

AI as a Homiletic Assistant: a Case Study for the Feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul

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Abstract: *As part of an initiative of the Lilly Endowment, Catholic Theological Union has partnered with the Attention, Perception and Experience [APEX] neuroscience lab of the University of Chicago to discover if there is an empirically verifiable basis for “compelling preaching.” As this project has evolved, AI has become an important partner. This paper will explore one aspect of the interface between AI and effective preaching: the creation of a virtual homily builder grounded in a database of approximately 600 homilies authored by the program director. This experimental information bank is being used for both analyzing preaching patterns and generating future homily outlines. This article provides a general view of the digital preaching landscape and then narrates a specific experiment with this “imitator” for preaching the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul on 29 June 2025.*

Introduction

While not all futurists agree with him, computer scientist and inventor Raymond Kurzweil’s work on the law of accelerating returns has prompted him to predict that in the 21st century the world will experience the equivalent of 20,000 years of progress at today’s rate of progress.¹ Kurzweil notes that among those developments we will see pilotless aircraft, human-level AI, synthetic telepathy, and successful nuclear fusion.² While he does ponder a future emergence of a “technological transcendence” in which advanced AI could facilitate new forms of meaning or even worship,³ he makes no specific predictions about AI assuming the roles of pastor or preacher. Maybe because this has already come to pass.

The intersection of religion and AI has produced some startling results over the past three decades. These include spiritual robotics such as the Daruma doll grounded in the Zen-Buddhist tradition, the Catholic saint-like SanTO with rudimentary praying and talking abilities, the robot monk Xianer that, among other things, can lead visitors to the Longquan Monastery in Beijing in their meditation.⁴ While developing more slowly, there is not only a growing number of apps,

¹ Ray Kurzweil, “Understanding the Accelerating Rate of Change,” *Perspectives on Business Innovation*, 2 May 2003, reprinted on KurzweilAI.net, accessed [3.vii.2025], <https://www.thekurzweillibrary.com/understanding-the-accelerating-rate-of-change>.

² Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005).

³ Kurzweil, *The Singularity*, 387–390.

⁴ See the overview of religious robots in Jonas Simmerlein and Max Tretter, “Robots in Religious Practices: A Review,” *Theology and Science* 22, no. 2 (2024): 255–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2024.2351639>; also Simon Balle, “Theological Dimensions of Humanlike Robots: A Roadmap for Theological Inquiry,” *Theology and Science* 21, no. 1 (2022): 132–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2022.2155916>; Simon Balle and Charles Ess, “Robots, Ethics and Digital Religion: Initial Considerations,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion*, eds. Heidi Campbell and Pauline Hope Cheong (2022), 562–79, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197549803.013.27>; William Gaver et al., “The Prayer Companion,” paper presented at the 28th Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2010, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/1753326.1753640>; Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial*

websites, and AI tools designed to assist in sermon preparation,⁵ but there are already virtual preachers appearing across various religions. In 2023, a Lutheran congregation in Bavaria held a service in which the sermon was generated by ChatGPT and delivered by an avatar of a bearded Black man on a huge screen in the sanctuary.⁶ Since early 2019, the Android preacher known as Minda has been regularly giving 25-minute sermons at the Zen Buddhist Kōdai-ji Temple.⁷

The debate over whether to use some form of AI when preparing a sermon or homily has been lively.⁸ Yet there seems to be an emerging consensus that employing AI as a tool rather than

Intelligence, and Virtual Reality (Oxford University Press, 2010); Löffler, Jörn Hurtienne, and Ilona Nord, "Blessing Robot BlessU2: A Discursive Design Study to Understand the Implications of Social Robots in Religious Contexts," *International Journal of Social Robotics* 13 (2021): 569–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-019-00558-3>; Scott Midson, "Posthuman Priests: Exploring the 'New Visibility of Religion' in Robotic Representations of Religious Rituals," *Religions* 13, no. 10 (2022): 941, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100941>; Ilona Nord and Charles Ess, "Robotics in Christian Religious Practice: Reflections on Initial Experiments in This Field," available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370600338_Robotics_In_Christian_Religious_Practice_Reflections_On_Initial_Experiments_In_This_Field; Anna Puzio, "A NAO Robot Performing Religious Practices," *ET-Studies* 15, no. 1 (2024): 129–40, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anna-Puzio/publication/381003073_A_NAO_Robot_Performing_Religious_Practices/links/6658e86f0b0d284574759539/A-NAO-Robot-Performing-Religious-Practices.pdf; Joseph Roso: Joseph Roso, "The Uses of Technology in Twenty-First Century Congregational Worship: A Report from the National Congregations Study," *Liturgy* 38, no. 4 (2023): 3–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2023.2260706>; Jonas Simmerlein (2024): Jonas Simmerlein, "Sacred Meets Synthetic: A Multi-Method Study on the First AI Church Service," *Review of Religious Research* 0, no. 0 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X241282962>; Simona Stano, "Dis- and Re-Embodiment in Religious Practices: Semiotic, Ethical, and Normative Implications of Robotic Officiants," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law – Revue Internationale De Sémiotique Juridique* 37, no. 4 (December 20, 2023): 1209–21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-023-10078-z>; William Young, "Reverend Robot: Automation and Clergy," *Zygon* 54, no. 2 (2019): 479–500, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12515>.

