Blog



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For the past few years, the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, have been the victim of an international scam targeting religious congregations.

The scam usually begins with an email. The sender claims to be Benedictine Sr. Mary Elizabeth Schweiger, prioress of the Benedictine Sisters in the United States. It sounds quite impressive but it is not true. This level of centralization simply does not exist in American Benedictine life. Benedictine monasteries are autonomous. Each monastery has its own prioress and its own governance. That is usually the first sign that something is off.

Still, the emails can look convincing.

They include a letterhead that resembles our own, though usually with small mistakes in formatting, spelling or grammar. It reminds me of AI-generated images. At first glance they look real, but the longer you look, the more things you find. There is always an extra finger, a distorted shadow or some small detail that gives them away.

The letters explain that generous donors have entrusted our community with a large sum of money that we would like to share with other congregations and ministries serving people in poverty. The supposed donation comes with almost no restrictions. The only request is a report explaining how the funds were used.

Then comes the catch.

The sisters are asked to send their banking information so the transfer can be completed. The email promises that proof of the transfer will follow.

The letters include seals and signatures that appear authentic. None of them are.

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These emails have reached communities in Mexico, Spain, Poland, the Philippines, Hungary, Haiti, Brazil, France, Italy, Australia and China, among others.

In the best cases, communities become suspicious. They search for our monastery online and contact us through our website. Others call directly to ask whether it is true that we are distributing large donations to support ministries in poor communities. When our prioress tells them it is a scam, there is usually relief on the

other end of the line. Most already suspected something was wrong.

Other conversations are more difficult.

Some communities contact us asking why the money never arrived. They wonder whether they submitted incorrect banking information or whether there was a delay with the transfer. Those are the calls that worry me. Our community has never offered any money, and we do not know what consequences these scams may have had for the congregations who have fallen victim.

Over the years, we have received hundreds of calls and inquiries.

Apparently, the scammers are quite convincing. What unsettles me the most is not the sophistication of the scam itself, but the way it exploits the goodness of religious men and women. The scammers understand that religious life is built on trust. Communities often share resources and respond to urgent needs to support ministries far beyond their own communities.

When our prioress responds to calls and emails from communities trying to verify whether these offers are real, again and again we learn that across countries, languages and cultures, women and men religious continue to expect one another's goodwill. That expectation is not naïve, though. It has been shaped by years of working together in education, healthcare and service to people who are poor or vulnerable.

That trust, however, can be taken advantage of by those who recognize how it works.

Still, I do not think the answer is to stop trusting one another. Religious life is based on trust and mutual support. This ongoing situation has made us more attentive to how we communicate with the public. In our community, we are fortunate to have people dedicated to communications, public relations and network security who help us review and verify the many messages and requests that come through our website each day.

At the same time, we realized that internal vigilance alone was not enough. So, in order to protect our community and others from further fraud, our prioress reported the scam to the local police department and later filed a report with the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center.

We were told there was little they could do since our community was not the one financially defrauded, even though our name, letterhead and identity were being used to target other congregations. The FBI explained that communities who had actually lost money or shared banking information would need to file reports themselves because the scam operates internationally.

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As Benedictines, we speak often about hospitality and trust. We answer emails, welcome guests and try to remain attentive to the needs of others. Perhaps that is why these scams feel especially invasive. They not only exploit our legal identity but also the monastic values we consider sacred.

Yet I find myself reflecting on the fact that the scams only work because generosity among religious communities is still believable. A monastery in Atchison, Kansas, supporting ministries halfway across the world does not sound impossible because women religious have been doing exactly that for generations.

Perhaps that is also why discernment matters so much now. If your community receives a message promising financial support, it is worth taking the time to verify the request directly with the congregation involved.

In our own experience, reporting the scam to local authorities and to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center has been an important step in addressing what we are seeing. I would encourage any community that encounters a similar message to report it as well. Protecting one another from fraud has become one more way religious communities care for one another across borders.