

Article

The Homily in the Algorithmic Age: Mediation, Delegation, and the Irreducibility of the Subject

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Abstract

The emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses unprecedented challenges to homiletic practice, compelling a shift in focus from the textual proficiency of the machine to the ontological status of preaching itself. Through a theological-pastoral analysis anchored in sacramental dogmatics and in dialogue with digital religion, this article scrutinizes the validity of algorithmic mediation in the ministry of the Word. The study establishes a tripartite normative framework—assistance, delegation, and substitution—demonstrating that while technical support is legitimate in preparatory tasks, the syntactic success of generative models acts as a critical mirror, exposing a pre-existing crisis of frequently generic and standardized preaching. It concludes that, within a sacramental framework, the homily constitutes an unrepeatable liturgical and spiritual event, requiring the authority of an embodied subject vulnerable to their own message.

Keywords: homily; generative artificial intelligence; sacramental theology; pastoral liturgy; digital religion; priestly mediation

1. Introduction

Large Language Models (LLMs) have mainstreamed the automatic generation of religious texts, including homilies, spiritual reflections, and biblical commentaries, produced from brief user prompts. Recent studies have therefore analyzed their theological competence (Freitas et al. 2026), their biases, and their hermeneutical capacity (Reed 2021; Trepczyński 2024; Elrod 2024), as well as how priests interact with these tools in their homiletic preparation (Mannerfelt and Roitto 2025). Concurrently, research in information ethics and the philosophy of technology has emphasized that algorithmic systems are not neutral instruments, but structures that shape discursive practices and frameworks of truth (Floridi 2014; Crawford 2021).

In this context, a question arises: can Artificial Intelligence (AI) write a good homily? At first glance, the answer tends to be affirmative. LLMs are capable of articulating basic biblical exegesis, integrating magisterial references, structuring discourse according to recognizable homiletic conventions, and producing rhetorically consistent texts. Formal excellence, explicit orthodoxy, and communicative efficacy prove, however, insufficient to encompass the true nature of the homily.¹

Reducing the issue to a performance dispute would have two consequences. First, it would obscure the theological specificity of the homiletic act. Second, it would shift ecclesial discernment toward predominantly functional criteria, such as expository clarity, the ability to engage the assembly, or emotional impact. Rooted in the theological premise



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that the liturgy arises from the precedence of Divine Revelation, its form must be received as a gift rather than manufactured as a human artifice. This sacramental logic stands in radical contrast to the contemporary obsession with performance (Franciscus 2022, no. 54). Here, the protagonist is not the orator, but what Ratzinger describes as “the action of God himself” unfolding in time (Guardini and Ratzinger 2018, p. 187). Stripped of any functionalist utility, the liturgy reveals its essence as an “end in itself”, a contemplative threshold where the believer ceases to perform and, in the silence of the heart, begins to participate in a Mystery that both precedes and sustains him.

Before defining this theological specificity, it is necessary to explicitly acknowledge the confessional framework of this study. As the history of Christian preaching demonstrates, the theological role and societal preconditions of the sermon have shifted significantly over the centuries. What constitutes a legitimate act of preaching in a sixteenth-century Reformed congregation emphasizing the exposition of the biblical text, or in a twentieth-century Pentecostal revival centered on charismatic inspiration, differs structurally from Patristic or Roman Catholic understandings. Therefore, this article does not claim to offer a universal definition of Christian preaching against which AI is universally measured. Rather, it deliberately adopts a Catholic, sacramental, and incarnational lens.

Viewed through this specific theological tradition, the homily, as an integral part of the liturgical action, is more than a religious discourse on Sacred Scripture or current events. Rather, it constitutes a living event where the proclaimed Word is directed to a concrete assembly through a minister in ecclesial communion. The recent Magisterium insists that the homily “is part of the liturgical action” (Benedictus XVI 2007, no. 46), and should foster a living encounter with Christ in the Word (Benedictus XVI 2010, no. 59; Franciscus 2013, nos. 137–144). Grounded in an ontological understanding of mediation, this formulation integrates preaching into a profound act of participation.

It is precisely at this point of convergence that certain contributions of new algorithmic tools must be theologically framed. If a system can produce a homiletic text formally superior to that of some ordained ministers, the difference between the two is not resolved on the level of rhetorical quality or intertextual density. The question thus shifts to another level: can an artificial system participate in the homiletic act as an ecclesial event? Is the nature of the mediation indifferent to the configuration of the mediator?

Recent literature on theology and AI tends to branch into two fronts. The first explores the discursive competencies of LLMs, evaluating their theological coherence and respective hermeneutical limits (Reed 2021; Trepczyński 2024). The second analyzes the ethical and pastoral implications of adopting these technologies in religious contexts (Proudfoot 2023; Mannerfelt and Roitto 2025). Yet, in both cases, the problem of what we define as the homily’s ontological dimension remains open.

This article explores the hypothesis that, sacramentally understood, a homily is defined primarily as an ecclesial and ministerial act, rooted in the communion of the Church and the action of the Spirit, thus surpassing the status of a mere discursive genre. Consequently, even if AI reaches high levels of formal excellence, it will retain a structural inability to participate in the order of ecclesial mediation. The fundamental distinction between the homily and algorithmic production centers, therefore, on the ontology of the speaking subject and their belonging to ecclesial communion.

Methodologically, this study adopts a normative-hermeneutical approach rooted in a theological framework. While engaging with questions of digital mediation familiar to the social sciences, its epistemological stance assumes that technology is not a neutral conduit, but a force that actively structures human enunciation. The objective is to analyze the incarnational nature of the homiletic act in light of the theological tradition, and to contrast it with the current operational realities and structural development of text gen-

eration technologies. By moving from a descriptive analysis of algorithmic mediation to a prescriptive ecclesial evaluation, the study directly addresses the most demanding objections and seeks to exercise careful theological discernment. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary approach avoids both technological determinism (alarmist readings) and a merely functional interpretation of the phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

Reflection on artificial intelligence and theology is articulated within a fertile and emerging theoretical terrain. The transition from digital mediation to algorithmic discursive generation introduces a shift that still demands to be thought through in light of the classical categories of the theology of communication and homiletics. It is, therefore, important to map the state of the question, identifying the most relevant contributions and gaps.