⁵ E.g., AI for work at <https://www.aiforwork.co/prompt-articles/chatgpt-prompt-rabbi-religious-services-prepare-a-sermon-b7337>; Logos at <https://www.logos.com>; Pastors.AI at <https://pastors.ai>; Pulpit AI Sermon Ai at <https://sermonai.com>; Sermon Illustrator at <https://www.newstartdiscipleship.com/post/a-free-sermon-illustration-tool>; Sermonary at <https://sermonary.com>; SermonPrep.ai at <https://chatgpt.com/g/g-zuGmaIq04-sermonprep-ai>; SermonsSend at <https://www.sermonsSend.com>; Sermonspark at <https://ai-for-churches.com/sermonspark/>; Verble at <https://www.verble.app/sermon/>.

⁶ "Can a Chatbot Preach a Good Sermon? Hundreds Attend Church Service Generated by ChatGPT to Find Out," *El País*, 10 June 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2023-06-10/can-a-chatbot-preach-a-good-sermon-hundreds-attend-church-service-generated-by-chatgpt-to-find-out.html>.

⁷ Erica Baffelli, "The Android and the Fax: Robots, AI and Buddhism in Japan," in *The Digital Turn in the Humanities* (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2021), 123–45.

⁸ Besides the innumerable blogs and videos debating the intersection of AI and preaching, articles include: En Rui Chua, "ChatGPT's Gospel Preaching Process: A Grounded Theory Study," *Authorea Preprints* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.23257727.v2>; Bin Hwang, "인공지능 시대의 도래에 따른 설교 윤리와 활용에 대한 개혁주의생명신학적 검토" [A Reformed Life Theological Examination of Preaching Ethics and Utilization in the Age of Artificial Intelligence], *복음과 실천신학* 68 (2023): 76–105; Ian Hussey, "Preaching and Generative AI: A Perspective from Early 2024," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 28, no. 2 (November 2024): 307–323; Rachael A. Keefe, "Where Is the Spirit? Reflections on Engaging AI in Sermon Preparation," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 79, no. 2 (April 2025): 136–144; Byung-Seok Kim, "급변하는 사회, 4차 산업혁명 인공지능(AI) 시대의 예배와 설교의 위치" [The Rapidly Changing Society, the Place of Worship and Preaching in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Period], *신학과 실천* 59 (2018): 153–182; Ian Nell, "Homiletical Competencies for the Fourth Industrial Revolution: South African Perspectives on Speaking Truth to Power," *International Journal of Homiletics* 6, no. 1 (2023): 105–120; Rob O'Lynn, "Wise Preaching: Furthering the

a substitute in sermon preparation is inevitable and can be both appropriate and ethical as long as certain parameters are in place.⁹

The Compelling Preaching Grant

In 2022, the Lilly Endowment launched its Compelling Preaching initiative, intended to foster more engaging and effective preaching by “cultivating practices among aspiring and active preachers that can help them to proclaim the gospel to a variety of audiences in more engaging and effective ways.”¹⁰ To date, the Endowment has provided sizeable grants to 140 schools, churches, and other organizations.¹¹

In 2023, Catholic Theological Union proposed a grant that would put preaching in dialogue with cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Key to that proposal is the Attention, Perception, and EXperience (APEX) lab at the University of Chicago under the leadership of Prof. Howard Nusbaum who became the principal investigator for the project.¹² This author is the program director. The program was designed to enable individual preachers to become more effective and to help those who teach homiletics boost the effectiveness of their students.¹³ The project is being conducted in both Spanish and English.

The project is unfolding in three phases. The first phase studied whether people could actually recognize homilies that the program director discerned to be compelling. The results, acquired through video reviews, online interviews, and a variety of cognitive and linguistic tools¹⁴ across both English- and Spanish-speaking participants was a clear “yes”: both experts and lay participants confirmed the classification of homilies as more or less effective, originally curated by the program director. With this first phase largely completed, enough empirical data emerged for the scientists to establish a working standard of what a strong or compelling homily sounds like.

