sender's mother in San Francisco in 1987 for \$1,430 dollars. The sender indicated that the painting was now appraised for ten times the purchase price. He asked that I display it in his mother's memory or he gave me permission to sell it if I so wished.

I read the rest of the information that was included with the painting. Having reflected some more on the gift, I decided to do some detective work.

I googled the name of the sender and had some eye-opening encounters with what I found. The first surprise was an article from "The New York Times" art section, dated January 11, 2011. It stated that the sender "is one of the most prolific forgers American museums have encountered in years. But he does not seem to be in it for the money, but for a kind of satisfaction at seeing his works accepted as authentic. He takes nothing in return for them." The writer mentions how the forger visited the museum director at Hilliard University, in Lafayette, LA to present a painting of American Impressionist, Charles C. Curran to donate. He introduced himself as Fr. Arthur Scott, a Jesuit priest, clad in clerical attire.

The next article about the forger appeared in "The Financial Times" in January 2011. The author of the article discovered that the forger had an IQ of 150 but didn't have a lot of common sense. It is because of his intelligence that he is the way he is. He's a brilliant artist. His mother told me that he's got paintings in the White House."

He told the newspaper's author, who finally tracked down the forger, that he dresses as a Jesuit priest because he had been taught by them in London. He said, "I've helped out a lot of people. They come up to me at airports and tell me of their problems. There's not much to being a priest. Some comforting words, that sort of thing. And a blessing."

On parting with the author, the forger said, "Let me give you a blessing. Pax Vobiscum."i

So, now what do I do? Do I hold onto my "valuable" forgery or confine it to a closet some place? What do I say to people who drop by and admire the beautiful "Young Virgin" and say, "Wow! That is beautiful. Who gave you that? Do I bother to tell them of my research and disappoint them and hear they say, "But it is still beautiful?"

P.T. Barnum once said that "there is a sucker born every minute." Maybe some museums and art galleries have been suckered by a classic forger. Maybe some people enjoy having a "fake" masterpiece that becomes a conversation piece and a status symbol. Maybe there is a lot of wisdom in what Abraham Wisdom said, "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." After all, the "writing on the wall" may be a forgery and the canvas may lie, but so often we want to believe that something is true or real, just in case we may appear stupid and humiliated.