2.1. From Digital Religion to AI-Generated Discourse

The field of digital religion has consolidated over the last two decades as a privileged interdisciplinary space for analyzing the transformations of religious practice and authority in technologically mediated environments. Studies show that faith communities reinterpret digital media in light of their traditions, integrating them through a continuous negotiation of legitimacies, boundaries, and practices (Campbell 2010, 2012). Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, a central debate within this field concerns whether technological mediation represents a genuine qualitative break with traditional religious practice or a more continuous, negotiated evolution. Historically, religious institutions tend to domesticate new media through a logic of pastoral continuity, seamlessly integrating them into existing structures. This process involves a “shift away from the predominant pre-AI narrative, which described ICTs as ‘gifts from God’”, moving towards a stance that “seeks to challenge the ‘technocratic paradigm’” through the development of “algor-ethics” (Campbell et al. 2025, p. 57). The classical distinction between religion online and online religion (Kühle and Larsen 2021), which opposed the institutional mediation of religion to practices born in a digital environment, has given way to a hybrid understanding of the circulation of the sacred between physical and digital spaces (Evolvi 2022).

In more recent years, the emergence of LLMs has altered the framework of this debate. Reflection is no longer limited to technical mediation, now expanding to include the automatic generation of theological texts. Pioneering works such as those of Singler (2020), who analyzed narratives about artificial intelligence as contemporary mythology, or Geraci (2010), who studied the quasi-soteriological promises associated with technology, anticipated this shift by demonstrating the technological capacity to transmit the sacred and to configure new religious imaginaries. Some researchers have analyzed the capacity of LLMs to generate biblical commentaries, theological responses, and spiritual texts in a pastoral context (Ignatowski et al. 2024; Andok et al. 2025). Other authors analyze how algorithmic logic influences religious authority on digital platforms (Campbell and Tsuria 2022; Evolvi 2020). The focus of the analysis thus centers primarily on content production and mediatic authority.

However, we argue that generative AI pushes the digital religion framework beyond the paradigm of continuity. While traditional digital media, even in their most hypermediated forms, function primarily as channels of distribution, generative AI introduces an unprecedented dynamic: the technological medium assumes a compositional and quasi-agential role. In the homiletic act, rather than passively transmitting human discernment, an LLM statistically simulates it. This simulation, however, is often perceived by clergy as “good but lacking”, producing content that feels stale and devoid of the gripping moments essential to a spiritual encounter (Cheong and Liu 2025, p. 184). From the perspective

of this study, the delegation of preaching to AI represents a profound qualitative break. More than being a simple evolution in content production and mediatic authority, this shift constitutes a fundamental alteration of the enouncing subject, posing an ontological threat to the incarnational basis of the homily, precisely because it attempts to automate acts that, in the view of practitioners across various traditions, fundamentally require humanity and Spirit-filled revelation.

2.2. *The Current Debate on Preaching and LLMs*

In the specific domain of preaching, research remains in its early stages. Some studies are beginning to examine how priests use artificial intelligence tools in preparing sermons and homilies. The work of [Mannerfelt and Roitto \(2025\)](#) constitutes a relevant reference in this area. Through interviews and the analysis of interactions with LLMs, the authors demonstrate the tendency of preachers to use AI as a primary source of inspiration, synthesis, or structuring. The collected data, however, point towards a vigilant stance among preachers, who are aware of the system's potential and inherent limits. As Rachael Keefe concludes, "AI won't ever be in relationship with God and is therefore not going to be touched by the Spirit. Only human beings can be radically inspired and transformed for the sacred task of preaching" ([Keefe 2025](#), p. 144).

Other contributions examine the hermeneutical competence of generative models in the handling of religious content. [Chua \(2024\)](#), for instance, investigated the functioning of ChatGPT-4 and identified recurrent structural patterns, as well as a strong tendency toward moralization. [Elrod \(2024\)](#) explored the presence of confessional and cultural biases in theological production, evidencing how the organization of training data and the power dynamics present in the ecosystem influence the results. Together, these studies converge in recognizing the system's ability, albeit marked by tendencies toward abstraction, conflict neutralization, and ethical universalization.

The introduction of generative systems in homily preparation brings to the fore an issue that remains largely underexplored: that of authorship and responsibility for ecclesial discourse. In existing studies, the homily tends to be treated primarily as a text, evaluated for its coherence or pastoral utility. However, in liturgical practice, it entails a concrete subject who publicly assumes the word before an assembly and answers for it within the heart of ecclesial communion. Algorithmic mediation thus compels us to question who is speaking and in what sense this word can continue to be recognized as a homiletic act within an ecclesial community.

2.3. *Mediation and Relational Expectancy*

A particularly relevant contribution to this debate comes from research analyzing the interaction between preachers and language models in light of relevance theory ([Sperber and Wilson 2001](#); [Clark 2013](#)). According to this perspective, human communication relies on contextual inference and the assumption of a shared interpretive context. When interacting with an AI system, preachers project onto it the expectations typical of human interlocutors, configuring the phenomenon designated by [Lagerkvist \(2024\)](#) as relational expectancy.

This analysis exposes a clear contrast. While there is a theoretical awareness regarding how the system operates, practice reveals an inclination to treat it as an authentic interlocutor. Such a projection perfectly elucidates the oscillation between trust and the frustration generated by less-than-adequate responses.

Furthermore, the application of relevance theory illuminates a crucial aspect of this reflection. Although artificial intelligence has the capacity to optimize the probability that a text will be considered relevant, it remains ontologically disconnected from the history,

finitude, and faith of the assembly. Algorithmic inference thus displaces experiential reciprocity. This point, though subtly addressed in the literature, opens a new horizon for a theological approach to mediation.

3. The Homiletic Act Beyond the Text

We return to the inquiry regarding the ontological essence of the homily. As previously noted, if the homily is perceived merely as a rhetorical discourse, the debate concerning language models is reduced to whether they produce better or worse texts than a human preacher. Conversely, conceiving the homily as an ecclesial event rooted in the economy of revelation confers upon the nature of the mediator a constitutive role within the act itself.

3.1. The Homily as a Liturgical Act

Post-conciliar reception consolidated this awareness by recognizing the homily as a decisive moment in the living dialogue between God and His people. When *Evangelii Gaudium* describes it as a “touchstone for judging a pastor’s closeness and ability to communicate to his people” (Franciscus 2013, no. 135), it situates it within the living relationship that structures the Church. Preaching emerges, therefore, as the concrete mediation of the Word within a specific assembly. It actively participates in the dynamic of addressing, convoking, and configuring the believing community through the proclaimed Word, which confers upon it an ontological status deeper than thematic exposition or moral instruction.

Liturgical theology underscores this performative nature. For Fagerberg (2012), the community elaborates a *theologia prima*, theology as act, prior to any conceptual systematization. Chauvet also defines the sacraments as the “primary symbolic proclamation” (Chauvet 1987, p. 391) of the Church, responsible for constituting the subject through their relationship with God and with the community. Once the liturgy is understood as an event of symbolic and sacramental mediation, the homily becomes an integral part of this structure.

The homily is, thus, a fundamental moment responsible for transforming the proclaimed Word into a spiritual motion. As Mary Hilker describes it, preaching functions “as the art of naming grace found in the depths of human experience” (Hilker 1997, p. 40). Its ultimate meaning reflects the relational configuration established among Scripture, the assembly, and the ordained minister.