Phase two is designed to determine the impact a more effective homily might have. This impact inquiry is particularly focused on five key moral virtues that the preaching consultants

Wisdom Homiletics Conversation in Both Model and Method,” *Religions* 15, no. 2 (2024): 240,

[https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020240\[2\]\[4\]](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020240[2][4]); Hyun-Shin Park, 챗GPT(ChatGPT)에 대한 실천신학적 조망: 챗GPT 설교에 대한 설교학적 비평을 중심으로, 복음과 실천신학, 2023; Woo Seung Pil, “Tools for 인공지능(A.I.: Artificial Intelligence) 시대의 선교전략: 선교지향적인 경험적 설교,” *복음과 선교*, 2024.

Jin-Ho Suh, “폴 틸리히의 신학의 관점에서 본 AI 설교의 가능성과 한계” [The Possibility and the Limitation of AI Preaching in Light of the Theology of Paul Tillich], *신학논단* 113 (September 2023): 165-192; Seung Pil Woo, “인공지능 (A.I.: Artificial Intelligence) 시대의 선교전략: 선교지향적인 경험적 설교” [Mission Strategy in the Age of A.I. (Artificial Intelligence): Mission-Oriented Experiential Preaching], *복음과 선교* 65 (2024): 195-223.

⁹ Dave Betts, “Can AI and Preaching Coexist? Three Ethical Ways to Use It Well,” *Church and AI*, 19 March, 2025, <https://www.churchandai.com/p/can-ai-and-preaching-coexist-three>.

¹⁰ <https://compellingpreaching.org/>

¹¹ <https://compellingpreaching.org/grantees>

¹² <https://apexlab.uchicago.edu/>

¹³ See the executive summary and other information about the project at <https://preachingandneuroscience.com/>

¹⁴ E.g., pupillary dilation studies, examinations of lexical-semantic predictors of compelling preaching, narrative transportation theory, and event segmentation studies.

confirmed were essential to effective preaching and that the scientists affirmed could be tested: can effective homilizing increase trust [in the community, the preacher, and God], increase hope, compassion, openness, or epistemic humility, and create memorability? This phase is moving forward by employing the same videos and the various linguistic and biophysical tools used in phase one, with additional studies utilizing EEGs and fMRIs.

Phase three will attempt to determine whether the project's findings can be translated so that homiletics teachers can employ them to nurture more effective preaching among their students. One major outcome will be the production of a series of online, open-access professional videos that both chronicle the work of the grant and present our findings in language understandable to those with no background in the sciences.

The Turn to AI

Late in phase one, the APEX team began to wonder whether it would be possible to create a virtual preacher that could be programmed with what we have learned from this project. Could our empirical findings, for example, be programmed into an AI system that would also be programmed with the Roman Catholic Lectionary, documents on Roman Catholic Preaching, the content and design of the Roman Catholic church year calendar, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and other relevant databases? Could we produce an AI preacher who could construct a homily for a specific feast or Sunday that is notably empathetic, engenders hope and trust in the listeners, prompts the listeners into a stance of epistemic humility, and is memorable?

When these musings first emerged, the APEX lab did not have the necessary hardware for creating such a digital preacher.¹⁵ Furthermore, with very little data on hand from the initial experiments underway, it was too early in the project to expend energy in this direction. However, one member of the team, David Falk, began a preliminary experiment with a "homily creator" based on texts from this author's homilies. For this experiment in January of 2025, I provided David with a compendium of about 600 of my stored homilies as Microsoft Word files.¹⁶ The goal was to create a large language model capable of generating a homily in my style. One of the presuppositions here is that my preaching is perceived as notably effective, something at least partially confirmed in phase I of the project and by other external sources.¹⁷

David first spent about 6 weeks formatting and labeling my homilies so they could be searched and imitated in creating a new homily. He then programmed in the liturgical calendar for all Sundays, solemnities, and holy days of obligation. This needed to be done for each year and in the context of the three cycles of the Roman Catholic Lection (A-B-C) as most Sunday celebrations (e.g., the 1st Sunday of Advent) fall on different dates each calendar year. The next step was to answer David's request to explain my style or method of homily composition, so that there was a broad homiletic framework the program could employ to generate a homily that imitated my homiletic approach. While I do not strictly follow any one pattern or model in my preaching, I am an admirer of Eugene Lowry. His insistence on introducing ambiguity very early

¹⁵ Subsequently, they have acquired a ThinkSystem SR630 V2 with 2x Intel 6346 processors, 64 total cores, 3.10 GHz, 1TB 3200MHz RAM, 960GB local SSD, and 4x L40S 48GB PCIe GPUs; more specifications at <https://www.itcreations.com/lenovo/lenovo-thinksystem-sr630-v2-server>.

