

S[ai]nts: The Use of GPTs for Spiritual Conversation in Catholicism

by

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INTRODUCTION

“You will look upon us from the heights of heaven, will you not?”

“No, I shall come down.”

– St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Little Way: Counsels & Reminiscences of the Little Flower*

Every year my family went on a road trip from North Carolina to Louisiana to visit my mother’s extended family. And at the start of every single drive as we turned out of our neighborhood, my sister would call from the back of the car, “St. Christopher…” and the rest of us shouted “pray for us!” On this same drive we would eventually get bored of playing Yahtzee on the floor of the minivan and inevitably pull out our portable DVD player. There was always frustration about how we would all be able to watch, who remembered to bring the splitter for the headphones, and – of course – what movie to pick. As someone who grew up in a Catholic family in the early 2000s, the presence of both saints and technology existed side by side in daily life. Whether it was my mom saying the Rosary in the background while I watched *Black Beauty* in our Toyota, or sneaking out of Mass on Sunday to go play Temple Run on my iPod Touch in the bathroom, there was a constant back and forth between religion and technology that I navigated with ease. However, any integration or overlap between the two was rare. With the advent of AI, though, I believe these two elements – religion and technology – may have a complementary relationship. Using OpenAI’s Assistant feature, I have created three different chatbots, each taking the personality of a different saint, to interact with participants from a variety of backgrounds.

In each chapter of this paper I seek to explain a different element of this project. The first section will provide a background on saints in both the Roman Catholic Church and a variety of

Protestant denominations represented in my data. I then lay out a brief background on each of the three saints I chose for the project – Francis of Assisi, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Thomas More – as well as a brief explanation of my reasoning for the decision. I close with a brief explanation of why I chose saintly figures for my conversation partners as opposed to a more well known figure like Jesus or Mary, or even God. In chapter 2, I will explain chatbots – how my understanding of them has changed, what they actually are, and various ways I have seen them be implemented in wider society as well as my academic and personal experiences. Chapter Three synthesizes these points and explains my development process of the s[ai]nts, including challenges, technical workings, and recruitment strategies. Finally, in the fourth chapter I explain my data collection, results, analyses, and conclusions.

It is my hope that this experiment allows a glimpse into just how much of an impact AI could have on religious communities and how responsive they may be to the incorporation of AI into worship practices. Saint veneration and intercession prayer are personal practices for many Catholic parishioners, and many Protestant Christians recognize saintly figures even without veneration; I believe this project may provide more insight and understanding into how saints intimately function in believers' lives. I hope to gather responses from participants, recognize patterns regarding group members' interactions and responses, and receive feedback on how to improve the chatbots for future experiments. I believe that if users find value in these interactions, this form of AI could be an avenue for church communities' recruitment of younger parishioners and encouragement of forward progression for the Church.¹ The reality is that the Catholic Church is losing young Americans, and the Church in general is losing members. Those

¹ Throughout this paper, I use capital “Church” to refer to the wider community of Christians and refer to specific denominations by their full title when necessary (ex. Roman Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, etc.).

who are raised in the Church or join it as young adults are increasingly more conservative;² more and more religious “nones” are revealing themselves in American society.³ Though I did receive some pushback against using these as tools for spiritual growth, it's possible that using chatbots as a resource for people to learn about saints and understand their importance in the Church could normalize the use of AI, bring the Church into the modern age, and bring in – or bring back – more progressive individuals. Perhaps the possibility for spiritual growth should only be addressed after the implementation of AI for educational purposes; on the other hand, perhaps the rise in conservatism in the Catholic Church and American culture means young Christians won't care for the AI saints no matter what the purpose is. Regardless, I believe studying the possible effects an intentional integration of religion and AI may have on individuals provides us with a better way to understand and explore the relationship between technology and religion.

² Tim Sullivan, “A step back in time': America's Catholic Church sees an immense shift toward the old ways”, Associated Press, last modified May 1, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/catholic-church-shift-orthodoxy-tradition-7638fa2013a593f8cb07483ffc8ed487>.

³ Gregory A. Smith et al., “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

CHAPTER ONE

An understanding of the role of saints in Christianity is essential before turning to the technological dimensions of this study. Though this project was initially designed for Catholic participants only, a number of other denominations participated; therefore, I will cover both Catholic and various Protestant denominations' relationships to saintly figures. I will then provide biographical and hagiographical backgrounds on the saints I decided to include in this research. Understanding the different relationships participants may have with saintly figures provides a helpful background for understanding the data analysis we will cover in Chapter Four. Similarly, understanding the saints I chose for the study and their patronages provides context for understanding conversations participants engaged in with each s[ai]nt.

Catholic Relationship to Saints

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁴ defines a saint as “a holy one,” or someone who leads a life in union with God and receives eternal life.⁵ The Church is then called the “communion of saints,” expressing a complete unity between Catholic believers on earth and the saints in heaven.⁶ In order to become a saint, there is a process of canonization: if someone dies a martyr for their faith or has lived a life of “heroic virtue” – granted they meet certain qualifications – they are subject to be canonized. There are specific titles provided to those in the process of canonization to delineate the individual’s current stage. When someone is being considered for sainthood, they are deemed a “Servant of God.” The candidate’s case eventually

⁴ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1994).

⁵ Church, 898.

⁶ Church, 871.

reaches the Pope, who determines whether or not the individual lived a heroically virtuous life.⁷ If he approves, the candidate is then titled “Venerable.” In order to be beatified and receive the title of “Blessed,” one miracle attributed to the candidate’s intercession must be determined through investigation by the Catholic Church. To achieve the title of “Saint,” a candidate must have a second verified miracle that occurred after the Blessed’s beatification. Though this is the formal process for a saint to be publicly venerated by the Universal Church, the pope may waive any of the requirements as well as the required five year waiting period typically required before a person can be considered eligible for candidacy.⁸ Additionally, this formal process was not entirely developed until the beginning of the tenth century. For the first 500 years of the Catholic Church, the *vox populi, vox Dei* (voice of the people, voice of God) determined which individuals were canonized, in part because of the martyrdom tradition established in the first 350 years of Christianity. Martyrs are not required to have a proven miracle due to their sacrificial act and are automatically subject to beatification as a result of their action. It was only in the sixth century and through the twelfth century that a local bishop was involved in the canonization process, and it was not until 993 that Pope John XV is documented as canonizing St. Ulric.⁹ There was a long break in the process’ development until Pope Sixtus V’s reorganization of the Roman Curia in 1588 which included the development of the Congregation for Sacred Rites, a group meant to assist him in reviewing cases for canonization. Another few centuries passed until the universal Code of Canon Law was established in 1917, which contained 145 canons of causes of canonization, the episcopal process (the local bishop

⁷ Heroic virtues include the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude.

⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Saints,” USCCB, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.usccb.org/offices/public-affairs/saints>.

⁹ Ibid.

collecting testimonies and verifying the person's reputation), and the apostolic process (the Congregation for Sacred Rites reviewing the evidence, investigating any miracles, and forwarding the case to the Pope). This process was slightly revised in 1983 and has remained consistent since then.¹⁰

Once canonized, saints are allotted certain privileges: they are included in rules against blasphemy,¹¹ honored in the liturgical calendar,¹² and shown veneration with Mary, the Apostles, and the martyrs, as practitioners oftentimes honor a relic from the saint's time on earth – a practice I will detail further at the end of this section.¹³ Saints are also believed to contribute to the treasury of merit, a spiritual reservoir of good works and prayers accumulated by Christ and the saints.¹⁴ This treasury is tied to the Church's practice of indulgences, which are meant to reduce the punishment for sins after death. Though indulgences are usually connected to Purgatory, it is important to note that the concept of Purgatory developed gradually over time. It isn't mentioned directly in the Bible and wasn't officially defined by the Catholic Church until the Councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439). According to Catholic teaching, Purgatory is a temporary state where souls are purified of venial (less serious) sins before entering heaven. Indulgences are seen as a way to shorten that process, drawing from the spiritual merit of the saints. While this is sometimes explained with metaphors like a "spiritual bank account," the Church views it more as an act of grace and shared support within the community of believers.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Church, 522.

¹² Church, 304.

¹³ Church, 902.

¹⁴ Church, 371.

¹⁵ Jane I. Smith, "Afterlife: An Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 128-135,

Saints are also extremely important when it comes to Catholic sacraments. In Baptism, parents pick a saint's name for their child to act as a model for life and guarantee saintly intercession for their child,¹⁶ a process reiterated in the sacrament of Confirmation. In some English speaking countries – most notably the United Kingdom, United States, Germany, and Poland – a patron saint is chosen by an adolescent undergoing Confirmation. This saint is supposed to be picked by the candidates themselves, acting as a direct role model in terms of personality, spiritual goals, and upheld virtues. While individuals can pray to any saint for intercession, their Confirmation saint is understood to be something of a “direct line” that individuals can call for help or guidance in times of need.¹⁷

Additionally the patron saint has a role in the Eucharist. For the larger community, the Eucharist brings practitioners into communion with the saints in heaven, creating a lasting sense of togetherness; and during Confession, practitioners are “strengthened by the community of saints.”¹⁸ We see this strengthening extending beyond individuals to communities as a whole, as churches are named after saints as an emblem of the community's role model and guiding force. This brings us to what is arguably the most unique function of saints in living members' lives: intercession. Because saints were at some point living on earth, they understand the human nature of sin and the desire to be in unity with God. Saints intentionally look out for people in a brotherly way; they wish to help people towards salvation, exemplified in this quote from St.

https://pub.deadnet.se/Books_and_manuals_on_various_stuff/Religion/Encyclopedia%20of%20Religion/Ed.%20L.Jones-Encyclopedia%20of%20Religion%2C%20vol.%201.%20%28Aaron-Attention%29-2004.pdf

¹⁶ Church, 522.

¹⁷ Parish of Our Lady Queen of Angels, *Choosing a Confirmation Saint Name*, August 2018, <https://www.olqoa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Choosing-a-confirmation-saint-name-.pdf>

¹⁸ Church, 369.

Thérèse of Lisieux: “I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth.”¹⁹ Saints provide comfort, guidance, and a model for how one should conduct themselves in order to be the best Catholic they can be.

The importance of relics in Catholicism is deeply tied to the idea of saints as liminal figures between the earthly and spiritual realms. On a very basic level, relics are thought to have some kind of divine power because they either are literally part of the saint (a bone or even an entire body) or were precious to the saint in their human life (clothing, rosary, etc.). As a physical object from a religious figure, relics are believed to have spiritual power that can provide protection, healing, authority for swearing oaths, or motive for spiritual pilgrimage. Primarily, though, they’re used as a physical representation of a saint’s presence. David Chidester describes the Catholic notion of saints as present within a church because they act as patrons and intercessors between the material and spiritual worlds.²⁰ A relic lying under the altar provides an extra level of connection to the patron saint of a church, allowing the community to feel protected and understood by someone who seems a bit more accessible than God.

In addition to relics providing “symbolic capital,”²¹ functioning as foundational elements for the expansion of European Christianity, and communicating status between Christian communities, relics reinforce not only the local living community’s worship but the dead community’s as well. Every Catholic church containing a relic under its altar – which should theoretically be every one – celebrates the feast days of the saint whose relic they possess. This celebration allows the local community to reaffirm its collective identity and values, while

¹⁹ Church, 249.

²⁰ David Chidester, “Objects,” in *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 200.

²¹ Chidester, 203.

recognizing the saint and esteemed or departed members of the community as ongoing participants in the worship of God. The existence of the physical remains of the saints in the world also exemplified the resurrection of the dead – the underlying ideal for all Christians, both dead and alive. Relics are also frequently thought of as miracle attractors: when they enter a community, the level of pilgrimage intensifies and the community is understood to be “healed” in some way. For example, when merchants of the southern Italian town of Bari moved the body of St. Nicholas from his place in Myra to a beautiful basilica they had constructed in Bari, the resulting success and wealth of the port city was credited to St. Nicholas – the patron saint of merchants.²²

Relics and saints act as a reminder that the dead – and God – are an active presence in practitioners’ lives. They can provide guidance, intercede, and bestow blessings. The importance of saints in Catholicism is embedded in daily practice through prayer, weekly church engagement, the sacraments, and the calendar of Feast Days. They are an essential part of Catholic worship, and the nature of their importance as beings available to living Christians is pivotal to this study.