This belonging leads to an understanding of the homily as a reality inseparable from its ecosystem. As Kevin Irwin argues, “liturgy is the context for text” (Irwin 1994, p. 90). Outside the celebratory context, preaching is circumscribed to the category of a religious text. Within the liturgy, however, it actively participates in the “event of salvation” (Irwin 1994, p. 52), convoking the faith assembly through the Word.

3.2. Text, Proclamation, and Event

There is a fundamental distinction between the sermon as a textual structure and proclamation as a living event. António Vieira² illustrates this difference by noting that published sermons, “without the voice that animated them, even when resurrected, are but corpses” (Vieira 1679, VI). He thus assumes an ontological stance in arguing that while the written text possesses the capacity to preserve discourse, the event of the word resists fixation on the page.

For Vieira, proclamation transcends the public reading of predefined content. It is an ecclesial act, uttered by a subject who exposes themselves before a concrete assembly. The voice, physical presence, and the risk intrinsic to the spoken word are essential dimensions of the homiletic moment, irreducible to the literary structure of the text.

This distinction must be clearly understood, as the sacramental and patristic tradition avoids identifying the value of the homily with the charismatic performance of the speaker. Baroque rhetoric is paradigmatic of this; although it valued *movere* and *pathos*, it always subordinated the efficacy of the affections to the primacy of truth. As Francis warns, “the homily cannot be a form of entertainment” (Franciscus 2013, no. 138), and therefore, the task of the preacher, Thomas Long argues, is to deflect attention from themselves in order “to announce this news to those to whom the herald is sent” (Long 2005, p. 21).

The decisive element thus resides in the difference between the discursive object and the relational act. While a text can be analyzed, reproduced, and disseminated autonomously, the homiletic event is a present moment that presupposes a dynamic of reciprocal listening between the one who speaks and those who receive. Following Walter Ong, it is important to remember that “the spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word” (Ong 2012, p. 74); that is, the homily is a communicative act.

Thus, the production of a homiletic text by a language model generates a finished discursive object. The central question remains in the divergence between this product and the reality that the Catholic tradition designates as a homily. There thus appears to be a difference between the homiletic text and the homily, whose identity is found precisely in that which code cannot replicate: the living character of the Word within the assembly.

3.3. Homiletic Subjectivity and Ecclesial Responsibility

The ontological status of the homily transcends the rhetorical efficacy or literary authorship, rooting itself instead in the preacher’s interiority and ecclesial embeddedness. Augustinian reflection on language deepens this understanding by highlighting the distance between the interior will and the exterior word. As Augustine explains to Adeodatus, whoever speaks outwardly expresses the sign of his will, but God must be sought “in the innermost part of the rational soul, which is called the inner man” (Augustinus Hipponensis 2008, p. 210).

This perspective shifts the focus from rhetorical performance to the structure of mediation, where the exterior word acts as an instrument designed to awaken an interior understanding that transcends it. Because the preacher may serve as a minister of truth rather than its original source, Augustine admits that delivering a wisely written discourse composed by another is not reprehensible: “If they take from others a discourse written with wisdom and eloquence, and having committed it to memory, deliver it before the people, they do nothing reprehensible” (Augustinus Hipponensis 2002, p. 164). The intuition that the legitimacy of the homily resides in the act of proclamation rather than pure text generation suggests that the use of external resources does not intrinsically invalidate the liturgical act.

Under this light, the presence of a responsible subject emerges as the truly constitutive factor, especially since such subjectivity is inherently characterized by an existential implication in the event of the Word. As Jean-Luc Marion reflects, the human word does not originate in a vacuum, as “word always responds to the word, silent or written, of God” (Marion 2012, p. 24). The preacher becomes simultaneously the interpreter and the addressee of Revelation. Furthermore, this circularity and authority flows from an apostolic mission that is “total and consistent in itself” (Congar 1954, p. 642), embedding the preacher within a historical, spiritual, and sacramental communion.

Consequently, the homily is configured as an imputable act. Following Paul Ricoeur, imputability consists of the “act of holding an agent responsible for actions” (Ricoeur 2008, p. 99) before others. In uttering the word, the preacher accepts being called to conversion and held accountable. The homily gains its voice through someone who shares the destiny of the community, proclaims from a shared vulnerability, assuming the role of a “wounded

healer” who “is called to recognize the sufferings of his time in his own heart and make that recognition the starting point of his service” (Nouwen 1979, xvi).

It is precisely this incarnational and imputable structure that exposes the ontological limit of artificial intelligence. While an algorithmic system can simulate contextualization and generate highly sophisticated linguistic sequences with immense statistical precision, it is merely executing a process of sign production. John Searle observes that “syntax is not the same as, nor is it by itself sufficient for, semantics” (Searle 1992, p. 200). The machine remains completely outside the dynamic of Revelation; it is neither addressed by God nor capable of being held responsible by a community. Consequently, delegating the core of the homiletic act to a machine would create an unbridgeable sacramental void, especially since, as Mark Coeckelbergh warns, “machines can be agents but not moral agents since they lack consciousness, free will, emotions, the capability to form intentions, and the like” (Coeckelbergh 2020, p. 111).

Furthermore, the algorithm is completely devoid of “the affective-analogue dimension, the capacity to be emotionally affected, which lies beyond the reach of data and information” (Han 2022, p. 37). While the human preacher speaks from a place of existential answerability, the machine operates from a position of absolute non-involvement, an algorithmic “alibi in being”. Ultimately, the decisive contrast is not between levels of discursive quality, but between the sterile production of utterances and the presence of a subject configured by the Word.

4. The Algorithm as Mediation

First and foremost, it is important to determine the nature of the intelligence implicated in the algorithmic generation of a homiletic text in order to ascertain the exact type of mediation exercised by the machine. The following analysis evaluates the structural nature of language models, their formal excellence, their intrinsic tendency toward discursive universalization, and their capacity for real-time liturgical adaptation. This framework will make it possible to identify the threshold between functional sophistication and what is traditionally understood as theological mediation.

4.1. *Technical Efficiency and the Ontological Barrier of Meaning*

In a strictly technical sense, a Large Language Model (LLM) is fundamentally a statistical engine designed to predict verbal sequences by “haphazardly stitching together sequences of linguistic forms” without any inherent reference to meaning (Bender et al. 2021, p. 617). This operational mode ensures that the machine remains alien to any personal experience or lived access to the content it produces, ignoring the existential weight of what it enunciates (Marcus and Davis 2020, p. 13). Murray Shanahan underscores this reality by noting that the LLM “just models what words are likely to follow from what other words” and is not, therefore, “in the business of making judgements” or distinguishing truth from falsehood (Shanahan 2024, p. 73). Consequently, these systems hit a barrier of meaning precisely because they simulate understanding by reproducing linguistic forms that we naturally associate with intelligence, despite lacking any situated self-consciousness (Mitchell 2019, p. 214).