¹⁶ 100+ of these are available on my website, edwardfoleycapuchin.org.

¹⁷ E.g., recipient of the 2022 Great Preacher's award from Aquinas Institute in St. Louis.

in the homily – his so-called "oops" move – is both appealing and, in my experience, very effective.¹⁸ I try to construct my homilies so as not to telegraph the summative points too early. Keeping the assembly a bit off balance through the unfolding of the homily is a useful strategy for maintaining their engagement throughout the homiletic event. Thus, I gave David an outline of Lowry's method as a final piece of programming. In early April 2025, I was given access to what David labeled the "Father Foley imitator."

The app is designed with four separate interfaces: 1) the liturgical calendar, which allows for browsing the current year's Roman Catholic calendar; 2) a discover scripture option, which allows for searching the bible by theme or question, 3) a homily explorer, which allows searching through the content of my stored homilies, and 4) an homily assistant, designed for writing, editing, and reviewing homilies in my voice.

The Feasts of St. Peter and Paul: a case study

For the past 18 years, I have been a guest preacher and presider at Old St. Patrick's Church in downtown Chicago. On 29 June 2025 I was scheduled to preach at the 9:00 a.m. Eucharist, a Mass that is regularly livestreamed.¹⁹ While the Roman Catholic calendar places that Sunday in the cycle of "Ordinary Time," Sundays in this post-Easter segment of the calendar are sometimes displaced by major feasts. Thus, in 2025, 29 June, which fell on a Sunday, intersected with the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul. According to Roman Catholic liturgical directives, this solemnity has priority and displaces what should have been the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time. As preparing a homily is a time-consuming process, my preparation for the 29th began on 3 June. While I have explored the "imitator" before, I decided to engage it more systematically as a serious homiletic assistant in preparing my homily.

One note about the requirements of a Roman Catholic homily: contrary to a commonly held view, it is not a canonical requirement to preach the lectionary readings of the day. While in no way diminishing the biblical texts that comprise the Roman Catholic lectionary, the highest magisterial instruction on homilizing appears in the 1963 *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In paragraph 52 of that document, the Council instructs, "by means of the homily, the mysteries of the faith and the guiding principles of the Christian life are expounded from the sacred text during the course of the liturgical year."²⁰ While at first glance "sacred text" could appear to be a synonym for Scripture, the Vatican's first instruction in 1964, "on the orderly carrying out of the Constitution on the Liturgy" (*Inter Oecumenici*), teaches otherwise. It notes that "A homily on the sacred text means an explanation, pertinent to the mystery celebrated and the special needs of the listeners, of some point in either the readings from sacred Scripture or in another text from the Order of Prayer of the day's Mass."²¹ The current Roman Catholic code of canon law is similar, noting that "in the homily the

¹⁸ Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Expanded Edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Available at <https://livestream.oldstpatrs.org/sunday-9am-mass>.

²⁰ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

²¹ "Inter Oecumenici," 1964, in *Documents on the Liturgy 1963-1979*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 830.

mysteries of faith and the norms of Christian living are to be expounded from the sacred text through the course of the liturgical year.”²² Given this flexibility regarding the focus and content of the homily, I chose to preach “the mystery” of Peter and Paul, i.e., their shared feast day and notably different personalities and ministries reflected in the proper orations and preface, as well as the lection passages appointed for that day.²³

Preliminary work

Before engaging the “imitator,” I began my usual study of the lectionary readings and other proper texts for the feast. A key part of that study is attempting to discover some point of ambiguity à la Lowry that could be employed to “trouble” the feast and the mystery being celebrated. He analogizes this as the equivalent of providing an “itch” that the assembly needs to “scratch.” He further contends that to engage the assembly, this needs to happen within the first two or three minutes.²⁴

Two possible “oops” emerged from this preliminary study. The first is that Peter and Paul, although they share this single feast day, were very different people: a sort of sanctoral “odd couple.” The differences in their backgrounds, their missions, and their disagreement at the so-called Council of Jerusalem are reflected in the proper preface of the day, especially in the summary line “So each in a different way gathered together the one family of Christ.”²⁵ This seemed to be a fruitful launching point for acknowledging the multiple paths to service and holiness. A second problematizing of the feast arose from the Gospel verse “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.” This text is usually interpreted by Roman Catholics as the biblical foundation for papal primacy, even infallibility. So how does this passage and its traditional interpretations invite all the baptized into mission and holiness and not simply reinforce fealty to the pope? Is there a way to imagine the rock of Peter embedded in the granite of all believers and so connect his ministry with that of all the baptized? After settling on these two points of ambiguity, I engaged the imitator through 6 different prompts.