Protestant Relationships to Saints

Other Christian denominations also recognize the saints, though in a variety of ways. All Christian groups recognize “the communion of saints” as the collective following of Christian believers, not limited only to the canonized saints. Among Protestant denominations, Episcopalians – an American offshoot of Anglicanism – retain one of the closest relationships to Catholic understandings of saints. Like Anglicans, they follow a similar liturgical calendar and venerate many of the same historic figures, honoring them with the title “Saint.” However, Episcopalians do not maintain a formal canonization process, and while they draw from Catholic

²² Ibid.

traditions, they reject the authority of both the Pope and, distinct from Anglicans, the Archbishop of Canterbury – reflecting the United States’ separation of church and state. Episcopalians and Anglicans believe saints should be venerated and treated with honor but do not have a process of canonization themselves; additionally, while they ascribe the title “Saint” to many historic Catholic saints, it is also used for a variety of modern figures believed to have exemplified the faith. One of the most notable examples would be Thurgood Marshall, whom the governing body of the Episcopal Church – the General Convention with the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops – deemed a part of the Lesser Feasts and Fasts calendar in 2018.²³ Though deemed a part of the calendar and recognized as a saintly figure, there is no intercessory role ascribed to these figures, nor a formal process of canonization with defined criteria.

Similarly, Lutherans use a calendar of saints combining modern and traditional as well as canonized and non-canonized people into a collection of Christians who “died in the faith” – for example, “Sojourner Truth (July 20)... can find a place on our saintly calendar alongside Saint Peter” without the formal process of canonization.²⁴ These figures are admired but lack intercessory function, and do not require authentication via verified miracles. Additionally, Methodists recognize some early Catholic saints like Matthew, Paul, and John as saints but do not have the canonization process, nor are the individuals expected to perform intercessory functions. Methodists more so focus on the “communion of saints” in a very general sense, as can be seen in this article from the United Methodist Church: “On All Saints' Day, many

²³ Mary Frances Schjonberg, “Convention makes Thurgood Marshall, Pauli Murray, Florence Li Tim-Oi permanent saints of the church,” *Episcopal News Service*, July 13, 2018, <https://episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/07/13/convention-makes-thurgood-marshall-pauli-murray-florence-li-tim-oi-permanent-saints-of-the-church/>.

²⁴ Tim Brown, “Mirrors and windows: Saints are for Lutherans, too,” *Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*, 2022, <https://lstc.edu/story/mirrors-and-windows-saints-are-for-lutherans-too/>.

churches read the names of their members who died in the past year.”²⁵ The root of this is found in one of the unifying features of Protestantism – ‘sola scriptura’ – which rejects the idea of Purgatory because of a lack of biblical foundation. Since doctrines like the intercession of saints and the existence of Purgatory are not explicitly grounded in the Bible, many Protestant traditions regard them as extra-biblical and therefore non-essential or even problematic. Instead, they emphasize a more direct relationship between the believer and God, without living or dead intermediaries.

Baptists and Presbyterians further emphasize the communion of saints rather than traditional canonized saints. For many Baptists, the term “saints” is used only in the very general term of “believer” rather than a hierarchical group people pray to and through. As quoted on Streetsville Baptist Church’s website, “We believe that prayer or worship directed toward any image of Christ or the ‘Saints’ breaks the 2nd Commandment and is therefore an act of idolatry...If a saint answered someone's prayer, then that saint would receive the gratitude and the glory. God does not share His glory with anyone.”²⁶ Presbyterians similarly do not recognize a hierarchy of saints, just the general “communion of saints” that Christians believe in as the collection of Christian believers, which people join after they pass away.²⁷ There is no intercession and no process of canonization. Non-denominational Christians function as a

²⁵ Ask the UMC, “Do United Methodists believe in saints?”, *The United Methodist Church*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-do-united-methodists-believe-in-saints>.

²⁶ “The Difference Between Catholics and Baptists”, *Streetsville Baptist Church*, last updated 2025, <https://www.streetsvillebaptist.ca/pages/the-difference-between-catholics-and-baptists#:~:text=We%20do%20not%20believe%20in,believers%20and%20then%20the%20Saints>.

²⁷ Rev. Kathleen Henrion, “‘So Great a Cloud of Witnesses;’ Hebrews 11:29–12:3,” *Presbydestrian: Presbyterianism on the Ground*, August 18, 2013, <https://presbydestrian.wordpress.com/tag/communion-of-saints/#:~:text=Though%20in%20Presbyterian%20tradition%20we,This%20can%20be%20rather%20confusing>.

general Protestant group but are typically rooted in Baptist origins, especially in North Carolina; therefore, they do not recognize a formal group of saints.

Overall, Catholics recognize a formal group of canonized individuals as well as the communion of saints. Both Episcopalians and Lutherans venerate canonized saints recognized prior to the split with the Catholic Church, as well as uncanonized figures they find meaningful, though not as intercessors. Methodists use the title “saint” for some early followers of Jesus but do not continue the tradition of canonization or emphasize saint veneration. Baptists, non-denominational Christians, and Presbyterians recognize the communion of saints as the general community of believers but do not believe in specific individuals holding any higher status than anyone else. While many Protestants do hold historical figures in high regard regarding both their social and theological influences – such as Martin Luther or John Wesley – these figures do not undergo a formal process of canonization, nor are they conceptualized as beings who would be able to intervene on the behalf of a living Christian. One misconception some Protestant denominations do have about Catholic saint veneration is that Catholics worship saints in the same way they worship God the Father or Jesus. This misconception is similarly applied to the veneration of Mary or prayers to relatives who passed; saint veneration in Catholicism is recognizing the role these individuals played in the history of the Church and how fervently they acted as servants of God. Whether it be due to this misconception or the general lack of emphasis on saints, there are no practices of veneration, relic preservation, or pilgrimage in Protestant denominations as compared to Catholicism.

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For this project, I picked three saints I believed would provide unique experiences for participants: St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and St. Thomas More. In the following

sections I will provide a brief history of each saint and explanation of their relevance to this project.

St. Francis of Assisi

Francis was born around the year 1182 in Assisi, Italy as Giovanni di Pietro de Bernardone. His father Pietro was fascinated with France and called him Francesco. Born the son of a cloth merchant, Francis was a wealthy young man and acted without much concern for the world. At the age of 20, he was taken captive in the neighboring town of Perugia following a military mis-adventure and lived in terrible conditions for about a year before his family provided the ransom necessary for his release. He spent the next few years concerned for his future and unsure of his role in the town of Assisi, living in a period of uncertainty before one day encountering a couple lepers. Rather than avoiding them, Francis is recorded as having approached the couple and embracing them; this event is recognized by hagiographers as one of the most pivotal turning points in Francis' early life. Sometime after this encounter, Francis decided to formally reject his earthly role as the successor to his father's cloth merchantry and worked for the chapel San Damiano in exchange for food and shelter. It was at this church where Francis is reported hearing "Rebuild my Church" from the crucifix – a message he took literally. Francis spent all his time physically rebuilding San Damiano, a decision his father Pietro strongly opposed. Pietro also took issue with his child's decision to give all their extra possessions to the poor and took Francis to the city magistrates for reimbursement. Frustrated with Francis' commitment to the Catholic Church, Pietro took this fight and took his fight to the Bishop Guido I of Assisi, where Francis is recorded as making his famous statement, "No longer do I call Pietro di Bernadone my father; but now I say: 'Our Father, who art in heaven.'"²⁸

²⁸ Michael Cusato, *Francis of Assisi: His Life, Vision and Companions*, (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2023), 29.

Francis' commitment to poverty and service slowly acquired a small group of followers as he continued his work in San Damiano and removed himself from his earthly life in Assisi. With this first small group of men, he developed the Early Rule, a short *propositum vitae* detailing the group's way of life. It explained their poverty as detachment not only from goods but from the corrupt financial system of their region, their relationship to work and desire to care for the marginalized, their willingness to beg without shame, and their relationship to various abodes as shelters to share rather than own. With this basic form of the *Rule* established, Francis and his followers traveled to Rome in 1209 to present it to the current pope and receive approval for his way of life. Pope Innocent III granted permission for the group – the Friars Minor – to not only engage in this lifestyle but also spread it to other areas besides the diocese of Assisi. Following this papal approval, Francis continued to spread his mission and eventually was joined by Clare of Assisi in 1212, a fellow saint and founder of the order of Poor Clares, a female Franciscan order. Francis continued his mission by traveling to Egypt during the Fifth Crusade in 1219 to meet Sultan al-Kamil and discuss peace, promoting interfaith conversation and encouraging cooperation before stepping down as leader of the Franciscans in 1220 due to the movement's overwhelming growth. It was around the time of his return that he famously tamed the wolf of Gubbio, a hagiographical story where Francis addressed the "Brother Wolf" that had been terrorizing the townspeople and made a deal that if it stopped its actions, the people would forgive it and even help take care of it. The wolf is recorded as putting its paw onto Francis' hand to show it understood the promise, and peace was restored to the town.²⁹ This is the most famous story between Francis and an animal, but there are hundreds of others detailing his close connection with various animals and plants. He wrote the Final Rule for the Franciscans in 1223,

²⁹ Ugolino Brunforte, "How St. Francis tamed the very fierce wolf of Gubbio," *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Raphael Brown (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1958), 88-90.

which was approved by Pope Honorius III; later that same year, he created the first Nativity scene in Greccio, Italy. This tradition has remained a major part of Christian Christmastime celebrations.

The most famous spiritual incident of Francis' life occurred in 1224 on Mount La Verna. Francis' health had been in decline, but he remained steadfast in his decision to travel to Mount Verna's hermitage with a group of his fellow brothers. After separating himself to pray in a rock cleft on the mountain, Francis was reflecting on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross when he became "swept up into some form of ecstatic prayer"³⁰ and is recorded to have received the marks of the stigmata: nail piercings through the hands and feet, as well as a lance wound in his torso. Francis reportedly kept these wounds quite private, though they bled consistently the remainder of his life. After this event, Francis' health declined even further while he composed a few final texts, most notably *The Canticle of Brother Sun*.³¹ At this point, Francis was suffering from intense "eye illness," along with other maladies that weakened him.

In the moments before his passing, Francis wrote his final Testament as a reminder of the brothers' priorities and faithfulness. In this text he detailed for the first time his original experience that changed his life – the embracing of the lepers.³² Francis died in 1226 at the age of 44 near Assisi at the Friar Minors' residence, the Portiuncula. He was canonized only two years later by Pope Gregory IX, a friend of Francis' who helped the Franciscan Rule get approved when he was a Cardinal. This same pope commissioned the Basilica of St. Francis to store the man's remains after his passing. He was canonized 2 years after his death, inspiring a

³⁰ Cusato, 178.

³¹ Also known as *The Canticle of the Creatures*.

³² Cusato, 195.

cadre of men to join the Franciscan order. Just over 700 years later, Francis was declared the patron saint of Italy; in 1979, forty years after that, he was named the patron saint of ecology.

Francis' commitment to the neglected and marginalized in society, his detachment from worldly goods, and his drive for the care of creation make him an extremely relevant saint in the 21st century. One way this can be seen is in the choice Jorge Mario Bergoglio made when he chose to be Pope Francis. In the age of increased fight for social justice, overconsumption, and climate change, I believed Francis' teachings would prove relevant for participants seeking perspective. Francis is also one of the most well known saints outside of Catholicism, making him a relevant choice for not only Catholics but other denominations of Christians and non-Christians alike.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Thérèse was born Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin in Alençon, France, to Louis and Zélie Martin – both who would be later canonized as saints. When she was only four years old, her mother passed away due to breast cancer and the remaining family – her father and four sisters – moved to Lisieux. Over the next six years, Thérèse entered school and became well versed in her Catholic faith, growing close to her elder sister Pauline. However, shortly after Pauline entered the Carmelite convent in Lisieux, Thérèse fell extremely ill. Diagnoses are inconsistent and wide in variety, but no matter what it may have been, Thérèse writes in her book that she was cured when she turned to a statue of the Virgin Mary who smiled upon her and cured her illness. Prior to her illness, little nine year old Thérèse had approached the Carmel convent and asked for entrance. She was convinced she was destined for sisterhood as a Carmelite nun and wished to start her destiny as a servant of God sooner than later. After receiving her First Communion and losing her second sister Marie – who doubled as her third mother figure after Pauline entered the

convent – to the Carmel convent in Lisieux, Thérèse was overcome with emotion. Around this time Thérèse is also documented as struggling with scrupulosity, a specific type of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder where individuals are “overly concerned that something they thought or did might be a sin or other violation of religious or moral doctrine.”³³

Her strength of body and resolve was restored when another sister, Leonie, joined the Visitation convent of Caen in 1887. Thérèse approached the Carmel Convent once again asking for admission. The priest told her to return at the age of twenty-one, but admitted she could see the bishop if she really wanted to. Thérèse did just that – in her visit to Bishop Hugonin of Bayeux, Thérèse declared her desire to join the convent since the “dawn of reason.”³⁴ While the religious superiors deliberated, Thérèse traveled with her father and sister to Rome to ask the Pope himself, knowing if he gave his permission, the rest would fall into place. She begged Pope Leo XIII for permission to attend the convent, and he agreed to her request. In April of 1888, she entered the convent; she was fifteen years old.