This ontological limitation is often obscured by the algorithm’s rhetorical excellence. In the view of Jacques Ellul, the technical phenomenon is always governed by the search for maximum efficiency (Ellul 1964, p. 20), and from a functional standpoint, the algorithm is indeed highly efficient. It can produce texts that are more organized and balanced than those of many human authors, a reality illustrated by research where AI responses were rated significantly higher for quality and empathy than those of real professionals (Ayers et al. 2023, p. 591). However, applied to the homily, this formal perfection risks

creating the illusion that ritual aestheticism suffices for the sacramental economy of the liturgical act. Pope Francis warns in *Desiderio Desideravi*, the true celebratory act demands the “vital involvement” of the minister and the community, a dimension that mere linguistic fluency or formal beauty cannot provide (Franciscus 2022, no. 22). This lack of subjective involvement is not a neutral vacuum but is inevitably filled by the “ontological slippage” inherent in the machine’s training data (Freitas et al. 2026).

4.2. Algorithmic Bias and the Risk of Digital Colonialism

The apparent abstraction of AI-generated texts is a structural symptom of this efficiency, where the model identifies recurring patterns to maximize universal plausibility. Such a tendency toward a theological average is empirically supported by research showing that AI-generated texts are nearly five times more likely to contain broad generalizations than human writing (Peters and Chin-Yee 2025, p. 1). The resulting structural tendency introduces a grave risk of reproducing Western and denominational hegemonies. Because LLMs are trained on predominantly North-Atlantic and secular datasets, they act as probabilistic mirrors of these dominant cultures. In moral and theological tests, AI consistently defaults to a Western-centric ethical consensus, often marginalizing traditional or minority perspectives from the Global South (Freitas et al. 2026). In this sense, homiletic delegation inadvertently facilitates a form of digital colonialism, where the diverse *sensus fidei* of local communities is overwritten by the statistical frequency.

For a preacher, this bias acts as an invisible filter. If a homily on social justice or family ethics is drafted by an AI, the resulting text will likely reflect a “standardized” morality that lacks the grit of local struggle and the specific prophetic edge required for a particular congregation. This process directly threatens the prophetic, local, and contextual nature of preaching, which must essentially address a specific *hic et nunc*. By its nature, AI operates through “algorithmic recursivity,” mathematically recycling past linguistic forms to prioritize the most probable sequence (Hui 2019). Consequently, a homily generated for a community in the Amazon or a suburb in Luanda might end up echoing the theological priorities and cultural sensitivities of a middle-class parish in Europe or North America. Such a mathematical preference effectively silences the “prophetic outlier”, the uncomfortable, counter-cultural, or minority truth that characterizes true Christian prophecy. For a multicultural Church, the reliance on algorithmic authority results in a de-territorialized theology, replacing the living historical memory of the community with a standardized abstraction. Ultimately, by delegating the heart of the homiletic act to an algorithm, the preacher risks an erosion of ecclesial mediation, transforming the pulpit into a relay station for a simulated authority that lacks the historical belonging and existential implication required to transform the specific reality of the faithful.

4.3. The Horizon of Real-Time Adaptation

Let us imagine an autonomous and complex system equipped with voice recognition, prosodic reading, facial analysis, access to the assembly’s biographical data, and the capacity for real-time adjustment. This is no longer a matter of a generic text, but of an adaptive matrix. A personalized text, sensitive to the environment, capable of shifting registers, mitigating resistance, or intensifying a tone of consolation. Recent studies attest to the potential for persuasion and the efficacy of argumentative modeling based on reading the addressee. Matz’s research concluded, in fact, that LLMs “generate a diverse array of personalized messages that influence people’s attitudes and behavioral intentions” (Matz et al. 2024, p. 11) more effectively than non-personalized messages. Along the same lines, the clinical trial by Salvi’s team demonstrates that, in a debate context, GPT-4 equipped with personalization proved more persuasive than human interlocutors in 64.4% of relevant

cases (Salvi et al. 2025). Consequently, the hypothesis of functional adaptation must be considered as an element for our theological reflection.

Even in this scenario of greater complexity, we understand that functional adaptation diverges radically from ontological reciprocity. The system can modulate its outputs based on physical signals and emotional reactions to then fine-tune its discourse according to audience profiles. But all this competence falls within the domain of operational responsiveness. Paradoxically, as Emmanuel Levinas reminds us, “the epiphany of the face is ethical” (Levinas 1979, p. 199) because it exposes itself to vulnerability and to the reading of the other. Therefore, even if the machine could read human expression, it would remain incapable of sharing in its vulnerability.

The homily, however, as an ecclesial act, demands a subject who responds to God before the Church, someone who has been transformed by the Word prior to pronouncing it. It implies assuming responsibility for the utterance in the condition of one who believes, discerns, and exposes themselves. Conversely, emotional analysis processed in real time is incapable of generating this theological status. The research by Nord and Schleier becomes particularly suggestive on this point. In summarizing the reservations of Christian leaders regarding artificial intelligence, the authors observe that “core spiritual and pastoral responsibilities require an irreplaceable human presence and wisdom” (Nord and Schleier 2025, p. 5). Far from closing the debate, this intuition points in the right direction. The unrepeatable character of preaching is rooted in the requirement of a responsible presence, utterly irreducible to the most perfect adaptive performance.

In this way, the maximum force of the technological objection contributes decisively to clarifying the argument of our reflection. Even in a scenario of absolute excellence, where artificial intelligence could write, persuade, and adjust more effectively than many human preachers, the essential question would remain intact, focused on the type of mediation at play. Algorithmic mediation, precisely by achieving formal perfection and refined adaptation, renders its intrinsic limit even more visible. Its mode of operation is exhausted in prediction, personalization, and optimization. The homily, in turn, demands witness, judgment, and personal responsibility before God and the community.

5. The Irreducibility of the Homiletic Act

After recognizing that generative models produce clear and well-structured texts, the discussion shifts to another level. The question ceases to be merely about the quality of the text and focuses on the nature of the homiletic act. The homily cannot be reduced to a discourse on Scripture, nor to a religious or social commentary. It is an assumed word, uttered within a concrete assembly and situated within an ecclesial communion which, as Romano Guardini emphasizes, always implies the overcoming of a purely individual expression and the insertion into a common form that transforms both the one who speaks and the one who listens (Guardini and Ratzinger 2018, p. 299). Open to a fecundity that surpasses the text itself, it is on this plane that preaching reveals its specificity. Therefore, Catholic homiletics describes it as a complex practice, an event, and even a “community event,” which can be separated neither from the subject who proclaims it nor from the Church in which it takes place.