Prompt 1:

Create a 1400-word homily on the solemnity of St. Peter and Paul that emphasizes their very different lives and personalities, but that what unified them was a shared faith. The homily should reimagine the Scripture reading for the day in Matthew 16: the rock is not a single person ... Peter was an outcropping at the beginning of a church ... and the rock today is not simply the pope but also the community.

This prompt did not produce a preachable homily but did produce some useful language, phrases, and suggestions. Especially appealing were nascent descriptions of these two apostles, like that of Peter: “Peter, the rugged fisherman from Galilee: a man who carried his faith with impulsive hands, shifting between boldness and doubt, a man whose faith sometimes felt like a

²² Canon 767 § 1, *Code of Canon Law*, Book III: “The Teaching Function of the Church,” canons 756–780, Vatican website, accessed 3 July 2025, https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib3-cann756-780_en.html.

²³ 1st Reading: Acts 12:1-11; Responsorial Psalm: Psalms 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9 (R. 5) - “The angel of the Lord will rescue those who fear him”; 2nd Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; Alleluia: Matthew 16:18; Gospel: Matthew 16:13-19.

²⁴ Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 29.

²⁵ *The Roman Missal*, English translation according to the Third Typical Edition (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2011), 887.

wave he could ride and at other times the sea ready to pull him under." Also helpful was language that tried to place Peter the Rock into a larger community context: "what if the rock was not simply Peter alone? What if it is more like a rugged coastline made of many stones, all pressed together by the winds and waves of time? Peter might be one prominent outcropping, but never the entire shore."

Prompt 2:

Nuance this homily with an awareness of so much division in the world today and even in the church. But that difference did not make Peter and Paul enemies ... so why does it so often make us enemies?

This prompt did not produce a markedly better homily, though, as before, there were some useful images and language. Building on the first description of the apostles, this prompt enhanced that description: "The two of them together—church's founding figures, sure—but it does not take long to notice a kind of oppositional electricity between them. The brawn and the brain, the impulsive and the reflective, the man of the people and the man of letters, the conventionally Jewish disciple and the radical missionary to the Gentiles." Overall, however, this prompt did not generate a text worthy of proclaiming. The opening seemed especially bland and did not introduce sufficient ambiguity for launching the rest of the text.

Prompt 3:

Now, expanding to 1500 words, nuance this homily with an ending that emphasizes how, despite our different political, social, or religious views like Peter and Paul, what can unify us - as they did in their own time – is not simply talking the talk but walking the walk.

Since the texts for my homilies ordinarily run about 1600 words, which turns out to be about 10 or 11 minutes when preached, this prompt was meant to expand the text closer to this ordinary length. This result properly expanded to 1500 words and improved upon the description of Peter and Paul, e.g.: "Peter, the rough and ready fisherman from Galilee, whose faith had the texture of the sea—sometimes calm, sometimes stormy—who shouted his confessions like a burst of wind yet faltered when the night grew dark. Paul, the fiery thinker, a man whose heart was caught up in zeal and whose mind raced with questions and struggles no less stormy, but whose path led him far beyond the waters of Galilee—across the Mediterranean, across cultures and communities." Overall, however, this version did not show great improvement. At this stage I realized that my original idea of Peter and Paul as a kind of "sanctoral odd couple" had not yet been included in any prompt, so on to the next one.

Prompt 4:

Now change the opening so it does not start by talking about Peter and Paul, but about other "duos" who were very effective even though they were very different, like maybe Oscar and Felix in The Odd Couple, or Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, or a more contemporary example. Maybe George Burns and Gracy Allen, Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Cheech and Chong, Simon and Garfunkel, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. The goal here is to catch people's attention early on.

This step brought the draft homily closer to what I was looking for, yet it took the prompt more literally than I had hoped. Upon consideration, I was concerned that the references to The Odd Couple or the references to Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were too dated for younger members of the assembly. Helpful for assembly engagement was the newly posed question:

“Maybe you think of someone more recent—two people from distinct worlds, odd complements who surprise you by the strength they find in each other’s differences.” The ending here also seemed a touch anticlimactic, so we needed to shore it up.

Prompt 5:

*The final invitation to the assembly is to become a trustworthy rock
like Christ was for Peter.*

This prompt generated a more refined ending, well underscoring the mission of the baptized: “When I think about that idea of becoming a trustworthy rock like Christ was for Peter, it calls to mind how messy that actually looks in real life. What does it mean to be a rock? Not a cold, immovable statue, but something you can lean on when the storms come, but also something alive and maybe even a little worn down by the waves.” The overall results, however, seemed subpar for actual use. It was becoming clear to me that “the imitator” was not capable of generating what I would consider a strong homily. Prompt 6 would be my last in this experiment.