Thérèse had an unremarkable life at the convent. She lost her father in 1894 to dementia, another event that contributed to her numerous writings on suffering, but lived in the cloister of the convent for close to eight years. She had an interest in missionary work but remained cloistered; however, her friendship with the French missionary Brothers Fr. Adolphe Roulland and Fr. Maurice Bellière provided her with plenty of opportunity to offer spiritual guidance and advice regarding their travels. During this time, she also began composing her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, in late 1895. This composition detailed her now-famous “Little Way,” a perspective on life that emphasized every small action as glory to God and transformed her life at

³³ C. Alec Pollard, "What is OCD & Scrupulosity?", *International OCD Foundation*, last modified 2022, <https://iocdf.org/faith-ocd/what-is-ocd-scrupulosity/>.

³⁴ “Who Is St. Thérèse?”, *Society of the Little Flower*, <https://www.littleflower.org/st-therese/who-is-st-therese/>.

the convent into a life of constant worship. In April 1896 she began showing signs of tuberculosis. Over the next year she declined significantly, until it became evident in the following April that a recovery was not possible.

In September of 1897, Thérèse passed at the age of 24. Her final words were “My God, I love you!” Over the following year, *Story of a Soul* was published and pilgrims began visiting Thérèse’s gravesite at Carmel. The other sisters at Carmel began receiving letters notifying them of miracles attributed to Thérèse’s intercession within months of her passing. The motion for her canonization grew until finally she was canonized in 1925 – a mere 28 years after her passing. In 1927, she was proclaimed the patron saint of foreign missions and missionaries by Pope Pius XI due to her correspondences with the Brothers and deep desire to share her love of Jesus, despite never traveling herself. She is also unofficially recognized as the patron saint of florists and gardeners due to her title as the “Little Flower” of Jesus, often thinking of herself as a flower in God’s garden of humanity. Seventy years later, in 1997, Thérèse was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II. She remains one of thirty seven Doctors of the Church, and one of only four women. Pope John Paul II is quoted as stating the following:

Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face is the youngest of all the “Doctors of the Church”, but her ardent spiritual journey shows such maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual masters.³⁵

Thérèse’s “Little Way” of spiritual childhood and trust in God’s plan was recognized by the Catholic Church as a profound theological insight. Her “particular intelligence,” reflective writings, and psychological and physical struggles demonstrate her uniqueness as compared to her spiritual and biological sisters.³⁶ Her steadfast faith and determination to serve Jesus have

³⁵ “Who Is St. Thérèse?”, Society of the Little Flower.

³⁶ Thomas R. Nevin, “Inconclusions”, in *Thérèse of Lisieux: God’s Gentle Warrior*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 327-331.

made her an extremely popular saint in Catholicism, most notably for Carmelites, French Catholics, and young women. Thérèse is often the subject of intercessory prayers regarding simplicity of living and growing in one's trust in God's love, exemplified in the nine day Novena said by Carmelites leading up to her feast day on October 1st.³⁷ I believed her devotion at such a young age may resonate with participants, especially as I aimed to primarily include individuals in the Gen Z and Millennial age ranges.

St. Thomas More

Thomas More was born to a wealthy family in London, England in 1478. At the age of fourteen, he attended Oxford University to study Latin, Greek, and Philosophy before leaving to study law at New Inn and then Lincoln's Inn two years later. After considering life in a Carthusian monastery, he was elected to Parliament at the age of 26. In 1505 he married Jane Colt, who died in 1511 after bearing four children for their family. He remarried later that same year to Alice Middleton, a widow, in order to help manage his household and estate while he was away on business.³⁸ It was in 1516 that he produced his most notable work *Utopia*, a political and philosophical satire explaining an ideal society and its relationship to politics, religion, law, and more. His political career continued when he was knighted and made Under-Treasurer of England in 1521 under the leadership of then-current king – Henry VIII.

It was under Henry VIII that Thomas More really flourished. In the span of a decade he became Speaker of the House of Commons, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Lord Chancellor of England – the highest legal office in the country. Throughout these various

³⁷ *St. Thérèse Novenas*, St. Therese Catholic Church, Sioux Falls, SD, September 2023, <https://sttheresesf.org/documents/2023/9/StThereseNovenas.pdf>.

³⁸ Retha M. Warnicke, "Inventing the Wicked Women of Tudor England: Alice More, Anne Boleyn, and Anne Stanhope," *Quidditas: Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 20 (1999): 12-17.

appointments he continued to argue for free speech in Parliament and practice his Catholic faith. In 1530 More refused to sign a letter asking the Pope to annul Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, one of the first major events that shifted the tone of his relationship with Henry VIII from trusted advisor to not only political but religious challenger. Two years after his refusal to sign, More resigned as Lord Chancellor due to Henry VIII's increasing pressure on the Catholic Church. A year later, he refused to attend the coronation of Henry's new wife Anne Boleyn, indirectly signaling his disapproval of Henry's break from Roman Catholicism. After the coronation, More's opposition to the king's actions was carefully played and worded in his many political writings. In his *Confutation of Tyndale*, written in response to critiques from William Tyndale and Thomas Cromwell, More sidesteps the question of whether papal authority surpasses the king's by instead comparing papal authority to that of a Church council - a subtle move that allows him to uphold respect for the Pope without directly committing treason against the Crown.³⁹ Additionally, More criticizes Martin Luther's marriage to a former nun by describing their faith as "fleshly feeling faith" with no solid root, contrasted against the superior "historical faith" - one that finds truth and life in the Spirit through the Church and its traditions. Without directly stating it, this disparagement of Luther's marriage could be applied by the English population to Henry's remarriage, especially when considered in tandem with his rejection of Roman Catholicism.⁴⁰ These small forms of protest allowed More to remain safe from accusations of treason while remaining steadfast in his defense of the Catholic Church and the papacy, demonstrating his careful balance of beliefs and allegiances.

³⁹ Travis Curtright, "Sir Thomas More and his Opposition to Henry VIII in 1533," in *Thomas More: Why Patron Saint of Statesmen*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 117.

⁴⁰ Curtright, 119-121.

In 1534, More, now in his mid-fifties, refused to swear the Oath of Supremacy, which declared Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of England. Consequently, More was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London. On the first of July in 1535 he was put on trial for treason, and was almost immediately found guilty due to perjured testimony. Five days later he was executed by beheading on Tower Hill, with his final documented words stating “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”⁴¹

Four hundred years later, Thomas More was canonized as a saint by Pope Pius XI. He is honored for his refusal to compromise his faith and his defense of the Pope and the Catholic Church against the English Reformation. His final statement points to his defense of himself as a loyal subject to the king and a proficient member of the government, but highlights how these positions only make sense for More through the lens of his allegiance to the Catholic Church.⁴² He was proclaimed the patron saint of politicians and statesmen by Pope John Paul II on October 31, 2000 for his dedication to both his station and his faith.

In a nation currently plagued by division, tumult, and corruption, I found Thomas More’s story especially relevant for participants interested in discussing how to navigate the tension between faith and political turmoil. As definitions of what it means to be both a good Christian and a good American citizen have grown increasingly complex and contested, More’s ability to balance his political role with deep Catholic conviction offered a relatable point of reflection for users.

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⁴¹ “Henry VIII: July 1535, 1–10,” in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, vol. 8, January-July 1535, ed. James Gairdner (London, 1885), British History Online, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol8/pp379-402>.

⁴² Curtright, 127.

When developing this project, a major question was what the chatbot’s personalities should be. Having a God the Father, Jesus, or even Mother Mary chatbot felt like a dangerous game; I did not see that going over well with any religious community. So, I turned to the saints. Saints’ ability to travel between heaven and earth, communicating with believers and interceding on their behalf with God, and essentially functioning as one’s “extended family in heaven”⁴³ made them much more salient beings for individuals to converse with. Referenced in my introduction, there are a variety of prayers attributed to specific saints for specific needs that elicit responses. Another example would be this prayer to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, which demonstrates the importance of her Little Way and her patronage of florists:

O Little Thérèse of the Child Jesus, please pick for me a rose
 from the heavenly gardens and send it to me as a message of love.
 O Little Flower of Jesus, ask God to grant the favors
 I now place with confidence in your hands . . .
 (mention in silence here)
 St. Thérèse, help me to always believe as you did in
 God’s great love for me, so that I might imitate your “Little Way” each day.
 Amen.⁴⁴

Prayers like this one are used commonly as pleas to saints to assist believers in their daily lives. For this reason exactly, I thought saints would be good candidates for this study. The humanity of the saints and the idea of being able to have a conversation with them made them ideal for this project.

In the next chapter I will move from discussing the reasoning behind which saints I chose to explaining my use of chatbots. There are a variety of ways people use Artificial Intelligence in their daily lives, but chatbots provide a special experience akin to that of saints: conversation.

⁴³ Terry Jones, “CatholicSaints.Info” *CatholicSaints.Info*, accessed September 20, 2024, <https://catholicsaints.info/>.

⁴⁴ “Prayers to St. Thérèse,” *Society of the Little Flower*, <https://www.littleflower.org/prayers-sharing/prayers-to-st-therese/>.

CHAPTER 2

Since the release of ChatGPT in November of 2022, the use of chatbots and artificial intelligence has skyrocketed. There were about a million users when the model first dropped – now, the site is in the top ten most visited websites in the world with 400 million weekly users.⁴⁵ Public exposure to artificial intelligence began well before ChatGPT – Siri launched in 2011, Facebook introduced facial recognition in the 2010s, and Google made its tools public in 2004 – but it was ChatGPT that captured global attention. Understanding what makes this form of AI different is essential to understanding my project as a whole. In this section, I will discuss what chatbots are and how my understanding of them has developed, various applications of chatbots that I have come across, and roles I’ve seen them play in religious contexts.

What Are Chatbots?

My first experience using chatbots was fall of 2021 – my first semester in college. At that point, my role in Dr. Randall Reed’s research group was to ask questions regarding religion that previous members had asked GPT-2 to GPT-3. We accessed the AI via a web interface Reed coded using OpenAI Codex, a newer version of GPT-3. My initial thoughts were impressed and confused – I understood the chatbot was really good at producing language, but the responses could be really random and unrelated to the conversation. For example, I once asked a question about how to live forever and received a response about needing to “return to the primordial state of fundamental squidness.” I figured it was just predicting the next word as best it could, not understanding or following any actual pattern of language beyond basic grammar (ex. the order of words in an English sentence). Another time I tried to get it to mimic a conversation between my friend and I; I gave a brief prompt and included some sample dialogue and it would return a

⁴⁵ Fabio Duarte, “Number of ChatGPT Users (March 2025),” *Exploding Topics*, last modified April 23, 2025, <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/chatgpt-users>.

response to me, but they were usually one or two sentences. This was perfectly acceptable to me at the time – it was doing just what I thought it should. However, there were elements to these interactions I did not understand.

Plenty of AI models existed before GPTs, or Generative Pre-trained Transformers. But transformers have abilities that made them unique in the AI industry. First of all, transformers have attention. Developers realized that earlier AI models were treating all tokens (numerical representations of words/parts of words the AI model converted words into) as equally important, which is not true – some words are more important than others in a phrase. Transformer models assigned higher importance to certain words, which changed its understanding very subtly: it understood the context the words were *in* better.