5.1. Embodied Authorship

In this theological anthropology, the homily is predicated on the presence of a subject. Although this is an elementary statement, it demands precise formulation today. The subject evoked here distances itself from the modern “self,” usually understood as pure expressive interiority (Taylor 2007, p. 473), or even from the charismatic figure of the orator who imposes himself by his presence. It is, on the contrary, the individual capable of

answering for what he says and of accepting judgment upon what he announces. One also expects someone willing to let himself be corrected by the truth he proclaims, appearing before the assembly and before God as intimately implicated in the very act of the word. Consequently, within this tradition, preaching inscribes itself in the order of responsibility.

Antônio Vieira expresses this point with remarkable density when he states that “the definition of the preacher is his life and example” (Vieira 2014, p. 52). This formulation is highly demanding. More than confining the proclamation to simple moral exemplarity, this perspective prevents the understanding of the preacher as a merely competent transmitter of content. In the Sermon for Sexagesima, the distinction between the “preacher” and “the one who preaches” serves precisely to highlight the insufficiency of the title in the face of the demand inherent to the truth of the act. Hence his verdict on the sterility of the unaccompanied word. As he himself warns, “words without deeds are shots without bullets; they thunder, but do not wound” (Vieira 2014, p. 53). Vieira’s target transcends the critique of literary style to strike directly at the dissociation between the enunciated word and the assumed existence.

The preacher’s responsibility is clearly distinguished from any pretension of impeccability, a reality that Augustine knew well. In the work *De doctrina christiana*, he recognizes that the truth can be proclaimed even by a “wicked and deceitful” heart (Augustinus Hipponensis 1995, p. 277), since the faithful obey, ultimately, not the prestige of the speaker, but the Lord who speaks through the Word. The efficacy of the proclamation does not depend on a perfect coincidence between the holiness of the speaker and the truth of what is said, even though this dissociation does not mitigate the moral demand placed upon the preacher.

In this context, Augustine maintains that, for one who seeks to be listened to “with obedience” (Augustinus Hipponensis 1995, p. 277), the preacher’s life is more relevant than any stylistic concern. The problem thus gains greater subtlety. Although the holiness of the minister need not be the primordial source of the announced truth, the responsibility for the homiletic act falls entirely upon him, whose life can confirm, obscure, or even wound the proclaimed content. As Hannah Arendt emphasizes in *The Human Condition*, action and speech reveal the unrepeatable “who” of each person. In this horizon, common life becomes possible thanks to properly human faculties such as forgiveness and promise: “Without being forgiven. . . and without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities” (Arendt 1998, p. 237). Artificial intelligence, possessing only a functional “what,” reveals no subject and, therefore, can guarantee nothing.

The model fails in what Mikhail Bakhtin designated as the “answerability” inherent in the ethical act. According to the thinker, the human subject assumes the weight of his words because he has no “alibi in being” (Bakhtin 1999, p. 49), that is, he cannot delegate his unique position in the world nor escape the consequences of what he enunciates. The machine, conversely, is the perfect alibi. It falls short of any interpellation of conscience and ignores the recognition of guilt. It fails to repent of an imprudent word and lacks the capacity to promise fidelity to an assembly. Consequently, it is entirely exempt from carrying the ministerial burden of having led it well or poorly. This profound lack of personal responsibility strikes at the structure of the act. In truth, the homily transcends the appearance of a correct discourse to assume itself as a word for which someone answers. The homiletic word requires a human voice precisely because it demands the living presence of someone capable of assuming it before their community.

5.2. Ecclesial Belonging and Communion

Since the homily demands a subject, it equally presupposes an ecclesial belonging. In the homiletic act, the preacher assumes the word from an ecclesial “we” rooted in the

communion of the baptized. In this context, Augustine's thought remains relevant. In Sermon 340, by distinguishing the service rendered for the people from the condition shared with them, "For you I am a bishop, with you, after all, I am a Christian" (Augustinus Hipponensis 1990, p. 292), Augustine clarifies the minister's position within the Church. Although the office and its risks prove real, grace remains a common gift. The minister exercises, in fact, a distinctive service, while keeping his fundamental condition as a baptized person intact. Consequently, his word always springs from the heart of the Church.

Thomas G. Long translates this intuition into homiletic terms by emphasizing that preachers speak "from within the church" (Long 2005, p. 35). This statement points to the ecclesial insertion of the ordained ministry. The presbyter announces the Word from an effective belonging to the body of the Church, in which he received the mission to serve. And the homily is thus inscribed in a living relationship between the minister and the assembly, sustained by the same grace that configures all as the people of God.

Fred Craddock contributes to the deepening of this perspective by recalling that the message is entrusted simultaneously "to the preacher and to the church" (Craddock 1974, p. 108), thus proposing preaching as a community event. This formulation is particularly relevant, primarily because the preacher acts as a servant who shares with the Church what he will subsequently deliver to it in the form of ministry. And, secondly, the homily expands the horizon beyond the dual relationship between text and speaker. In this way, communion overcomes the condition of a social backdrop to integrate the very structural essence of the discursive act.

It is important to acknowledge that Protestant homileticians such as Thomas Long and Fred Craddock operate within ecclesiological frameworks that differ from the Roman Catholic sacramental understanding of ministry. Yet this difference ultimately reinforces the critique of algorithmic mediation. Despite important theological divergences, both traditions converge on a central point: Christian preaching requires a historically situated and ecclesially accountable human subject embedded in a living community of faith. Whether understood sacramentally or as stewardship of the Word, preaching presupposes forms of vocation, participation, and belonging that no machine can genuinely possess.

This intrinsic ecclesial belonging dismisses any logic that equates preaching with a transferable commentary. While a commentary circulates, is republished, adapted, and reused in other contexts, the homily reaches its fullness only in the singularity of an assembly in act. Its proper place is the communion where the Word is proclaimed, received, discerned, and celebrated. Byung-Chul Han's analysis of the contemporary logic of communication becomes pertinent here, according to which *information exists by circulating*, whereas symbols and rituals "are narrative processes that do not allow for acceleration" (Han 2020, p. 13) and resist productive logic. The homily is inscribed precisely in this symbolic regime: it is not exhausted in the transmission of content, nor does it allow itself to be converted into reusable material without loss. The preacher speaks as an ordained minister or as an envoy with a recognized mission within a living tradition, assuming a proper discipline and a defined pastoral responsibility. His word finds consistency in this belonging, receiving from it form, authority, and criterion.