Prompt 6:

It is my style to end the homily so that it leads into the piece of music that will be performed afterward. You can subtly weave allusions to the song into the homily text without being too obvious. Here is the lyric:

*When others see with earthly eyes
Just what they want to see
You will see the things that never die
You will know and recognize
By simple child-like faith
The priceless truth that
Others will deny.
When others say I'm just a man
Who likes to dream His dreams
When others call a miracle a myth
You'll listen for eternity
In moments as they pass
And see with spirit eyes
What others miss.
Upon this rock I'll build My kingdom
And on this rock forever and ever it shall stand
And all the powers of Hell itself
Shall never more prevail against it
For Satan's thrones are built on sinking sand
Upon this rock I'll build My kingdom
And on this rock forever and ever it shall stand
Upon this rock of revelation
I'll build a strong and mighty nation
And it shall stand the storms of time
Upon this rock.
If in a simple carpenter*

*You see the Son of God
If you would choose to lose
When you could win
If you would give your life away
For nothing in return
Then you are where
My kingdom will begin.²⁶*

This prompt was not terribly successful for enriching the rhetoric or effectively resolving the “oops” embedded in the contrasts of Peter and Paul. It did include a few references to the song “Upon this Rock,” but nothing outstanding. It became clear, at this point, that the “imitator” could not create a preachable homily on its own. It was time for me to draw ideas and phrases, rhetoric and metaphors from the generated text and write my own homily. The full text (1604 words) follows, in which materials either explicitly generated by or inspired by the “imitator” are underlined:

A number of years ago I had a great colleague
who became my most effective writing partner.
After authoring a few articles together
we produced a book that, 26 years later, is still going strong
both in English and Korean.²⁷

Part of the surprise of this success is that Herbert and I
are such very different people.

He is a married Lutheran Pastor
and I am a celibate Roman Catholic priest;

he has children and grandchildren
and I have an 18-month-old yellow lab;

his specialty is pastoral care
and mine is worship.

I am obsessively neat, and compulsively orderly
and let’s just say that Herbert is the opposite:
we were in so many ways an academic odd couple.

Yet as we have admitted in print, these differences
were part of the formula for the book’s success

²⁶ Gloria Gaither and Dony McGuire, "Upon This Rock," (Capitol CMG Publishing, Universal Music Publishing Group, 1983).

²⁷ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); 예배와 목회상담 : 힘 있는 이야기, 위험한 의례, trans. Seok-mo Ahn (Seoul: Hakjisa, 2012).

and for our own friendship now stretching over 4 decades.

The so called “odd couple formula” was popularized
by Neil Simon’s 1965 play of that name, and its many adaptations.

But well before 1965 was the TV series "The Honeymooners"
with Ralph Kramden always wanting to send Alice to the moon.
Then there was what some considered
the greatest comedy duo of all time: Abbot and Costello.

Variations of the formula are repeated in innumerable shows
pairing unlikely characters
like Hot Lips and Frank Burns on Mash
or Frasier and Lilith in "Cheers"
and then there's the entire cast of "Big Bang Theory,"
except for maybe Raj and his dog.

You probably recognize variations of the odd couple in your life:
the extroverted relative with the introverted partner
a generous friend dating a selfish narcissist
or the religiously pious in love with a happy agnostic.

Not to be outdone, the church today invites us to what might be dubbed
“Odd Couple” Sunday:
an unusual interruption of the Sunday cycle of ordinary time
with these two extraordinary
and extraordinarily different disciples.

First there was Peter, the rough-edged fisherman from Galilee,
whose faith was not unlike the sea where he labored:
sometimes calm and generous, sometimes stormy and unforgiving.

who shouted his confession like wind gust
then faltered in the night when confronted with his discipleship
subsequently battered by wave after wave of guilt
and ultimately transformed into a bold yet humbled fisher of men.

The British Journalist William Norman Ewer once wrote.
“How odd of God to choose the Jews.”

Similarly, we might say of Jesus,
“How rare to dare, with Peter as Leader.”

Revered as the “first pope,”
the so-called prince of the apostles is the only person in the New Testament
that Jesus actually calls “Satan.”

Then there was Saul transmuted into Paul,
not a fisherman but a seafaring visionary
whose restless mind was as tumultuous as the waters he crossed;
fierce in zeal and sharp in judgment,
a voice first vehemently raised against the church
then zealously raised in its defense;

an ardent son of Israel riding high on certainty, until he was
then knocked off his high horse by the crucified;
the hunter was turned into hunted
whose letters burned with fire and mercy alike
fashioned out of hardship, shipwreck, and prison;

both scholar and tentmaker
he embodied the paradox of strength and vulnerability;

his relentless journeys carried the Jesus movement
beyond its local beginnings
into worlds both welcoming and hostile,

and his boldness in words and travels
letters and living
ultimately cost him his life.