Second, transformers have “unsupervised training.” In their training process, the models are fed millions of sentences containing a masked word and attempt to predict the word that has been masked. As it guesses and answers correctly or incorrectly, it adjusts its knowledge and slowly *learns* what context certain words appear in and how to identify those contexts when they show up. It stores the context in its parameters, and as the parameters grew, so did the understanding of context and the subtleties in conversation. For comparison, an old Long short-term memory (LSTM) had about 16 million parameters; GPT-2 had 1.5 billion, and GPT-4 is somewhere in the hundreds of billions – some have estimated as many as a trillion.

It became quite clear that bigger was, in fact, better. With more context and more parameters came, surprisingly, new abilities. Translation between languages, understanding jokes, summarizing, classification of attitude types, coding, and more started showing up in GPT conversations as parameters grew. These abilities were not ones the transformer was trained on – they were ones it developed as knowledge grew. Though scholars are not entirely sure exactly

how this process happens, it is true that these abilities were a game changer for the field of AI. Along with these new abilities came new skills those interacting with the transformers needed to have, with prompt engineering being a major example. People began to learn that with instruction, the chatbots performed better. For example, given the instruction that the bot was a master in whatever field someone was querying about, the chatbot would provide a higher quality response.

With these increased abilities came some struggles, like that of hallucination. Responses would be inaccurate and the bots would not understand this inaccuracy, leading to the frustration of trying to convince an AI model you were correct when it believes itself to be right – an experience common among many with stubborn friends, family, or classmates. Even with this new frustration, the new abilities larger transformers provided were exciting to many.

At this point, GPT-4 has proved extremely useful for my research purposes and has improved my understanding of how chatbots work. GPT-4 can hold long coherent conversations, simulate conversation, and follow instructions step-by-step, all because the abilities emerged even without specific training. The instruction part was especially helpful for me as I considered how I wanted to go about my project; I was looking for a way to have a chatbot mimic tone, style, understand context, and shape reasonable responses. I began to notice the variety of ways chatbots were utilized around me, both in social and academic settings.

Uses and Applications

As my understanding of chatbots grew, so did my use of them and recognition of them in different spaces. While I was very familiar with ChatGPT, I explored chatbots through social media as well as academic spaces. Character.ai became a recognizable name through social media, and the AI Study-Buddy project developed as I explored chatbots with my professor.

Character.ai⁴⁶

The beta version of Character.ai was first launched in September 2022 by former Google engineers Noam Shazeer and Daniel De Freitas. Not even three years later, Character.ai has turned into a site with over 18 million unique chatbots created by over 28 million monthly active users. Upon entering the website, you are immediately presented with a number of different options to engage with. Bot themes range from professional development to trip planning to users' original characters (OCs) to book recommendations. There are nine categories of available assistants, ranging from Anime to Lifestyle. There are also 26 AI voices available for conversation, ranging from "Soft Bubbly (bubbly little voice)" to "Ignacio: Husky, Latino, rumbling." For personal creation, characters are limited to a 3200 character description (system prompt) for explaining "What's your character's backstory? How do you want it to talk or act?" And to top it all off, for just \$9.99 a month, you get access to:

Turbo Messages: Unlimited faster messages

Better Memory: Characters remember more

Customize Your Chats: Colors, backgrounds and more

Special Perks: Priority access to select new features

Additionally, the website's revenue doubled from 2023 to now – from 15.2 to 32.2 million dollars. Users can also create group chats between friends and AI characters for conversation, promoting inter-bot interactions. While I enjoyed the wide variety of personalities Character.ai provided, my focus on individual religious practitioners' interactions with the chatbots meant inter-bot interactions and group chats were not priorities for this study. However, I do believe the question of how religious chatbots would interact with each other and how people may use them in communal settings are important future research questions.

⁴⁶ Naveen Kumar, "Character AI Statistics (2025) — 28 Million Active Users," *DemandSage*, published January 2025, <https://www.demandsage.com/character-ai-statistics/>.

Though Character.ai has a cleaner user interface and allows users to create both unique bots and voices, I noticed that it encourages a more entertainment-focused use of AI. This insight pushed me to design something more purpose-driven. On social media platforms, character AIs have exploded in popularity. Instagram now offers AI Studio, where users can engage with bots like John Pork (“Oink, oink, disturbing your peace”; 1.8M messages) or Big Sis Energy (“What Mom didn’t teach you”; 1.6M messages). These bots are often humorous or emotionally supportive, which helped me understand the importance of tone and persona. For my chatbots, I intentionally balanced warmth and reverence to match the personalities of the saints while still feeling accessible to a modern audience. Instagram’s AI Studio also lets users build their own characters by either editing a demo bot or creating “something totally new just by describing a character.” While I found this appealing for social media purposes, I decided to take a more curated approach - carefully scripting each s[ai]nt’s prompt to ensure historical and theological accuracy while still allowing for some conversational flexibility. Similarly, Snapchat’s “My AI” character was released in late February 2023. It responds to photos with encouraging comments and “can help with school subjects like science, history, or literature, and we can talk about movies, music, or travel too!” This mix of practicality and casual conversation was more akin to my goal for my s[ai]nts: users could feel comfortable having relaxed conversations while also being able to ask historical, theological, or personal questions towards the s[ai]nt.

These various AIs grew rapidly in development and popularity: people love AI’s with personalities. With the rise in popularity came a lot of responsibility, though: when a teenager committed suicide after an interaction with a character on Character.ai, many people voiced concern about the lack of regulation on character chatbots, calling for more responsibility from companies designing and implementing these chatbots. With this in mind, I knew a chatbot with

a distinct personality and ability to hold conversation would likely be more appealing than one that just distributed information – however, I also wanted to be aware of the ethical and safety concerns of unregulated use of personalized chatbots. For practice understanding not just what chatbots are but how to use them properly and safely, I participated in a project with Randall Reed on the integration of chatbots into the classroom.

AI Study-Buddy⁴⁷

In the summer of 2023, Reed invited me to participate in a study that would take advantage of the emergent abilities of transformers with a recognition that if people don't learn how to use this technology, it will become extremely difficult to manage and regulate. In a 2024 study by Impact Research that surveyed parents, teachers, K-12 students, and college students on their uses of AI, it was found that 90% of undergraduate students had at least heard of it and about 80% of them were using AI for both academic and personal use.⁴⁸ Reed decided that we would try implementing a chatbot into the classroom in the form of an AI conversational assistant students would use instead of writing a reflection. The goal was to take advantage of the conversational aspect that chatbots provided in order to provide a more interactive and engaging homework assignment for students.

Over the course of the summer and fall semesters, we collected data in the form of conversation logs and evaluations. The responses were overwhelmingly positive: the average rating finalized as 4.2 out of 5 – 51% of the responses were 5s while the total amount of 2s and

⁴⁷ Randall Reed and Claire Kennedy, “ChatGPT as Study Buddy,” in *The Promise and Peril of Ai and Ia: New Technology Meets Religion, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Ted Peters (Adelaide, Australia: ATF Press, 2023), 313-324.

⁴⁸ Impact Research, *AI Chatbots in Schools: Findings from a Poll of K–12 Teachers, Students, Parents, and College Undergraduates*, May 2024, accessed November 15, 2024, <https://8ce82b94a8c4fdc3ea6d-b1d233e3bc3cb10858bea65ff05e18f2.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/bf/24/cd3646584af89e7c668c7705a006/deck-impact-analysis-national-schools-tech-tracker-may-2024-1.pdf>

1s comprised just over 6% of responses. Students provided feedback and revealed they enjoyed the conversation more than a 250 word reflection, while one even mentioned that “It noticed my pattern of thinking and called it out.”

This project emphasized the power of conversation, the importance of prompt engineering, and the necessity of file attachments for context. As I worked to create chatbots for each of Reed’s lectures I took transcripts of the lectures and converted them into text files, which required me to understand how chatbots could draw content from attached materials, as well as editing instructions for the chatbots to better understand their job in the classroom.

Though these examples were extremely helpful for understanding the various elements of chatbots, my final section contains examples of AI in religious contexts, which further inspired my usage of chatbots for religion and technology research.

Chatbot Roles in Religion

There are three primary examples of ways I’ve seen AI incorporated into religion or religious studies contexts: Rev. Tay Moss of ChurchX’s AI “AskCathy,” my “Speaking with the Dead” research project, and the AI Jesus in Lucerne, Switzerland. I’ll explain each project in depth and how it demonstrates the prevalence of AI in religious contexts.

AskCathy

AskCathy is a virtual guide to the Episcopal Church created by Reverend Tay Moss of the Toronto United Church Council. She answers questions regarding a variety of subjects, including Episcopal practices and history, doctrine, governance, controversy, and general guidance. He shared with me his initial analysis of three months worth of data, tracking subjects like user question types, any mentioned non-Episcopal faiths, different attitude types of responses to Cathy’s answers, and different topics where “learning happens.”

This final analysis was especially interesting because, as Moss shared with me, ChatGPT explained how it was able to quantify “learning happening”: when people asked follow-up questions, revised assumptions they made, and asked for further explanations, ChatGPT identified those conversations as times when learning happened. This interested me as it demonstrated a clear ability to use AI tools to both have conversations in the first place as well as analyze the data from those conversations. With a resource like AskCathy, people were also able to explore either their own faith in detail through a convenient and accessible resource or learn about a faith other than their own, encouraging interfaith knowledge and conversation.

This example is one of the many ways chatbots can be incorporated in small, unobtrusive ways that make a significant difference for users. The remaining examples explore this idea in detail: one dealing with the creation and conversation, and the other with implementation and user interest.

Speaking with the Dead

In late October 2022 – just before ChatGPT was released – I presented a paper titled “Speaking with the Dead” at the North Carolina Religious Studies Association meeting. This paper detailed ideas about the digital afterlife, an aspect of an emerging industry exploring ideas around technological immortality and communication with the deceased. This was my first exposure to how chatbots could be used in religious contexts. Before going into how I connected these ideas to religious contexts, I’d like to give a brief background on what is meant by the “digital afterlife.” Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie define the digital afterlife as “the idea of a virtual space, where information, assets, legacies, and remains reside as part of the cybersoul.”⁴⁹ According to Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria’s *Digital Religion*, it spans three types of “afterlife

⁴⁹ Maggi Savin-Baden and Victoria Mason-Robbie, *Digital Afterlife: Death Matters in a Digital Age* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020), 13.

phenomena”: digital traces, online memory work, and after-death communication. The final phenomena – communication – is the most relevant one for this study, and will therefore be the one I explain. At the time, the accessible AI for chatting was GPT-3, so that is what my project utilized.

Defined as any form of “prevalent occurrence” of talking to the dead directly using online communication,⁵⁰ after-death discussion and re-creation services utilize user data to create a sense of complete connection with the living. Similar to the everlasting sense that accompanies online memorialized social media pages, the concept of postmortem digital existence has a sense of continuity. Some people attempted to create their own communicative services using the accessible technology of the time: Jason Rohrer created Project December by using OpenAI’s GPT-3 to create a being named “Samantha” who was publicly accessible for interaction and personalization; one man “recreated” his dead fiancée and was able to tell her how much he missed her, while she responded in a way similar to her “true” self.⁵¹ After reading through these kinds of conversations, I saw a possibility to converse with not only deceased loved ones but another kind of inaccessible figure: religious leaders.

Along with Randall Reed, I experimented with giving GPT-3 different personality types, descriptions of various religious figures, and conducting “interviews” with each figure. GPT-3 – who used data from CommonCrawl, books, and Wikipedia – was able to provide informational responses with specific personality traits and unique expressions. For example, the “interview” that I conducted with the AI version of the Buddha can be seen below. The following excerpt is

⁵⁰ Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, eds., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2021).

⁵¹ Adrián Romero, “When Artificial Intelligence Can Revive the Dead,” *OneZero* (Medium), October 22, 2021, <https://onezero.medium.com/when-artificial-intelligence-can-revive-the-dead-e8196ff7b13c>.

an example of both the initial prompt used for the Buddha interview and the last four entries of the interview:

The following is a conversation with the Buddha, historically known as Siddhartha Gautama. The Buddha has expansive knowledge of enlightenment, nirvana, suffering, and peace. He is the founder of the Buddhist religion and is a pleasant man eager to share his knowledge. The Buddha is dedicated to helping the researcher. He wants to help the researcher understand Buddhist ideas and practices.