From this organic belonging, a clear theological boundary is drawn vis-à-vis artificial intelligence. As Karl Rahner emphasizes, the Word proclaimed in the Church reaches its fullest form when it becomes an event, constituting the "supreme moment of self-realization" of the Church (Rahner 1966, p. 271). The generative model effectively reproduces the surface of the discourse, but remains exterior to this ecclesial reality. It is not born from a concrete communion, and therefore its production remains abstract, incapable of becoming the singular event in which an assembly listens and recognizes its own identity.

5.3. Grace and Ministerial Cooperation

Ecclesial belonging makes it possible to understand a third fundamental aspect. The preacher is simultaneously the first recipient of the Word. This reciprocity assumes decisive importance. In its absence, the homily runs the serious risk of degenerating into an exercise of religious application imposed from the outside, as if the minister could situate himself before Scripture and the community in a position of immunity. The most robust homiletic tradition, on the contrary, defends exactly the opposite dynamic.

Fred Craddock observes that, by recognizing the simultaneous delivery of the message to the preacher and to the Church, the minister is placed “into the posture of the grateful recipient” (Craddock 1974, p. 108). The image of the grateful recipient proves to be of enormous theological fecundity, as it converts preaching from a regime of possession to the spectrum of pure reception. Although the preacher studies, prepares, and orders his discourse, all this work is secondary to the starting point, which resides in a divine initiative. Consequently, the Word is, first and foremost, welcomed into his own life and only then exercised as a ministry.

Saint Augustine formulates this dynamic with remarkable intuition. Before taking the floor, the preacher assumes the duty to pray for himself and for all those he is about to address, becoming “a man of prayer before becoming a man of words” (Augustinus Hipponensis 1995, p. 235). Grace neither legitimizes improvisation nor substitutes preparation, even when adopting someone else’s text. On the contrary, it precedes the act of preaching and requires, on the part of the speaker, a genuine availability so that what is said corresponds to a Word first received.

Following this same line of thought, Pieterse and Wepener resort to the metaphor of the sponge to describe homiletic preparation. “The preacher is a sponge who must absorb in herself or himself the context of the congregation, simultaneously absorb the context and message of the text and embody it in his or her existence” (Pieterse and Wepener 2021, p. 3). This image helps overcome two frequent reductions: treating the homily as an exegesis followed by an application, or relying solely on the pastoral sensitivity of the context. An integral act implies articulating these two dimensions; that is, the Word acts upon the preacher as he disposes himself to listen to the text and the people.

In a complementary register, Pleizier rejects the logic of reducing the homily to a transfer of religious information. For the author, preaching must reach the core of the person: “Preachers must address that which is deep down in the existence of the listeners, that which defines the core of what it is to be human and to care for being human in a world that is suffering, especially when so much suffering is caused by humans” (Pleizier 2024, p. 10). However, to reach this depth and speak legitimately about the human condition, the minister cannot forge concepts from the outside. The act of preaching demands that he share in this vulnerability, allowing himself to be touched and judged by the Word first.

This radical demand for receptivity exposes, ultimately, the absolute ontological deafness of the algorithmic model. As the philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien demonstrates, the human condition is defined by the precedence of listening over speaking. Our word never constitutes an absolute beginning, always emerging as a response to an intimate call that summons us and renders us vulnerable. It is before this inner voice that, according to the author, “the Absolute is present to us without any distance. We form the place where it is manifest” (Chrétien 2004, p. 70). Artificial intelligence, however, merely processes instructions. It lacks that interiority capable of being wounded or consoled by the Word, and of feeling like a grateful recipient. Unable to be a listener of grace, the machine annuls the very possibility of becoming its messenger.

5.4. Weakness and Spiritual Fecundity

The efficacy of the homily does not reside in its external grandeur. In the Sermon for Sexagesima, António Vieira already denounced the self-referential formalism and the obsession with performance that convert the word into a sterile spectacle. Criticizing the artificial assembly that forgets the vocation of the seed, he warns: “preaching must be like one who sows, and not like one who paves, or tiles” (Vieira 2014, p. 58). He repudiates a “violent and tyrannical style” where the words of Scripture are forced “like those coming to martyrdom: some are hauled in, others dragged in, others stretched, others twisted, others torn to pieces” (Vieira 2014, p. 57).

The decisive criterion emerges the moment the homily accepts placing itself under the sign of the cross. The matrix of this demand is found in the Pauline theology of weakness. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle assumes having presented himself “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3), deliberately stripping himself of the persuasive language of wisdom so that the efficacy of the preaching would not rest on the excellence of the speaker, but would be a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (1 Cor 2:4). The gospel possesses an essentially paschal form: its strength manifests itself, even if necessary, through the frailties and limitations of the messengers.

This perspective averts the danger of two errors. The first is the romanticization of mediocrity, based on the illusion that frailty would guarantee, in and of itself, the mark of authenticity. In truth, deficient preparation persists as a grave moral and technical flaw, and the invocation of the cross lacks any power to transmute pastoral negligence into a pacifying virtue. The second misconception reflects the presumption that formal excellence automatically ensures spiritual fecundity. A homily of absolutely impeccable composition runs the serious risk of remaining spiritually sterile by closing itself off in the self-sufficiency of the sender or in the purely calculated management of its performative effect.

In this horizon of meaning, the weakness of the preacher acquires a theologically significant weight. Fear, trembling, the acute awareness of insufficiency, pastoral fatigue, and even the expressive poverty of certain moments preserve the validity of the homiletic act intact. In certain circumstances, these vulnerabilities have the power to configure it in a way incomparably more faithful to the gospel than a brilliant and dominating performance. By recognizing his total inability to assume himself as the source of efficacy, the minister restores to the word its exact measure. Freed from the urgency of seeking his own confirmation, he opens up the necessary space for the action of God. Spiritual fecundity springs, thus, from a profound transparency. Far from constituting an absence of mediation, this reality establishes a radically decentered mediation.

Consequently, a homily endowed with a more modest form frequently achieves a superior spiritual fecundity. This phenomenon occurs quite apart from any supposed irrelevance of form, whose inestimable value Vieira himself made a point of demonstrating. Its root is found in the fact that the homiletic form is vitally ordered to an end that absolutely exceeds it. Its true fruit transcends the mere provocation of admiration in the audience, the vain exhibition of the speaker’s competence, or the calculable production of impact. It belongs, rather, to the serene and discreet regime of conversion, consolation, the illumination of conscience, patience in trial, and renewed openness to the transforming presence of Christ. The cross frees the homily from the tyranny imposed by measurable efficacy, replacing the act of preaching in the exact theological place destined for it.

In sum, the irreducibility of the homiletic act is grounded in a very precise foundational structure, imperatively demanding a responsible subject, a voice emerging from the living communion of the Church, a preacher willing to welcome the Word as its first recipient, and a fecundity shaped by the paschal logic. Although the homily retains the freedom to benefit from multiple instrumental supports, the preservation of this structural essence

constitutes a non-negotiable demand. Its eventual dissolution may even give rise to the maintenance of an eloquent and persuasive religious discourse, sliding, however, into the irretrievable annulment of the homiletic act in its fullest and most theological sense.

