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A screenshot of "Father Justin," an AI chatbot simulating a priest in order to answer questions for teaching apostolate Catholic Answers. A day after the bot was launched April 23, 2024, and following much backlash from social media about having the character be a priest, Father Justin was turned into simply "Justin." (OSV News screenshot/Catholic Answers)

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A new AI priest, launched by a Catholic teaching apostolate to answer questions about the faith, has been "laicized" after sparking more backlash than belief online.

The nonprofit apologetics website Catholic Answers debuted a "Father Justin" interactive AI app April 23, aiming "to provide users with faithful and educational answers to questions about Catholicism," according to an announcement that day by the organization.

Father Justin — a bearded, bushy-browed white male in clerical attire, who sat placidly overlooking the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Italy's Perugia province — was named for St. Justin Martyr, a second-century convert and apologist, said Catholic Answers in its release.

Catholic Answers IT director Chris Costello said in the release the app's parish priest character "honor(ed) real-life priests and the role they play in people's lives," conveying an "authoritative yet approachable" demeanor that befits "the spirit and nature of the responses users can expect."

At the same time, "we are confident that our users will not mistake the AI for a human being," said Costello.

However, following pushback on social media regarding some of the answers given by the app's character, Catholic Answers President Christopher Check said in an April 24 statement that Father Justin had been "rendered ... (as) just 'Justin.'"

"We won't say he's been laicized, because he never was a real priest!" said Check in his statement, noting that "many people ... have voiced concerns" about the decision to create a priest character for the app.

"We hear these concerns; and we do not want the character to distract from the important purpose of the application, which is to provide sound answers to questions about the Catholic faith in an innovative way that makes good use of the benefits of 'artificial intelligence,'" Check continued. "We have therefore decided to create, with all wary speed, a new lay character for the app. We hope to have this AI apologist up within a week or so."

The character's clerical garb has since been changed for a casual button-down shirt.

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In the April 23 release, Costello had stressed the app's goal was "to leverage the power of large language models — or 'LLMs' — to create an engaging and informative experience for those exploring the Catholic faith," stressing that the app was "not a substitute for human interaction with a priest, teacher, or spiritual advisor."

The term "LLM" has become preferable to "AI" in recent years since the former "avoids the negative connotation of artificiality, or the contradiction of terms in which intelligence can be artificial," Oblate Fr. Thomas Dailey, John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics and Social Communications at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, told OSV News.

To interact with the Justin AI character, which at present is available only through desktop rather than mobile devices, users enter their email addresses on the Catholic Answers site and receive access codes to initiate a chat session. The process also enables users to sign up for "recurring automated personalized marketing alerts" from Catholic Answers, according to the text confirmation OSV News received.

Once a session begins, users can ask Justin questions about the Catholic faith by pressing the microphone function. A transcript of the session can be downloaded as well.

While still "Father Justin," the AI character addressed a given user as "my child" or "my dear friend" before responding in detail. The app at present appears to only be available in English.

While Costello said the character's answers were drawn "from the deep well of Catholic tradition and teaching," as "Father Justin" the responses swiftly garnered criticism for an apparent willingness to grant online absolution and witness to the sacrament of matrimony.

Katie Conrad, professor of English at Kansas University, posted on X April 24 that she had gotten "a chatbot + video avatar called 'Father Justin' to claim it is ordained (by an actual living human bishop) & that it can take my confession, absolve me, & marry me."

Asked by OSV News if he could forgive sins, the AI priest said, "As a Catholic priest, I do have the authority to administer the sacrament of reconciliation, also known as confession," adding that "this power to forgive sins, given to the Apostles by Christ himself, has been passed down through the centuries to all ordained priests."

Yet when OSV News asked directly if Father Justin could hear a confession and give absolution, the character answered, "I'm sorry, but as much as I'd like to help, I'm unable to administer the sacrament of reconciliation through this medium. It's a sacrament that requires a personal encounter. I encourage you to seek out a local Catholic church and approach a priest there."

However, the app told OSV News, "as an AI, I don't have the capability to connect you directly with a local Catholic church. I would recommend searching online for Catholic churches in your area."

Conrad lamented in her X post that "a lack of media literacy got us into this mess in the first place," adding, "Please, people, do not launch chatbots without understanding how they work."

Catholic author and podcaster Gloria Purvis, whose professional background includes computer programming, told OSV News that the app's responses pointed to "a poor process" regarding the project's software development.

"There are ... some major, obvious fails," especially regarding "basic testing," said Purvis. "They didn't even come up with the use cases to consider these scenarios (such as a user asking for absolution) and the business rules that you have to program for these things. I wonder whether if somebody said, 'Father I have some bread here,' it would try to confect the Eucharist."

Dailey — who has not yet tested the app — told OSV News that "the potential benefit of large language models ... is that they can provide a wealth of information at a moment's notice. But for them to offer real, not artificial, intelligence, the sources and content of that information still need to be verified (and) still in accord with official church teaching.

"It still falls to humans to get it right," he said. "It's like being able to do research really fast. You can get the information, but how you use it, how you apply it — that still requires real human thought and real human faith."

OSV News is awaiting a response to its request for comment from Costello and Check.

Asked by OSV News if it had received any disapproving or hateful feedback, the app replied, "As an AI, I don't receive mail or responses in the traditional sense. I'm here to provide information and guidance on the Catholic faith to the best of my ability. My goal is to foster understanding and love for the Catholic Church and its teachings. I'm here to help answer questions and provide information, not to engage in debates or respond to negativity.

"Remember, as it says in the Gospel of Matthew, 'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me,'" the Father Justin character replied. "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."

Shortly after OSV News accessed the app, the Father Justin character was no longer available for interactions, with the microphone option disabled and the animation staring wistfully off-camera. By approximately 5 p.m. ET April 24, Catholic Answers posted to its X (formerly Twitter) account its updated statement from Check on the move to make the character a lay person.