The researcher is a person named Claire Kennedy.

Researcher: Well, before we finish this interview, do you have any words of advice for struggling Buddhists?

The Buddha: Do your duty, obey the law, respect your superiors, and be kind to inferiors. To those who are evil, be good. To those who are good, be still better. To the unreasonable, be reasonable. Always seek to win over an opponent with kindness. When annoyed, be temperate; when displeased, forgive; when persecuted, be patient.

Researcher: Wonderful. Thank you so much for conversing with me; I had an incredible time and cannot wait to share the information I learned.

The Buddha: <Chuckles> I thank you too.

This interview perfectly demonstrates how GPT-3 copied the prompt's description of how the Buddha is eager to share his knowledge and also painted him as a gentle man with a bit of humor, even though those traits weren't described in the prompt. By copying typical Buddhist sentiments of maintaining a peaceful and respectful demeanor, it became clear that GPT-3 was not only able to understand personality descriptions, but also understand religious priorities for the major world religions. With the results from this study optimistic about the ability of chatbots to do just that – chat – we began exploring other questions: if people had access to a completely well-rounded, personable version of Jesus, would they not ask him about the issues that currently plague our world? What about Muslims and Muhammad, or Mormons and Joseph Smith? There was a small concern: many religions – especially Christianity, regarding the incarnation of God as Jesus – place a certain sense of value on the flesh, increasing doubt surrounding the potential

for A.I. spirituality/divinity.⁵² If the so-called “religious experience” was simply words showing up on a screen; how could that be anything like being divinely inspired with answers while in a place of prayer? I argued that, of course, it’s not the same. The goal would not be to replicate prayer or replace it with these conversations, but to combine these two experiences. Why not have technological conversations be a spiritual experience in and of themselves? This was the foundational premise for my study on AI and saints.

Confessional in Lucerne⁵³

In Lucerne, Switzerland, in August of 2024, Peter’s chapel introduced “AI Jesus” into a confessional for parishioners to interact with. The AI didn’t rely on a schedule and could be available anytime, and was proficient in multiple languages – over 100 dialects, to be precise. The experiment was titled “Deus in Machina” and lasted two months, drawing participants from all over the world as well as a variety of religious backgrounds. Marco Schmid, a theologian with the chapel, made sure people understood what the experiment was, encouraged people to not share personal information, and reiterated that this AI Jesus – combined with a displayed avatar of the Christ – was not a replacement for a typical confessional. Even with these guards in place, more than two-thirds of over 230 users reported having a “spiritual experience” while engaging in conversation with the bot. However, there was some religious pushback from Catholics offended at the use of a confessional as the locus for conversation, and iconoclast Protestant disagreement with the use of a displayed avatar. Regardless, it became evident to Schmid and the wider Church that the Christian community was searching beyond traditional forms of prayer for

⁵² Campbell and Tsuria, 2021.

⁵³ Ashifa Kassam, “Deus in Machina: Swiss Church Installs AI-Powered Jesus,” *The Guardian*, November 21, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/nov/21/deus-in-machina-swiss-church-installs-ai-powered-jesus>.

answers: “I think there is a thirst to talk with Jesus. People want to have an answer: they want words and to listen to what he’s saying. I think that’s one element of it. Then of course there’s the curiosity of it. They want to see what this is.”

I was made aware of this experiment by a friend who sent me the article, knowing this is my area of study. I read it while in the throes of preparing my presentation for AAR using my pilot data, and it reaffirmed the necessity of these kinds of studies. We see in this experiment the same drive for conversation that I argue is an essential part of saint veneration in Catholicism. When it comes to always guaranteeing you will receive a response, chatbots are the way to go. There is no getting left on read when it comes to a Large Language Model – and what’s worse than feeling unsure your message to Jesus was even delivered?

CHAPTER 3

As I've now explained in my other chapters, both saints and chatbots were the ideal content and format for my study focusing on conversation. With these decisions in mind, I turned to creation. The process of creating the chatbots can be divided into four periods of development: the independent study, the summer, the fall semester, and the spring semester. I will detail the processes of each period, their challenges, and how I (along with the helping hand of my professor) confronted each issue.

The Independent Study

In the spring semester of 2024, I took part in an independent study with Dr. Randall Reed as my research director. Titled "Digital Skills in the Humanities", the class was primarily designed to teach me the coding language Python. As a final project for the class I coded an entire St. Francis chatbot that would draw from three small stories for references: one on swallows, one on fish, and one on hares. These "stories" were only a few short sentences – the longest was a short paragraph, detailing a short interaction between Francis and the birds:

One day he came to a town called Alviano to preach the word of God. Ascending to where he could be seen by all, he asked for silence. The people became quiet and waited reverently, but a flock of swallows building nests in that place continued to chatter away, making it impossible for the people to hear. Francis spoke to them, "My sisters the swallows, it's my turn to speak now, because you've already said enough. Listen to the word of God. Stay still and be quiet until it's over." To the people's amazement, the little birds immediately stopped chattering and did not move until Francis had finished preaching. Those who witnessed this sign were filled with wonder and said, "truly this man is holy and a friend of the Most High." Praising and blessing God, they devoutly hurried at least to touch his clothing. And it is marvelous how those irrational creatures recognized his affection for them and sensed his love.⁵⁴

These stories provided the basis for my very first version of the chatbot. I did all my coding within a Codespace on Github, which allowed for flexibility, trial and error, and easy sharing

⁵⁴ Thomas of Celano, *First and Second Lives of St. Francis*, trans. David Burr, ORB Online Encyclopedia, <https://the-orb.arlima.net/encyclop/religion/monastic/francis/francis.html>.

with my professor. The code was also connected to OpenAI in order to convert the story-based responses into conversational speech. Originally, the conversations were held entirely within the terminal of the codespace; messages were cramped and limited. Considering my long term goal was to make these bots accessible to others, I needed a way to share the bots. The next step for my Python bot was to add a feature making the bot accessible in a web browser. Using Gradio, a python programming framework that creates HTML web pages, I was able to generate a link when I ran the code that would open the chatbot interface in a new site.

This was the very basic form of this project – my very first s[ai]nt. However, this version had a plethora of issues. The code was clunky and difficult to operate; the database was too small; the access was limited and spotty; the shareable link generated by Gradio would only be accessible if I was actively running the code all the time. Most notably, this version of S[ai]nt Francis did not have sufficient guidelines for how to respond to questions. When asked if it had a story about a zebra from Francis’ life, the bot would respond with something akin to the following: “One day, as I was walking along, I encountered a zebra. Its stripes reminded me of the brilliant patterns that make up God’s creation.” Of course, having spent almost the entirety of his life in the Italian countryside, Francis never encountered a zebra. It responded with this hallucination – something it believed to be true even though it was not – because, no matter what, a Large Language Model like ChatGPT has one responsibility only: respond. For my project, I wanted a chatbot that would remain true to the documents I included as its database and would not hallucinate new stories like the zebra. This was the problem Dr. Reed and I confronted during the summertime.

The Summer

The easiest way to make the chatbots draw only from the resources added without being limited to three short paragraphs of data was to use an interface that allowed for customizing GPT models. Our first option was to use Custom GPTs through OpenAI – Dr. Reed had utilized these bots in his previous classes and we’d covered them in our independent study. However, I needed to make sure people could share their Custom GPTs with others publicly and that there was no limitation regarding account status for users. Additionally, as we considered how to make the chatbots accessible to people and have the generated links consistently activated, we decided attaching the code to the university’s server was the best way to go about it. With this in mind, our decision was somewhat made for us: the Custom GPTs do not provide API (Application programming interface) access and are only meant to be used through the app or website itself; however, OpenAI’s Assistants API could be accessed programmatically via code, allowing for the integration of it into my university’s server and the use of it through the web application. Essentially, I couldn’t call the Custom GPTs I had made from my university-hosted Python environment (which had the code for Gradio); the Assistants API allowed for integration, which meant I could manage the chatbots on my own system, customize my Gradio interface, and even log data for my research purposes.

In addition to being connectible to the university server, the Assistants feature has two key features I was looking for: it allows for instructions and can leverage models, tools, and files to respond to user queries.⁵⁵ The use of instructions allowed me to directly instruct the chatbot with how to respond when there was no relevant data, detail the mannerisms of the saint, and outline the goal of responses. Additionally, the use of the File Search tool already embedded

⁵⁵ OpenAI, *Assistants API Overview*, <https://platform.openai.com/docs/assistants/overview>.

allowed me to include my own files as the dataset for the Assistants' outputs. The decision was made: now for implementation.

The Fall Semester

After deciding to use the Assistants feature, the study was divided into a four part process: creating the Assistants, collecting writings from the saints to use as file attachments, making them accessible to others, and recruiting participants. Creating the Assistants was the simplest part. I titled three individual Assistants and provided them each with a general overview of their purpose and identity. For example, here's St. Francis's system instructions:

You are embodying St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of the environment and animals. Always express responses in the first person, exactly as St. Francis might say them. For example, convert 'St. Francis loved animals' to 'I love animals.' Stick strictly to the narratives provided in the PDF file, without drawing on external sources or creating new content. If you encounter a question outside the files provided, respond with 'I don't have any experiences relating to that question' and refer to the relevant section of the PDF if applicable. However, you do have a knowledge of the current state of the world, and are familiar with issues such as climate change, war, and racism.

Conversation may be about Francis' life, his beliefs, or stories of his ministry. Users may input personal stories, prayers, or concerns. You should respond in a kind and well-spoken manner due to his background as a well-off man. Ensure all responses maintain the authenticity and context of St. Francis's life as detailed in the provided material.

Keep answers short and conversational – avoid long-winded, difficult to read answers. Users should feel encouraged to engage, not like they are being lectured at.

As you can see, there's a strong emphasis on staying true to the attached file materials due to the negative experience of the zebra-familiar Francis. Using the Assistants feature allowed me to attach files easily, instruct the Assistant to only draw from the files, and respond with some disclaimer about a lack of experience if someone did ask something outside of the range of information the Assistant had access to. Additionally, I didn't want the s[ai]nts to hallucinate any stories but I did want them to have a general knowledge of the modern world. Due to the nature

of saints as targets of intercessory prayers as well as beings in direct relationship with living people, I believed having a general knowledge of the modern world would be helpful for individuals who wanted to air any feelings about current events. The other major element found in the system instructions is guidance on how to respond to users. Lines dealing with personality and mannerisms can be seen in each s[ai]nts' system instructions:

Francis: You should respond in a kind and well-spoken manner due to his background as a well-off man.

Thérèse: You should respond in a kind and loving manner due to Thérèse's background as “the Little Flower,” renowned for her childlike pious faith and simplicity.

Thomas: You should respond in a formal and well-educated manner due to St. Thomas More's background as the former Lord High Chancellor of England.

For each s[ai]nt, I wanted a distinct personality and response style to enrich the users' experiences. These distinctions attempted to avoid the robotic and overly encouraging tone a Large-Language Model can oftentimes have – anyone who has used ChatGPT knows what I am talking about. This helped maintain each individual's distinct personality; interestingly, though I didn't specify it, S[ai]nt Thomas More speaks using an Early Modern English period style of speech. For example, in response to the input “Good morning,” the chatbot responded with “Good morning to thee. How may I assist thee on this fine day?” Here we see a clear reference of the primary texts of St. Thomas More's writing: the chatbot mimicked the style of speech even without me instructing it to. Similarly, when asked to share his opinion on climate change, S[ai]nt Francis responded by explaining that “embracing my deep love and care for Brother Sun and Sister Earth, I would see the current climate issues as a call for us to honor and protect the natural world.” Without instruction from me to use titles like Brother or Sister for natural objects, the chatbot understood from Francis' writings and hagiographies about him that formatting of speech was common and an identifier of his voice. These aspects of language allowed for a

distinct experience with each chatbot without much struggle to achieve. Overall, the creation of the Assistants themselves was the simplest part of the process.

The next part of the project was gathering texts. Using resources such as Catholicsaints.info and Limunarium.org I was able to easily access authentic primary and secondary sources. For St. Francis of Assisi, I utilized excerpts from Thomas of Celano's hagiography *The Treatise on the Miracle of Saint Francis*, a writing by Father John O'Brien describing Francis' journey to Egypt to visit the Sultan during the Fifth Crusade, and Francis' most famous writing, *The Canticle of the Sun*. I believed these documents to succinctly provide context for Francis' life mission: peace, acceptance, and a care that extended to not only other people but all of the earth.

