

AI and the church



At the intersection of science and religion is an emerging topic around the nature and purpose of artificial intelligence. The church needs to understand and be prepared to have a dialogue with the current generation around these new realities. In its ancient and ever-new wisdom, the church can lead the way to a more human experience of technology and continue its mission to teach and sanctify in the metaverse.



FATHER ROSS MICELI is the pastor of St. Jude Parish in Erie. He has a passion for technology.

Focusing on a theology of technology will hopefully continue an ongoing conversation around the nature of technology in the life of the church and the life of a Christian.

I start out each day talking to my Alexa device in the bathroom. "Alexa, what time is it? What's the weather?"

On my way to morning Mass, I'll check my emails, update apps and maybe check out Bishop Barron's daily reflection.

Afterward, I go to my Google calendar and review the day, making sure I have the right dates and times for things, and then we usually review them as a team in the office with a shared calendar so we all know what everyone is doing without having to ask a lot of questions. All our events — internal and external — are synced.

When I go to my car — a Model 3 Tesla — my phone syncs and auto-programs my map to the next destination on my calendar: visiting a parishioner or heading to the next meeting off-campus.

The rest of the day is taking phone calls, answering texts, listening to an audiobook, recording a podcast, ordering lunch, etc. — all on my smartphone.

My phone contains my credit cards, gym membership, car insurance cards and pretty much anything else I could need. My smart watch is also synced with all of the above. I can literally leave my phone at home and do almost anything with just my watch.

The last thing I do at night is say to Alexa, "Turn off bedroom," and all my lights shut off. If I forget to say goodnight to my device, it is programmed to listen for me to snore and turn off the lights for me, knowing that I am already asleep.

This is the life of a millennial.

A few years ago, Pew researcher and President Michael Dimock offered insight into the changes in generational technology, stating, "Technology, in particular the rapid evolution of how people communicate and interact, is another generation-shaping consideration. Baby boomers grew up as television expanded dramatically, changing their lifestyles and connection to the world in fundamental ways. Generation X grew up as the computer revolution was taking hold, and millennials came of age during the internet explosion."

Technological change is part of every generation. Generation Z has grown into early adulthood with those changes as an integral part of their lives. It's hard for us to remember, but the iPhone came out in 2007, when most of Gen Z was about 10 years old. They have experienced the internet primarily through mobile "always-on" devices. Millennials quickly adapted to the rapid changes of their time, while for anyone born after 1996, the modern world and its technology are simply a regular part of life.

The implications of growing up in an always-on technological environment are only now coming into focus. Recent research has shown dramatic shifts in youth behaviors, attitudes and lifestyles — both positive and concerning — for those who came of age in this era. What we don't know is whether these are lasting generational imprints or characteristics of adolescence that

"If you create other things that think for themselves, a serious theological disruption will occur ... If humans were to create free-willed beings, absolutely every single aspect of traditional theology would be challenged and have to be reinterpreted in some capacity."

This isn't new territory for the pope. In 2020, the Vatican, along with Microsoft and IBM, endorsed the Rome Call for AI Ethics — a policy document containing six general principles that should guide the deployment of artificial intelligence. These include transparency, inclusion, impartiality and reliability, all sensible attributes when it comes to deploying algorithms.

Kevin Kelly, an author and co-founder of *Wired* magazine, claims: "If you create other things that think for themselves, a serious theological disruption will occur ... If humans were to create free-willed beings, absolutely every single aspect of traditional theology would be challenged and have to be reinterpreted in some capacity."

Interestingly, Kelly, who was raised Catholic, has already begun to advocate for the development of "a catechism for robots," adding that he takes the idea "very seriously." I just hope they don't call it Robocat after the famous YouCat series of modern catechisms.

He stated: "There will be a point in the future when these free-willed beings that we've made will say to us, 'I believe in God. What do I do?'" At that point, we should have a response."

While Kelly, and those willing to entertain



his ideas, claim robots will one day require and may even ask for conversion, very few believe robots will ever have a soul, primarily because it is a God-given gift passed from God to all of humanity.

Should robots begin to experience emotions, consciousness and self-awareness, Stephen Hawking claimed AI "would take off on its own and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate."

Artificial intelligence is just that — artificial. The good news for us is that the church still has a purpose and a place in soci-

ety. We can either ignore the advances of technology altogether, or we can advocate for their rightful use in the advancement of civil society and for the advancement of a more equitable future for all — a way to increase access to education, clean drinking water, sharing of basic human rights and adding to the dignity of every human being and more.

Humans will still need to interact with every aspect of technology now and in the future. Sometimes we will initiate things, and other times we will be the beneficiaries of things already processed by technology. Health care is rapidly becoming AI-driven.

Many decisions around pain therapy are already calculated by computer models. Surgeries are performed with robotics. And there is more access to doctors via telehealth.

No matter the platform or virtual reality space, the need to engage people both in the real world and the metaverse will require a church that is in the world and not of the world — a church that is in the metaverse and not of the metaverse. We can't pretend this isn't happening.

Maybe someday there will be an office in each diocese for Artificial Intelligence, the Metaverse and Social Advancement.

Until then, we can all do our part to listen, learn and live our Catholic faith each day. It just might make a difference for someone trying to figure out what exactly Catholicism can add to the future of human existence and technological progress.

Wired magazine proposes there could be a point in the future when these free-willed beings that we've made will say to us, 'I believe in God. What do I do?' "At that point," *Wired* author Kevin Kelly says, "we should have a response."

Dear (young man),

If you have been searching for a meaningful purpose in life, a life dedicated to serving others, then I would like to invite you to consider the vocation of Catholic priesthood. The priesthood is a noble and rewarding calling that has the potential to change the lives of countless people for the better.

As a Catholic priest, you will have the opportunity to serve God and your community in a profound way. You will be called upon to preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments and provide pastoral care to the members of your community. You will also have the chance to lead others in prayer, provide guidance and support to those who are struggling, and help to build a sense of community and belonging within your parish.

At a time when the world is facing so many challenges, the role of the Catholic priest is more important than ever. As a priest, you will have the opportunity to offer hope and comfort to those who are struggling, to bring people together in love and compassion and to help others find meaning and purpose in their lives.

If you are considering the vocation of Catholic priesthood, I would encourage you to speak with a priest or spiritual director who can help guide you on your journey. They can help you discern whether this is truly your calling and can provide support and encouragement as you begin your studies and formation.

Becoming a Catholic priest requires a significant commitment of time and energy, but the rewards are immeasurable. You will have the opportunity to live a life of service and sacrifice, to make a difference in the lives of others and to deepen your relationship with God. You will also have the support of a community of like-minded individuals who share your passion for service and faith.

It is a calling that can change your life and the lives of those around you for the better. May God bless you on your journey.

Sincerely,

That letter was written by a computer. It's probably the best letter I've ever read inviting a young man to consider the priesthood. Some might argue it's lacking "spirit," but, to paraphrase Pope Francis, social media posts and ads are useless marketing without the power of the Holy Spirit. Feel free to steal it and add your own spiritual comments. †

— Father Ross Miceli