6. Objections and Clarifications

A more conservative thesis regarding the delegation of the homily to artificial intelligence is, however, susceptible to criticism or differing points of view. These objections must be taken seriously, as confronting alternatives allows for clarifying the contours of the debate. The defense of the algorithmic system for the production of the homiletic text tends to rely on four arguments.

First, the pragmatic argument, according to which efficacy in the edification of the assembly constitutes a sufficient criterion of validity. Second, the invocation of God's freedom, understood as the divine capacity to operate salvation through any mediation. Third, the historical perspective highlights the longstanding recourse to the words and sermons of others in the tradition of the Church and suggests a contemporary overvaluation of the concept of authorship. Fourth, on a more speculative level, the hypothetical advent of computer systems endowed with consciousness.

6.1. *If It Edifies, Is It Enough?*

The pragmatic objection asserts itself with remarkable persuasion: if an AI-generated text is capable of forming, clarifying Scripture, and even of leading the faithful to prayer, is that not enough? The limit of this reasoning lies in elevating the utilitarian character of the text to the ultimate criterion of validation. Even if a discourse is communicatively effective and elegant, and even spiritually edifying, it may still remain distant from the intrinsic truth of the homiletic act. Likewise, although the Christian tradition values the edification of the assembly, pastoral utility is an incomplete measure for evaluating the totality of the phenomenon.

This reservation rests on respect for the singular nature of the evangelical proclamation. In its essence, the homily absolutely transcends the category of a common religious text. As Nicholas Wolterstorff synthesizes, the function of the sermon is to "convey to the listeners, in its own distinct way, the continuant discourse of God that the reading aloud of Scripture already conveyed to them" (Wolterstorff 2018, p. 228). It is, thus, a kind of re-presentation or prolongation of God's discourse to the assembly. But when the criterion of validation is circumscribed to pragmatic edification, the homily comes to be evaluated exclusively as a product of consumption or impact. This perspective inevitably obscures the liturgical-ecclesial fabric and the responsibility of the subject who pronounces it.

Added to this is a second challenge. The edification perceived and evaluated by the subject can be fallible. Sentimentalist discourses possess, for example, the capacity to generate relief and a comforting sense of well-being. Resorting to Jean-Luc Marion's celebrated phenomenological distinction, a machine-generated text, optimized to meet the listener's expectations and needs, runs the serious risk of converting itself into an "idol". The idol, Marion reminds us, acts as a mirror that reflects only our own gaze, the "closed image of our experience of the divine" (Marion 2001, p. 8). On the contrary, preaching must be an "icon," causing a healthy discomfort proper to that which "preserves and highlights that distance in the invisible depth of an unsurpassable and open figure" (Marion 2001, p. 9). Stated differently, the homiletic act opens space for the true alterity of grace.

6.2. Can God Act Through Any Mediation?

The second objection, of greater theological depth, rests on the premise of God's freedom to operate grace through atypical mediations. The Catholic tradition attests to the occurrence of spiritual turning points mediated by contingent events, an example being the conversion of Saint Augustine through a child's voice urging him, "take up and read; take up and read" (Augustinus Hipponensis 2015, p. 134). This perception reflects the dogmatic principle according to which God binds salvation to the sacraments without, however, being ontologically constrained by them.

As Kevin Vanhoozer argues, God's transcendent and immanent action "are best viewed in terms of communicative agency rather than motional causality" (Vanhoozer 2010, p. 24). There is an intrinsic intentionality in this movement of God. Similarly, Rik Van Nieuwenhove, retrieving Thomas Aquinas's theology of grace, recalls that "divine causality operates on a transcendental level and can achieve its goal through secondary, creaturely causes but it is not in competition with them" (Van Nieuwenhove 2023, p. 805). Based on these premises, the pragmatic argument questions: if God acts freely through contingent elements, could He not operate effectively through a script generated by artificial intelligence?

Despite the validity of this premise, the intended conclusion makes an unjustified epistemological leap, that is the direct transition from providential possibility to liturgical normativity. God has the power to communicate grace through accidental mediations; however, sacramental theology refuses to elevate contingency to the category of an ecclesial criterion. If applied uncritically, this reasoning would justify the suppression of all sacramental discernment in favor of an exclusive appeal to practical effect. Once the end is achieved, the question of the means becomes irrelevant.

The decisive conceptual distinction is established, therefore, between the providential exception and the fitting form (*utrum hoc fuerit conveniens*, in the Thomistic tradition). The recognition of divine freedom regarding mediation does not annul the normative demand to evaluate the rightness and proportionality of that same mediation within the liturgical context. If this distinction is marginalized, the reflection on the homily slides into a utilitarian theory of religious experience. The requirement of an incarnate subject implicated in the preaching does not stem from a limitation of divine action, but from fidelity to the economy of the Incarnation, which is the fitting form established for the communication of the Word in the Christian assembly.

6.3. What Changes When the Text Is by Another?

The third objection is based on homiletic and liturgical tradition, more specifically on the fact that the demand for absolute originality in the formulation of the text proves historically anachronistic. Preachers have always cited other authors, reused outlines, welcomed commentaries, integrated exegetical traditions, and made use of homiliaries throughout the centuries. The reuse of written material was pastorally accepted. The paradigm of this validation is found in Saint Augustine, who legitimizes, as we have seen, the recitation of a sermon written by another, provided that the preacher, devoid of his own eloquence, assumes it for the benefit of the community (Augustinus Hipponensis 1995, p. 164). Faced with this precedent, why would the generation of a homiletic text by an artificial intelligence system be ontologically unviable?

The answer implies shifting the axis of analysis from pure material authorship to the performative assumption of the word. When Augustine authorizes the use of someone else's sermon, he presupposes the appropriation of a reflection already discerned by another believing subject within the living tradition of the Church. As Pullicino points out in his analysis of testimony, the theological fecundity of the word requires its organic rooting in

the context of “community listening and discernment” (Pullicino 2023, p. 582). This is not far removed from the research of Verweij and Pleizier when they state that the efficacy of the homiletic act surpasses the correct semantics of the text. By exposing himself publicly, the preacher triggers processes of existential and relational self-implication with the assembly, creating what the researchers term a “homiletic relationship” (Verweij and Pleizier 2020, p. 52). Artificial intelligence operates outside this nexus of communion.