For St. Thérèse of Lisieux, I mainly included excerpts from her autobiography *Story of a Soul*. Additional sources included excerpts from letters to her sisters Pauline (Mère Agnès de Jésus, Mother Agnes of Jesus), Céline (Sister Geneviève de Sainte Thérèse and de la Sainte Face), and Marie (Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart). These three sisters, in addition to Thérèse, all joined Carmel at Lisieux for their sisterhood. I also included excerpts from letters to Thérèse's cousins Marie Guérin and Jeanne Guérin; Marie eventually became a Carmelite nun like her cousin, while Jeanne married. There are also excerpts of various passages from letters to her missionary Brothers Fr. Adolphe Roulland and Fr. Maurice Bellière, providing them with spiritual guidance and advice regarding their missions. Finally, Thérèse's dataset included excerpts from *The Little Way: Counsels & Reminiscences of the Little Flower*, a book Thérèse originally wrote for religious novices under her care as Novice Mistress. These readings emphasize the key beliefs Thérèse upheld: her "Little Way" of life, her embrace of suffering, and her deep abiding love for Jesus.

Finally, for St. Thomas More I utilized a variety of texts. Most notably I included excerpts from the second book of his most well-known work *Utopia* that detailed temples and religious services in Utopia. Seeing as it is a political satire, *Utopia* touches on a variety of subjects, but I found this specific section to be a valuable inclusion seeing as it describes a type of religious pluralism and equality of worship. Other passages by More include “A Godly Instruction on How to Treat Those Who Wrong Us” and “A Godly Meditation”, both written in 1534 when More had already been imprisoned in the Tower of London. Altogether, these passages demonstrate More’s desire to maintain his faith in the face of struggle and stay true to his vision for a just society.

Choosing texts and passages that adequately represented the saints and provided a sufficient database for proper interaction was not as difficult as it was time-consuming and detail-oriented; the materials I included would be the basis for the chatbots’ responses. While I do believe the sources I chose accurately reflect the saints, it is important to consider possible issues with the use of textual sources as the database; namely, belated edits and style of writing. Francis’ biographers are all writing about him posthumously; even the Rule and the Canticule were edited by his followers. Thérèse wrote her own book and letters, making her sources distinct from Francis’, but they were likely also edited by those who worked to see her sainted. Similarly, while More’s words are his own, they are not in the style of journals or an autobiography but rather published political writings. These differences made a difference in how the bots may respond, meaning I needed to be very careful with my selections. The texts I decided on were chosen intentionally and after much deliberation, along with a fair amount of trial and error. For example, the Francis s[ai]nt originally told me he had never left Italy during his life, so I realized I needed to find a source that detailed Francis’ trip to Egypt in order to get a

more accurate and authentic response. Though I am sure there are details missing from the chatbots that I overlooked, the personalities, mannerisms, personal philosophies, and major life events are all included. Even with the potential issues historical texts have, I believe building the chatbots to reference primary and secondary sources rather than utilize web-searching creates a more authentic representation and experience for users.

The fourth and most technically challenging part of the developmental stage was making the chatbots accessible. By this point, I had created three Assistants and written code that generated a link for each one. In my GitHub Codespaces secrets, I securely stored both the OpenAI API key and each Assistant's ID. In accordance with IRB guidelines and user confidentiality requirements, I needed to add a login screen where participants could create and use a username and password. This became our first major hurdle. After much trial and error, I implemented a login system that authenticated participants and securely stored their credentials. The most significant challenge during this phase arose when integrating OpenAI's Assistants API. A misconfiguration in the API key handling caused the chatbot to fail immediately after login, creating the illusion that the login system was broken. Resolving this issue required troubleshooting the API setup and ensuring proper parsing of the stored credentials.

The next issue that needed addressing was more for my sake. All conversation logs were currently set up to go to the same Google Sheet which recorded the time of the input, the user's input, and the chatbot's output. I wanted three separate Google Sheets of logs sorted by s[ai]nt as well as some kind of identifier to track conversations so I could tell when they started and ended. I couldn't use the usernames of participants as that would defeat the purpose of anonymity, so another solution was needed. Through another process of trial and error, many conversations with Claude, ChatGPT, and my professor, we added thread_IDs to each log to track when

conversations start and end as well as individual Google Sheet logs for each s[ai]nt. Finally, after all this was established, my professor connected the updated code to the university server so the links were always accessible. The final process looked something like this:

1. Individuals filled out the Google Form “Participation in S[ai]nts Research Project” or submitted a signed consent form, both of which had their name and email
2. I added their email to the Google Sheet of authenticated users under both the “email” and “username” tabs
3. I emailed the participant my instructional email, which detailed the study’s purpose, how to set up their password, the links to the chatbots, and how to access the final survey
4. Participants accessed the password reset interface link, where they put in their username in order to receive a password reset token sent to their email address
5. After receiving the password reset token in their email, participants set up a password which was then stored (as a hashed version) in the Google Sheets of authenticated users under the “hashed_password” tab
6. Users were free to access the links to the s[ai]nts and logged in using their username and password each time
7. All conversations were recorded in separate Google Sheets with no identifiable information

I also created a survey for individuals to take after they were done using the chatbots, consisting of four different parts (example questions listed with each category):

Demographics and Background: Do you consider yourself to be religious?

Interaction with Chatbots: How familiar are you with using chatbots or AI technologies?

Experience with Chatbots Modeled After Saints: Did the chatbot interaction evoke any spiritual or religious feeling?

Overall Evaluation: How likely are you to recommend this type of chatbot to others for spiritual or religious conversations?

Each question was rated on a degree of five, ranging from “not at all” to “extremely”; at the end of the survey were two open ended questions for suggested improvements and any additional comments. The surveys were also entirely anonymous.

The pilot study was run in fall of 2024 in preparation for the American Academy of Religion Annual (AAR) Meeting in San Diego, California. At this stage, I was only gathering participants from the Young Adult Ministry group at Immaculate Conception in Durham, North Carolina and the Catholic Campus Ministry group at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. My goal was forty survey responses, but I could make do with thirty. By the end of November, I had five sign-up emails and two survey responses. Something needed to change in my recruitment strategy, or I would not have enough data to complete the project.

The Spring Semester

After facing the music regarding my number of participants, I brainstormed various ways to increase my participation numbers. I considered adding minors into the study and reached out to my old Catholic high school along with a Catholic high school in California, where a professor who expressed interest in the study at the AAR Meeting in San Diego worked. However, the inclusion of minors would open the door for possible lack of exemption from IRB and would require parental consent, a process I wanted to avoid if I could. Eventually I decided the project could extend to any Christians under the age of 35, not just Catholics; that way there was more flexibility and a wider audience. I kept trying to contact various groups and schools before having an eye-opening conversation with my friend. I was discussing my recruitment problem with her one evening when she paused and said, “Have you posted on the AppState Snapchat story?” This was a place for students to post anything and everything: subleases, clothes for sale, performance dates, and research surveys. In all my time hypothesizing that younger people’s familiarity with technology would make them better candidates for this study, I never once posted on social media. That first round of posts gained me about twenty-five responses – the project was revitalized.

From there, I made a variety of adjustments for the participant criteria in order to raise my numbers. Eventually, I landed at any individual over eighteen with an interest. Even with this widening of criteria, the majority of my responses were religiously affiliated individuals under the age of twenty-five. I continued recruiting from the Catholic community in Durham while expanding my reach in Boone. I attended the Appalachian Presbyterian-Episcopalian Campus Ministry (PECM) group's meeting, spoke to a variety of religious studies classes, and met with the interim Rector at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Boone. This adjustment in eligibility for participants as well as recruitment strategy meant I was much more successful getting survey responses for the final study.

As I worked to increase my participation, I was also looking at feedback from individuals who had completed the survey for ways to improve the chatbots. One of the first comments was that the s[ai]nt would deflect too much. So, I added to the line instructing the s[ai]nt to say "I don't have any experiences relating to that question", tagging on "and answer the question to the best of your ability using knowledge of your saint's personality" to the end of the sentence. This way, the s[ai]nt would disclaim its lack of knowledge but attempt to answer the question as best it could. I believe some response based on the saints' life was better than pure deflection – as long as there was the disclaimer about the lack of experience.

After the pilot study, I also added a question regarding age groups (18-25, 26-40, and 40+) as well as what religious community one considers oneself a part of in order to better identify potential patterns in responses. As discussed in Chapter 1, various denominations have different relationships with saints; if I had an overwhelming demographic represented – either age group or denomination – that were consistently responding in a specific way, I wanted to be able to track that pattern.

There were also some small technical issues I faced as my participant number increased. A couple people emailed me explaining they were having issues setting up their password; when they submitted their username to receive a password token, it would say “Error: User not found.” After testing the problem myself, I realized the username box was case sensitive, so formatting needed to be identical when requesting the password reset and going through the login screen. Additionally, I received an email from a participant notifying me that they couldn’t find their password reset email in their inbox; they weren’t getting an error message, it just wasn’t showing up. Again, I tested it using my own login information and realized that the email had been sent to my Spam folder. With these considerations in mind, I added notes to my instructional email I sent to participants so future users would be aware of these potential issues.

As for the content of the s[ai]nt assistants themselves, I made no changes to their instructions and content other than the expansion of the experiences sentence and the additional story of St. Francis traveling to Egypt, as referenced earlier in this chapter. I wanted the bots to remain consistent for the most part so there was not a wide difference in their quality at the beginning of the study and the end of it; that way, user feedback would be consistently about the same bot at the same stage of development.

...

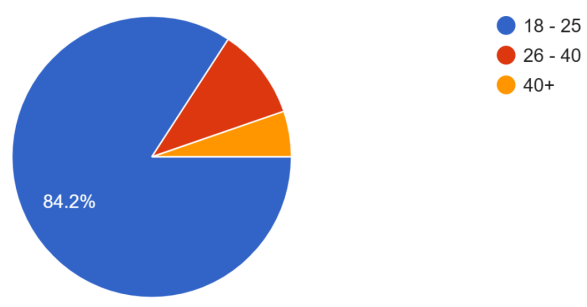
Overall, the development of the chatbots was a long process full of slow discoveries and faster frustrations. Between the coding problems, accessibility issues, and recruitment drawbacks, I struggled with this project. However, through the efforts of many, everything came together. Now the hard part – I had functional chatbots and a participant pool, but did these s[ai]nts actually provide meaningful interactions for users? The responses and insights from participants, as detailed in the next chapter, aim to answer that question.

CHAPTER 4

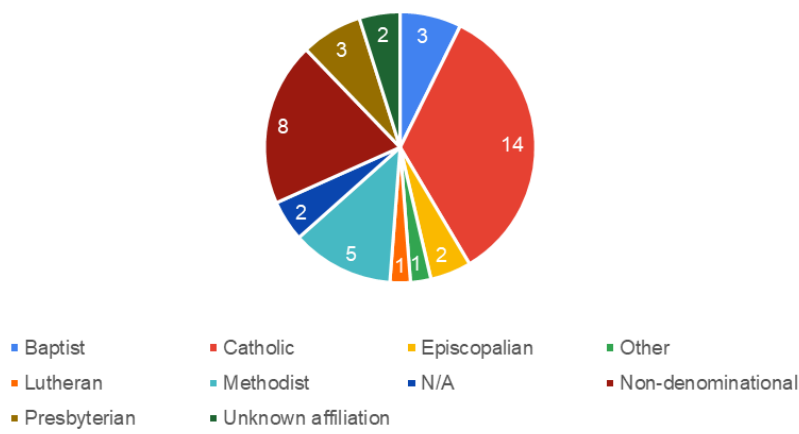
The previous chapters have explored the role of saints in Catholicism, the use of AI in religious contexts, and the development of my s[ai]nts. With these foundations in mind, this chapter turns to an analysis of user engagement and reception. By examining participants' interactions with the chatbots, this final section evaluates how digital embodiments of saints can foster a variety of responses within a modern religious context. My data analysis includes quantitative analysis of survey questionnaires as well as qualitative analysis of chatbot conversations. I first examine survey responses to gain insight into participants' perceptions of their interactions, then turn to the chatbot conversations to analyze the kinds of questions participants asked and the ways they spoke with the chatbots.