So, we have these two alpha males
each critical for shaping the origins of Christianity
sitting somewhat uncomfortably side by side
on the same feast day ... in the same liturgy.

Peter is apparently the more important of the two:
after all, his name comes first,
he was the sidekick of the historical Jesus,
the divinely designated rock,
the progenitor of the Roman Catholic Papacy.

On the other hand, multiple scholars contend
that it was Paul ... not Peter ... not even Jesus
who founded Christianity²⁸ and Christian Theology.²⁹
Remember, Paul was writing his letters
decades before Mark invented the genre we call gospel
or before any other New Testament author
got into the act.

²⁸ A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (W. W. Norton, 1997); Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul the Founder of Christianity* (Prometheus Books, 2002), etc.

²⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Baylor University Press, 1951), 187.

To push the comparison a little further
their competing roles, personalities, and influences
actually clashed in real time – although there is no evidence
that they came to blows.

20 years or so after the death of Jesus
with the growing number of Gentile converts,
largely because of the efforts of Paul,
the question arose whether these non-Jewish believers
should be required to be circumcised
and follow other key directives of Mosaic Law.

This issue came to a head at the so-called Council of Jerusalem.
Initially, Peter agreed with James and other traditionalists
that Gentiles should follow the Torah
but Paul vehemently disagreed.
And even though Peter was the rock
his position crumbled and Paul's argument prevailed.

So we might wonder who is the real rock?

When my family needs a happy diversion
because of some new trauma on the horizon,
and there are many,
we often turn to trusted and true movies
that inevitably make us laugh and remind us that life goes on
even if in strange and unexpected ways.

One of these perennial favorites is "My Big Fat Greek Wedding."

One memorable line from that movie
occurs when Tula wants to go to school, but her father is against it
but then her mother reminds her
that the man is the head, but the woman is the neck
and she can turn the head
any way she wants.³⁰

So is Peter the head and Paul the neck?
Peter the Rock and Paul the hydraulic hammer?
Peter the winner and Paul the contentious runner-up?

Or maybe we need to reimagine
any apostolic competition here,

³⁰ Available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJbC5AfxqPc>.

any founder's tournament

and reassess this apostolic brotherhood
not only for the sake of history,
but also for the sake of the church today:
in a world in which competition can devolve
into a dangerous virus
where losers are shunned and degraded,
and martyrs are mocked as failures.

Over the years, I have often had the chance to fly
over amazing mountain ranges:
The Alps, the Andes, and the Canadian Rocky Mountains.
Inevitably, each is populated with impressive rock formations
huge boulders and massive stones.
Interestingly enough,
none of these geological outcroppings is alone:
some may soar skyward, dwarfing their surroundings,
but each such giant is embedded in communities of stone.

Largely because of today's gospel reading
we tend to see Peter as a singular rock
as an isolated cornerstone,
like the only leg on a three-legged stool ...
and you know how that is going to turn out.

However, rather than imagining a lone apostle
as a solitary cornerstone
what happens if we reconsider that rock
not as a lonely placard holding up one name
but as an admittedly notable peak in a rugged mountain range
a crest created by many stones pushed together
the result of tectonic plates colliding
like Jesus, Peter, and Paul
a religious Everest that reshapes the world
with its love ethic and call to radical inclusivity.

The church was never meant to rest on the shoulders of one person.
From the very start, it emerged from a community:
a brace of like-minded friends
a mountain range of believers
composed of a myriad of diverse outcroppings
pressed together in the tectonic upheaval we call faith,
and that here we call Old St. Pat's.

A couple of years ago, I had the privilege

of presiding at a baptism
of the first male son
born to either side of the family for two generations
... of course, he was destined to become a little prince.

Right before the baptism, the proud maternal grandmother
who had lost her husband some years before
said to her daughter, "He is so beautiful,
I think he looks like your father."
The daughter, who never knew her birth father, gently said,
"Mom ... that can't be ... remember I am adopted."
The Mother, at first a little taken aback, shook her head and said,
"I'm sorry, I always forget."

Sometimes we forget, in this age of singularity
that we were adopted into a community grounded in granite
and that this church of Peter and Paul
still needs rocks and jackhammers
still needs committed odd couples
still needs bold, impulsive, even problematic disciples
to move the tectonic plates of justice in a world
that resists the gifts of Christianity's preternatural odd couple
Peter and Paul.

On this their feast, we accept again their commission
that as bombs are turning cities into rubble
to be an unshakeable foundation for peace;
that as human dignity in all of its diversity is under assault
to be a mountain range of justice;
and as our society and the world
is prone to placing boulders of exclusion
to block the progress of those the elite deem unworthy
to become jackhammers of liberation
removing every obstacle that hinders the way of the Lord.

