

Con artists at the door: The ministry of being lied to

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My first ten years in ministry were spent in Chicago in a church office above a soup kitchen. The kitchen's clients regularly invaded my office. First I'd hear heavy footfalls in the hallway, sometimes a sharp, offensive odor, and then an inquisitive "Father?" I am not a priest, but by this point it was too late to stop the drop-in. Head and shoulders were appearing in the doorway.

Then came a wild lie, usually followed by a crazy story. "I'm on the run from the Colombian mob. I just ditched a car full of cocaine on the side of Addison Street and I need \$200 to get a bus ticket out of town. Otherwise they'll come after my family. They could be on their way *here* right now." Or "I found a job as a line cook, but I can't begin until I've got a pair of rubber-soled shoes, and they cost \$60." Or the quick and dirty version: "I'm down to my last colostomy bag!"

At first I was bowled over by such lies. Then I got wise, or so I thought. I became able to differentiate between a junkie's obvious dissembling and the artistry of a more nuanced con. I tried to see each lie as a sort of performance piece, and sometimes I handed over bills as rewards for stories well told. But more often the stories weren't well told. Eventually I began interrupting each visitor by sliding a 20-dollar bill straight across the surface of my desk. The money felt like a sort of toll, a tax I paid to return to the sermon or the church newsletter or the e-mails that were

piling up even as the story was being spun. As the old saying goes, "Please get out of my office so I can get back to ministry."

I cared, but I also took each lie as an affront to my pride. First of all, I could see right through them. More important, I knew the church could help. But how could we ever meet the needs behind the lie if the liar refused to just come clean? So I let the entire exchange become transactional. "You need money and I need you to get out of my office. Here's a twenty."

But not everyone agreed to my price. Toward the end of this time a man showed up with his two young children in tow. He told me that he'd lost his job nine months earlier and his home was about to be foreclosed upon. He needed to earn \$400 or else they'd all be out on the street. He pointed toward his kids when he said this. The good news was that he had found a job working construction. He could start the very next day, make \$400 by the end of the month and thereby save his home. The bad news was that he couldn't begin until he had a pair of steel-toed boots. And they cost \$105. I held out a twenty. He told me that wasn't enough. The boots cost \$105. He had \$25. He showed the money to me, crumpled bills pulled from his pocket. He just needed \$80 more. Eighty dollars and he could work again. Eighty dollars and his house would be saved. Eighty dollars and his wife and kids could breathe easy again.

I bristled, tired of being lied to, and asked if there were any other way I could help. But he was too deep into his story to back down. So we sat there in a standoff, my pride versus his lie and nothing in between them—certainly not the presence of God. The silence in my office intensified. His children squirmed. No one said anything, until finally he grabbed the money from my desk and marched straight out.

These days I work in the wealthy suburbs of another heavily Catholic city. My church has two secretaries who stand between my office and the front entrance. Unscheduled visits are rare. But every few months a needy, sneaky visitor will sidestep these guardians to knock upon my door. "Father?" And it starts all over again.

The first time this happened I felt my old irritation rear up. Yet ensconced as I am in a plush and well-protected office, I know that I am cut off from Christ. Indeed, I have never felt so close to him as I did during those years I was lied to almost every day—which is not to say that Christ was present in those exchanges. Far from it. Initially I thought I saw something holy in the expectation those visitors brought into

my office. They were poor and they knew the church should help. But I was quickly disabused of such sentimentality. They were liars and they knew the church could be manipulated.

Yet there was something sacred there as well. Or maybe it was almost there, but also absolutely absent. Simone Weil wrote that "grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it." I have not felt a void as stark or wide as that between a desperate person willfully, wildly bending the truth for cash and a church that sits on money. We are all lying when this happens. Mistruth abounds, and Christ's absence is laid bare so plainly that it almost becomes its own living thing. Almost. But in reality he lives outside the pastor's office, hovering, pulsing just beyond the boundaries of such conversations. Waiting to step into the void our lies create and magnify even as they bar his entrance.

All of this is to say that my latest response is simply to let the lies unfold. I sit on my wallet, leaving the twenties untouched. My visitor talks at length about his need for steel-toed boots, for rubber-soled shoes or a bus ticket out of town, and together we create a space that cries out for Christ, a void that names both his utter absence and his very nearness.