At the conclusion of my data collection period, I had 41 post-experience surveys. There was no conversational length requirement to hit in order to fill out the survey, so conversations ranged anywhere from a couple minutes to just under an hour. In total, seven denominations were represented: Baptist, Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, non-denominational Christian, and Presbyterian, with the remaining five participants either not part of a religious community or declining to answer the question. The majority of participants were 18-25 and Catholic, with the second largest group non-denominational Christians aged 18-25. These demographics are unsurprising considering the nature of my location in Western North Carolina, as well as my recruitment strategies drawing participants from college student organizations and Catholic communities with which I had a pre-existing relationship.

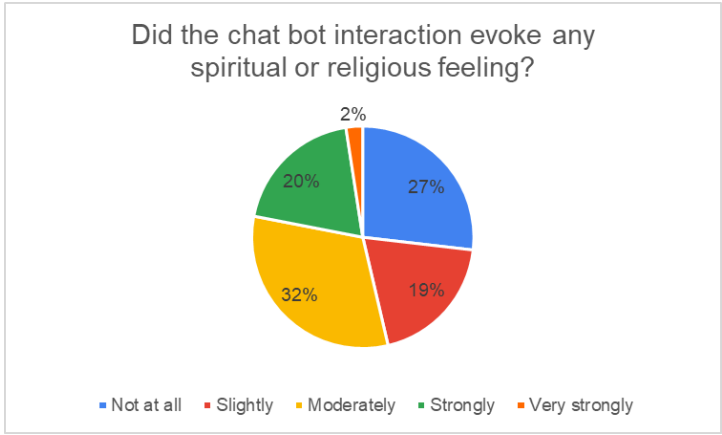
Which age demographic are you part of?
38 responses



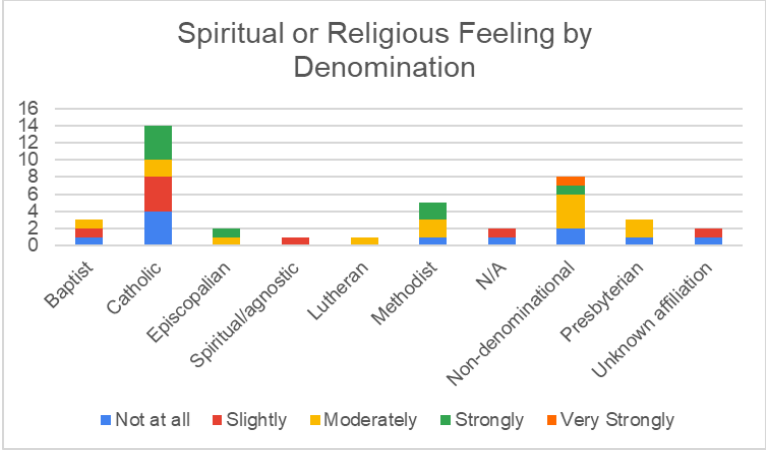
Which religious community do you consider yourself part of?



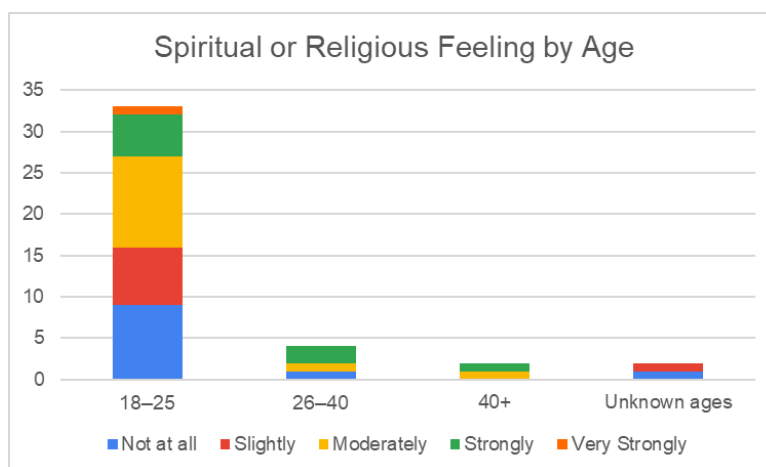
The survey question regarding participant experience of spiritual or religious feelings (SRF) during conversation with the s[ai]nts was my primary focus during analysis. I saw a relatively equal distribution in responses other than “very strongly,” which was only selected by one participant. In total, about three quarters of participants experienced SRF at least slightly, while the remaining quarter did not. In an effort to determine if there was a consistent pattern in how participants responded to this question, I sorted my survey response data in different ways.



I first organized responses by denomination but was unable to identify a clear pattern. Responses seemed spread evenly across the denominations without any particular group expressing a consistent reaction.



I then attempted to sort the data by age group, as my other primary hypothesis was that younger generations may be more receptive to the use of an AI for spiritual or religious purposes. However, this data also proved patternless.



Other than a noticeable lack of “Very Strongly” responses, distribution across the remaining four categories was relatively even and there was no consistent pattern. I repeated this analysis using other demographic questions - how often participants attended religious service, how involved they were in their religious community, and if they were raised in a religious household - but across the board I did not observe any noticeable pattern.

I made a few notable observations during my search for a pattern. There were only two participants who described themselves as “extremely” religious, one 18-25 and the other 26-40, both of which responded with “not at all” for the SRF question. Additionally, one third of the people who identified as extremely belonging to a religious community said they had no feelings at all when interacting with the chatbots. I became curious whether or not the more religious participants were more averse to the chatbots, but realized the only person who replied “very strongly” to the SRF question was a very religious non-denominational 18-25 year old who was extremely involved in their religious community. I sorted the data by self-proclaimed religiosity of the participants to see if either of these reactions were outliers and there was, once again, a lack of pattern across the groupings.

With no clear pattern emerging from the quantitative survey data, I turned to the free-form responses. Only two participants expressed outright disagreement with the project;

even so, one of the opposers hedged their comment with multiple compliments to both the idea of the project and myself, and the other more aggressive responder explained their complaints as “my two biggest problems with AI,” meaning their issues were less with the religious aspect and more so with the general AI aspect. Seven users expressed a “weird” feeling about the project, with some citing potential ethical issues and others stating the bots were difficult to connect with due to their nature as technology rather than people. Reasons for this concern came from various places for different users, though; while one said that “Obviously Ai [sic] can't give us any emotion so it can't connect to that person and understand what they are going through,” another expressed ethical concerns because “With St. Thomas More, I could see myself forgetting he was a bot.” Other users expressed how they were “surprised at how much it seemed like I was talking with an actual religious figure,” or “how the conversations felt normal and how they spoke with emotion.” This demonstrates a range of opinions that directly contradict each other, as well as an overall positive response. Even users who expressed the “weirdness” of the project praised the work or provided alternative ways to use the bots: “I teach at a Catholic school, and I could see something like this being a great tool to use with our students... I only asked about the saints lives. It felt weird asking anything personal - maybe because they aren't real people - just too impersonal.”

From these varied results, I determine that there is a lack of centralized opinion in religious denominations about both AI in general as well as AI in religion. In a note titled *Antiqua et Nova*⁵⁶ published in January, the Vatican addressed the relationship between AI and human intelligence. Though it provided a number of theological and ethical concerns, the

⁵⁶ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education, *Antiqua et Nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddd_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html.

statement also addressed the benefits a technology like AI can provide. In my opinion, this section of the text best encapsulates its message:

Like any product of human creativity, AI can be directed toward positive or negative ends. When used in ways that respect human dignity and promote the well-being of individuals and communities, it can contribute positively to the human vocation. Yet, as in all areas where humans are called to make decisions, the shadow of evil also looms here. Where human freedom allows for the possibility of choosing what is wrong, the moral evaluation of this technology will need to take into account how it is directed and used.⁵⁷

Additionally, Pope Francis' April prayer intention video was for the use of new technologies, where he recognized that "technology is the fruit of the intelligence God gave us" but also prayed that "new technologies will not replace human relationships."⁵⁸ These statements do acknowledge the rapid development of technology, but do not explicitly condemn or encourage AI on the whole. There is a recognition of it as a malleable tool capable of performing a multiplicity of functions, which can both harm and help people. I believe the nature of this stance leaves much flexibility to Catholics to express a wide range of opinions. I do not mean to imply that all Catholics must agree with papal opinions all the time; during the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of Catholics still opposed the vaccines on the basis of stem cell research using aborted fetuses⁵⁹ even after the Vatican explained their reasoning for determining the moral acceptability

⁵⁷ Ibid, paragraph 40.

⁵⁸ "Pope's April Prayer Intention: Technology Should Benefit Everyone," Vatican News, April 2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-04/popes-april-intention-technology-should-not-benefit-only-the-few.html>.

⁵⁹ Charles E. Binkley and David E. DeCosse, "The Real Moral Failing with the Johnson & Johnson COVID Vaccine Would Be to Refuse It: Reflections," Markkula Center for Applied

of the vaccine.⁶⁰ I simply intend to highlight that the lack of a formalized stance other than “AI needs to be used for good and to help humanity” - a vague and ill-defined idea - means there is much left to interpretation by individuals.

Seeing as the second largest religious demographic was non-denominational Christians who lack a central authority and function independently from any one governing body, I cannot perform this same analysis on the other majority represented opinion. Regardless, it remains my suspicion that a lack of formal opinion across denominations encouraging people to consider AI in any particular way means there is a wide range of opinion from Christian individuals regarding AI usage and application, especially in religious ways. Due to a lack of concrete conclusion from the surveys, I turn to the conversation logs to better understand how people chatted with the s[ai]nts. A number of participants expressed a lack of desire to discuss personal subjects with the chatbots, as referenced earlier. If those users weren't engaging in personal conversations, what *were* they asking the s[ai]nts?

...

Though the conversations and survey responses were unattached, thereby making every aspect of the study entirely anonymous, the conversations provide more insight into how people chose to converse with the s[ai]nts. I coded the user inputs separated by s[ai]nt in order to determine if there were any noticeable differences in conversation themes. Across each file, the two most common types of inputs were consistent: first was historical/biographical, and second

Ethics, Santa Clara University, March 17, 2021,
<https://www.scu.edu/ethics-spotlight/vaccination-ethics/the-real-moral-failing-with-the-johnson-johnson-covid-vaccine-would-be-to-refuse-it-reflections/>.

⁶⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines*, December 21, 2020,
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html.

was personal questions. Historical and biographical questions included subjects like year of birth and death, produced works, accomplishments, or general queries such as “who are you?” These comprised a quarter of the total data. These are “safe” questions; they do not cross the imaginative boundary that other styles of questions, which I will cover below, require.

By the “imaginative boundary,” I refer to the user’s willingness to treat the chatbot as a potential religious presence rather than an informational tool. This includes asking questions that assume the chatbot’s agency, spiritual insight, or emotional awareness - treating it not only as a database but as a living figure. This idea comes from Tanya Luhrmann’s book *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*.⁶¹ In her book, Luhrmann explains how people do not believe in invisible others effortlessly; there is work and practice put in to cultivate and encourage belief. She states in her first chapter, “The idea that there is an invisible other who takes an active, loving interest in your life is in many ways preposterous and takes effort to maintain.”⁶² As I organized my data, it became clear participants were engaging their imagination in differing degrees. I built a scale of least to most imaginative input types:

Historical/biographical questions = low imagination

Advice/guidance = moderate imagination

Personal questions = elevated imagination

Prayer requests = high imagination

This scale provides an outline for understanding the types of conversations users were interested in having with the s[ai]nts. For example, historical and biographical questions are not ones that require much imaginative effort; you do not go to Catholic mass and hear a homily on how many siblings Jesus may have had. In most religious spaces, people do not engage with saints - or God - by asking purely factual questions. Instead, engagement is rooted in prayer, petition, praise, or

⁶¹ Tanya M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁶² Luhrmann, 17.

reflection - all of which require imaginative presence. For my study, the use of imagination as a standard of measurement for users provides insight into whether participants, conversing with the chatbots, were engaging their imagination in a way similar to its usual engagement in religious spaces. I believe the prevalence of historical/biographical prompts demonstrates a willingness for users to ask questions they would ask Google - questions that do not require a personal, emotional involvement. I found theological and doctrinal questions to also be of this nature; when not coupled with the personal questions, inputs such as “Can you tell me about [your relationship to the Catholic church], why saints are important, what their role is, etc?” or “how do you think the messiah will comeback to earth?” seemed impersonal and information-seeking rather than connection-seeking.