If we do so, then, like Peter, the Lord can say to us
upon you, this fresh outcropping of faith
this 21st-century rock, I will build my church
and the powers of hell will not prevail against it
through Christ our Lord.

Discussion

Homily preparation is a time-consuming venture. If a preacher has been ministering in the same congregation for any extended period of time, that preparation can be even more challenging unless the homilist ends up endlessly repeating themselves. Preparing a Sunday homily for Old St. Pat's church is ordinarily a 10- to 14-hour commitment for me. Not all of that is at the computer

writing. It includes reading and praying the appointed "sacred texts," musing on them while driving or on the treadmill, and reading multiple commentaries and searching various websites (e.g., textweek.com and zeteosearch.org) for information and inspiration. I also record the final draft on my iPhone so I have a good approximation of the homily's timing and can edit for oral delivery rather than simply reading it. Employing the "imitator" did not shorten the preparatory time. It actually increased it. Some of that may be the result of my not having previously explored the tool so assiduously and was inept in my preparation for this venture.

That has been one key learning resulting from this exercise. Since any large language model is, as David Falk once noted, a sophisticated "autofill" device, diligent preparation is necessary before engaging this or any chatbot. I had done some preparation and imagined two key "oops" points (i.e., the "sanctoral odd couple" and the Gospel singularity of Peter as Rock) that could propel the homily along. However, those key points needed to be elaborated more fully. Also, both of them should have been introduced from the beginning of the AI dialogue, whereas I only introduced the first of these in prompt three.

While I do not always follow it, especially when inspired to go in a different direction in the writing process, I ordinarily sketch a rough outline that sequences the key points, positions the "oops" (unlike Lowry some homilies will contain two or three of these), properly balances the liturgical-scriptural-doctrinal elements with narrative or poetry, and builds to an appropriate and succinct conclusion. Prompt one might yield a more useful text from the beginning if I provide it with a general outline of the homily as well as key points.

A downside of the "imitator" is its difficulty, or even its inability, to personalize. Despite the fact that the underlying database of my homilies is filled with personal anecdotes and stories, the "imitator" never accessed them. While aware that the homily should not be focused on the homilist, personalized experiences and stories are often more effective as they more easily communicate the emotion of the preacher, which contributes to their reception by an assembly.³¹

It is a privilege to have such a homily-preparation tool, largely driven by my preaching texts spanning the last 18 years. Even with such a personalized tool, however, the attempt to craft a quality homily for the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul for the community of Old St. Pat's was not wildly successful. That suggests that employing non-personalized, non-contextualized LLMs would produce even less satisfying results. Thus, while digital platforms such as ChatGPT, Chatbot, and Claude might supply useful information, their capacities for generating anything close to wise preaching are limited. If this experiment took 6 prompts to push the limit on what could be expected for a homily, other, more generic platforms might require at least twice as many prompts, if not more, to provide a text that a preacher could draw from in crafting a homily in their voice.

At the same time, my dialogue with the "imitator" was invigorating and even enjoyable. At times, it felt like I did have an assistant providing alternative language, new metaphors, even bits of poetry. It is doubtful that on my own I could have mimicked the couplet "How odd of God to choose the Jews" with "how rare to dare, choosing Peter as Leader." Consequently, I will continue to engage

³¹ This is one of the finds of APEX team member Ima Alberro, as reported in his M.A. thesis for the Social Sciences degree at the University of Chicago. By using narrative transportation theory, he concluded from the data derived from studying our Spanish language consulting experts that "while narrative transportation can contribute to pro-sociality, its effects are largely mediated through empathic engagement. The findings imply that it is the emotional, empathic engagement — not merely exposure to high narrativity or persuasion — that predicts real-world moral attitudes and pro-social tendencies. See Imanol Alberro, "Effects of Narrative Transportation on Personal Attitudes" (master's thesis, University of Chicago, 2025), 20.

with the “imitator” but now with a more refined expectation. One overarching future goal in engaging the “imitator” will not be to produce a full text for a homily that is appropriate to preach. Neither the “imitator” nor any other LLM presently has that capacity. However, this digital assistant has shown the capacity, when appropriately interrogated, to stimulate my imagination, provide fresh rhetoric and metaphors, and even to craft phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that I can incorporate into a final homily.

As such, digital tools are programmed and trained to evolve into more effective homiletic assistants; it is also apparent that any preacher intending to engage them will need a notable degree of training if they are to reap the benefits of such tools while ensuring the integrity of their own voice.³²

³² Johannes Schneider, “Humans Learn too: Better Human-AI Interaction using Optimized Human Inputs,” *arXiv*, 19 September 2020, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2009.09266>.