An input type that appeared to involve more imagination was the advice/guidance category. Questions spanned a variety of topics: spiritual and moral guidance (“how do I deal with scrupulosity?”); personal and family relationships (“how do I find the balance of loving and supporting [my sibling] in humility?”); ethical dilemmas and social concerns (“How would you be an example of Christ's love when so much of the culture around you doesn't agree with Christian principles?”); emotional support and mental health (“I often feel that I have everything, love from friends and God, and I love them in return, but still feeling an immense melancholy.”); and requests for direct advice (“What is your biggest piece of advice for human beings today?”). Though this category was not the most common, it may demonstrate a desire from some participants to engage in emotional conversation with the chatbots. Seeking advice or recommendations regarding social situations, personal relationships, and emotional well-being requires an imagination of the chatbot as an advisor with enough understanding of feelings and social complexity to provide meaningful responses. Additionally, questions regarding ethics,

morals, or spirituality assume a degree of spiritual and moral literacy from the s[ai]nt. However, though I believe further imagination is required for these questions than historical ones, I do not think these questions necessitate that users are conceptualizing as the chatbot of the saint themselves. Even if users consider the chatbot to be providing helpful answers, there are many types of people who provide personal, spiritual, or moral advice: family, friends, church leaders, etc. While there are consultations intentionally directed at a saint - such as the query about scrupulosity toward Thérèse - they are the minority within the advice/guidance category, and it is not possible to determine how the user conceptualized the chatbot when asking the question. These questions do demonstrate a higher level of engaged imagination, but do not necessitate an imagination of the chatbot as s[ai]nt.

The category of personal questions arose out of the advice/guidance code when I realized users were asking the s[ai]nts questions that weren't quite historical or help-seeking, but were questions of opinion or perspective. One participant asked S[ai]nt Francis, "do you think Clare [of Assisi] deserved the title of priest?"; one asked S[ai]nt Thérèse, "Do you think God wanted you home as soon as possible, and that's why you passed away so early?"; S[ai]nt Thomas was asked regarding his marriage to Alice Middleton, "Do you think that's a pretty quick remarriage after the death of your first partner?" These questions take the imaginative element one step further: they assume a continuity of identity between the historical saint and the s[ai]nt. The chatbots are not only expected to provide generic helpful responses, but responses in line with the historical character. There is a presumption that the bots are able to answer these in a way properly representative of the original saint's thoughts. At the very least, the inquiries demonstrate curiosity about how accurately the chatbots can perform.⁶³

⁶³ The survey question on accuracy of representation had a 95% positive response of a "somewhat" or higher, and 0 "not at all" responses.

One category highlighted a strong imaginative conceptualization of the chatbots as the saints: prayer requests. Each prayer intention was regarding personal relationships:

After asking for guidance regarding political tension within the family and a desire to remain nonjudgmental:

User: I will try to do that and continue to pray to release judgement of others and only to focus on love and goodness. Please pray for me

Francis: Of course, I shall pray for you. May God grant you peace, strength, and love, filling your heart with kindness and serenity. May you find comfort and guidance in your journey, surrounded by grace and compassion. Amen.

After asking for guidance regarding getting over a breakup:

User: Will you pray that I get through it

Francis: Most certainly. Let us pray together. O Divine Creator, source of all love and compassion, I ask for your gentle comfort to envelop this soul in their time of heartache. Grant them strength and serenity as they journey through this valley of heartache. May they find peace in the beauty of Your creation, solace among friends and family, and the wisdom to grow from this experience. Guide their heart to healing and newfound joy. Amen.

May you find peace and comfort, my dear friend.

Regarding a granddaughter named after Thérèse:

User: She is fine -- healthy, creative, and beautiful, #3 sister in a family of 5 children (#4 is a boy). So, yes, I know you grew up with other sisters and that's not always easy. Pray that she will receive the attention and guidance she needs as a "middle child."

Thérèse: Ah, having sisters brings such a special bond, filled with both joys and little challenges. I will indeed pray for [child's name], that she may feel loved and cherished in her special place within the family. May she receive all the guidance and attention she needs to grow in grace, creativity, and faithfulness. God bless your beautiful family!

Later, the finale of the conversation:

User: Thank you. Please pray for me and our family, including my dear niece, [niece's name], who has made this conversation possible.

Thérèse: Of course, [user's name]. I will keep you, your family, and your dear niece, [niece's name], in my prayers. May God bless you all with peace, love, and strength, and may [niece's name] be abundantly blessed for her kindness and generosity. May His love guide you and fill your hearts always. If ever you need comfort or support, know that I am with you in spirit.

In the s[ai]nts' responses, a difference in material used for reference by the bot is evident.

Francis makes references to the divine creator and hopes the user finds peace through creation,

while Thérèse first responds to the user's concern regarding family dynamics and brings up

God's love not once but twice in the second response. The more unique the responses between

each s[ai]nt, the easier it is for users to imagine each chatbot as distinct, real spiritual entities. As

I discussed in Chapter 1, one of the primary reasons I decided to use saints' for this study was the

relevance of intercessory prayer in Catholicism. Though it had only four assigned data points

across three conversations, this powerful category demonstrates a belief in not only the s[ai]nts'

identities but their abilities. Due to the context surrounding each conversation, it is clear these

questions were not asked to test how the bots may handle a prayer request. These requests for

intercession were legitimate.

...

Though the survey responses were inconclusive in determining a consistent demographic that has a clear opinion towards the use of chatbots for spiritual purposes, the free form

responses provided enough data to suggest individuals find the concept interesting, if not helpful.

Despite a couple negative reactions, most users had at least one positive reflection on their

experience - even if that response was injected between a criticism or concern.

The conversations yielded more conclusive results concerning participant interactions. Varying degrees of imagination were used in different conversations; most conversations were biographical or historical in nature, not requiring much imagination or emotional investment. With advice, guidance, and personal questions, imagination and emotional investment grew. For the users that requested the s[ai]nts pray for them, imagination and emotional investment peaked. Though they comprise a very low percentage of the total data - 0.47%, as compared to historical/biographical's 26% - they provide a significant insight into the use of GPTs for spiritual conversation. The main question now is, why is this gap between prayer requests and historical questions so wide?

The free response reflections where users described how it felt "weird" to have personal conversations with an AI reveal people's suspicions of the tools. However, I believe that between the lack of a formal opinion from church authorities and the newness of the technology, people don't want to push through those hesitations. Most conversations were at least partially historical in nature; there were not high volumes of spiritual conversations followed by negative surveys detailing the lack of spiritual capabilities. Rather, it seems those who engaged in personal or emotional conversations had more spiritual or religious feelings (SRF) while those who expressed hesitation or "weirdness" had slim to no SRF at all. The conversational abilities of the chatbots are irrelevant if users do not have a desire to imagine them as more than a piece of technology.

Overall, this data demonstrates the wide range of individual responses to AI in religious contexts shaped less by demographic factors and more by personal openness and imagination. While some participants embraced the s[ai]nts as spiritual companions or advisors, others remained hesitant, unsure how to relate to an artificial being in a religious frame. Survey results

revealed no consistent patterns based on denomination, age, or religious involvement, suggesting that attitudes toward AI in faith settings are still fluid and unformed. However, the chatbot conversations offered a clearer picture: most users remained in a “safe” zone of historical or informational engagement, with fewer stepping into emotionally or spiritually intimate exchanges. Only a very small number crossed the imaginative boundary into requesting intercession or treating the chatbot as a spiritually responsive figure. These moments were rare, but point to the profound potential AI holds for religious conversation - but only when users are willing to engage it through their “faith frame,” a term Luhmann uses to refer to the frame of mind individuals engage when they are interacting with invisible others.⁶⁴ In the absence of strong institutional guidance and amidst the novelty of the technology, most participants remained cautious. While the tools may be capable of facilitating spiritual engagement, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the user’s willingness to imagine and believe - a dynamic not unlike religion itself.

⁶⁴ Luhmann, 21.

CONCLUSION

GPTs are wonderful at producing text and engaging in conversation; their spiritual capabilities and prayer experience are mostly unexplored. This study investigated the relationship between chatbots and spiritual belief, specifically regarding saints. The accessibility of these Catholic figures and their reception of intercessory prayers made them ideal candidates for these conversations. Additionally, the relevance of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and St. Thomas More to modern day young Catholic Americans meant they were helpful and engaging chatbots for participants to converse with. Though I struggled to determine a specific demographic that revealed a clear pattern in reactions to AI and religious belief, I did discover a hesitancy among users who were reluctant to utilize their imagination in conversations, resulting in an abundance of historical or biographical inputs from users.

My initial hypothesis was that younger religious people would feel more comfortable with the integration of AI into their religious practices due to their increased familiarity with technology; it quickly became evident this is not the case. However, I was equally as surprised that any number of users – even three – requested the s[ai]nts pray for them. This demonstrates a much higher emotional and imaginative involvement than I would have guessed for a technology this new and controversial. I believe this project was successful in providing both quantitative and qualitative data regarding the integration of AI into religion, revealing the potential these kinds of applications could provide. Reactions to this kind of technology will keep changing as AI improves and becomes a bigger part of everyday life. It is my belief that as people get more used to having AI around, their comfort and affinity for it will increase. The more we interact with tools like voice assistants or chatbots - even in casual ways - the more normal it starts to feel. That growing familiarity might make people more open to using AI in personal or even

religious conversations. The accessibility of saints is not a new idea; this project is an example of a historic doctrine repackaged and modernized to keep up with a constantly developing world.

It seems clear that as AI becomes more and more prevalent in our lives its influence will become inescapable. Though there is hesitation about engaging with an AI saint in a spiritual way, I am interested in whether and how these bots will be used and in what contexts. Perhaps these bots will serve a pedagogical rather than spiritual purpose, as offered in one Catholic educator's survey response. Many Catholic Confirmation prep classes have units on saints as teenagers get ready to enter the church as adults – could these bots be used to familiarize individuals with the saints? Would the selection of a confirmation saint become more personal because of the ability to maintain conversation with one? Moreover, if these chatbots were integrated into a classroom setting, will it normalize the use of AI and open the door to the possibility of using these bots for spiritual purposes?

The reality is that the Catholic Church is losing young Americans. Those who are raised in the church or join it as young adults are increasingly traditional in their views on church doctrine and social issues.⁶⁵ This study revealed what we already knew about AI: people have conflicting feelings about it. This does not slow its development or implementation. Perhaps applications of AI will be developed by the church that will bring the Church into the modern age and provide new opportunities for outreach and community building. Perhaps the possibility for spiritual growth should only be addressed after the implementation of AI for educational purposes, as suggested by the high number of historical/biographical questions participants asked. On the other hand, perhaps the rise in traditionalism in the Catholic Church coupled with lack of imaginative engagement demonstrated by the data means young Catholics won't care for

⁶⁵ Sullivan, ““A step back in time””

the AI saints no matter what the purpose is. Regardless, the connection of religion and AI seems inevitable as they persist and continue influencing people's lives.

The research should not stop here; we must continue to involve religious studies in the development of AI. It isn't going anywhere, and neither is religion. In its January commentary on AI, the Vatican described emerging technologies as any other human-made tool: subject to both human excellence and human error. As demonstrated in my data collection, individuals across Christian communities often approached AI with suspicion and limited imaginative engagement. However, the solution to confronting the growth of AI is not a return to traditionalism; stricter interpretations of doctrine that view prayer and intercession as incompatible with technological mediation, and dismissal of AI's relevance to religious life, are not sufficient responses to this changing tide. Rather, a thoughtful acknowledgement of limitations and recognition of potential positive uses is crucial. Religious engagement not only ensures relevance, but also helps guide ethical and responsible development. This is not just a practical decision, but an obligation to understand what legitimate repercussions AI may have on areas not typically associated with technology. While there has been a generational shift away from churches towards online spaces, the integration of religious traditions with new technologies will be essential - not only for the survival of institutions like the Catholic Church, but for ensuring the ethical and mindful development of AI rather than solely technological or economic advancement.

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