Consequently, the substitution of organic authorship by artificial generation substantially alters the ecology of the act. The preacher retains full legitimacy to resort to resources, preparatory models, and inherited formulations, integrating them into the dynamic of his ministry. The critical rupture occurs the moment external mediation ceases to be an instrument and begins to replace the presbyter’s discernment. Proclaiming in an intentionally passive and integral manner a script generated by a probabilistic model, devoid of faith, body, and discernment, constitutes a fracture in the communicative pact with the community. For the appropriation of an AI-generated text to be theologically valid, the machine cannot replace the presbyter’s spirituality. It falls to him to infuse, through his own inner struggle, the existential weight and the testimony that the machine is ontologically incapable of offering.

6.4. *What If the Machine Is Conscious?*

The most demanding objection arises in the arena of the ontological spectrum, questioning the hypothesis of an artificial intelligence endowed with true consciousness. Faced with this horizon, it is imperative to absolutely avoid two diametrically opposed simplifications: the dogma of categorical impossibility, on the one hand, and the naivety of elevating syntactic sophistication to proof of phenomenal consciousness, on the other. The state of the art proves the complexity and current relevance of the topic.

Recent studies by Colombatto and Fleming highlight the propensity of a significant portion of the public to attribute a real possibility of consciousness to large language models (Colombatto and Fleming 2024, p. 4). Birch warns, however, of the danger of the “gaming problem” (Birch 2024, p. 316), underlining the capacity of highly optimized systems to mimic persuasive behavioral signs of sentience in the absence of genuine subjective experience.

This profound split between technical reality and human perception is corroborated by the structural analysis of the transformer architecture itself. Evaluated in light of the criteria of consciousness, the infrastructure of current models excludes any dimension of interiority, revealing that the exacerbation of public confusion is, to a large extent, induced by the widespread use of interfaces and anthropomorphic language (Shardlow and Przybyła 2024, p. 18). This illusion leads to the creation of an artificial bond, in which the user attributes mental states to the machine with such a degree of confidence that they even ignore the explicit divergence of experts (Colombatto et al. 2025, p. 3).

It is important to emphasize, nevertheless, the manifest insufficiency of this hypothesis, even if granted, to automatically resolve the homiletic question. The emergence of a conscious artificial entity would immediately transmute the debate on textual simulation into a complex discussion regarding personal status and, within a strictly Christian framework, ecclesial belonging. This objection reveals, therefore, an undeniable robustness by exposing the provisional and technologically dependent character of certain current criticisms of artificial intelligence. It fails, however, in demonstrating a hypothetical reduction in the homily to the presence of a generic interiority, keeping the central problem firmly anchored in its ecclesiological and theological core.

7. Discernment and Proposal

Having analyzed the legitimate objections and rejected dichotomous simplifications, the argumentative path demands the transition from critical diagnosis to normative discernment. The core question has focused on the aptitude of generative models to produce homiletic texts ready to be used in the liturgy, a premise previously validated. The epistemological and pastoral challenge resides, rather, in determining the criteria that delimit the legitimacy of the instrumental use of artificial intelligence, identifying the threshold beyond which the ontological disfigurement of the homiletic act occurs.

If the reflection remains circumscribed to the semantic quality of the final output, the evaluation will invariably be guided by pragmatic metrics of efficiency and the assembly's receptivity. Although they hold instrumental relevance, such parameters are manifestly insufficient to scrutinize a liturgical practice whose dogmatic architecture inextricably integrates truth, existential testimony, communion, and moral responsibility.

It is within this ecclesial horizon that algorithmic mediation must be framed. Recent studies on digital religion demonstrate that technology is not a neutral instrument. On the contrary, it actively shapes the way religious authority is constructed and recognized by the community. As Pauline Hope Cheong explains, technological media, rather than merely conveying messages, participate and "co-enacts with religious authority" (Cheong 2017, p. 26) in the very configuration of authority. In this way, the problem of preaching gains a new line of analysis: it is important to perceive exactly what kind of pastoral authority is promoted, or subverted, when the presbyter delegates the construction of the homily to an artificial system.

7.1. Assistance, Delegation, Substitution

The distinction between assistance, delegation, and substitution allows for overcoming the reductionism of the current debate and establishing a normative criterion. The legitimacy of *algorithmic assistance* is recognized, granting the presbyter the freedom to resort to generative tools for complementary tasks, such as locating biblical references, comparing translations, mapping thematic axes, or improving the fluency of the writing. In these scenarios, technology retains a strictly instrumental nature, subordinated to a pastoral intelligence of an ecclesial matrix. The theological core of the homily, that is, the hermeneutical nexus between the readings, the discernment of the community, and the final assumption of the word, remains inalienable. This dynamic echoes the perspective of Jared Alcántara, who describes preaching as a practice grounded in competencies, namely conviction, contextualization, clarity, concreteness, and creativity (Alcántara 2019, p. 14). Technology possesses the potential to optimize support for these dimensions, provided it preserves intact the protagonism of human agency.

To maximize the pastoral usefulness of this model, it is crucial to establish clear criteria demarcating the subtle boundary between targeted assistance and structural delegation. This threshold is crossed the moment the tool transitions from an informational resource to a compositional agent.

Delegation begins when the tool exceeds the function of targeted assistance to assume the discernment, the argumentative structure, the generation of central metaphors, or the very spiritual matrix of the text. If, for instance, an AI proposes a homiletic structure that the preacher merely adopts, it constitutes a subtle outsourcing of the homiletic act. In this scenario, the presbyter maintains his physical presence and delivery, but outsources the core of his interior *munus*.

This crossing can be critically evaluated through three theological criteria. The first is interior appropriation: delegating the structural logic or the analogical imagination bypasses the minister's necessary spiritual struggle with the Word, risking his reduction to

a mere performer of an externally generated script. The second is the discernment of spirits: identifying which specific metaphor or narrative tone best responds to a local assembly *hic et nunc* is fundamentally an act of pastoral discernment that a statistical model cannot perform. Finally, this boundary rests on ecclesial accountability: the ordained minister is intimately responsible before the community for the theology proclaimed, a mandate severely compromised when the core hermeneutical choices are dictated by an algorithmic average. The generated text may even exhibit strict orthodoxy and edifying clarity, but it lacks the performative weight of a word forged in the vulnerability and personal exposure of the one who proclaims it.

Finally, *substitution* constitutes an extreme threshold, incompatible with liturgical normativity. If in delegation, artificial intelligence replaces the work of the minister, in substitution the machine usurps the subject himself. This scenario materializes when the technological system assumes the role of speaker and performative agent, suppressing the body and voice of the ordained minister, whether through synthetic locution broadcast over loudspeakers or the projection of a digital avatar. Here, a dogmatic rupture with the principle of the Incarnation is consummated. Francis synthesizes this ontological requirement by recalling that the Lord asks ministers to act as “living, free and creative beings who let his word enter their own hearts before then passing it on to others” (Franciscus 2013, no. 151). Although the preparation of the homily admits the use of external tools, its liturgical validity rests, non-transferably, upon the real presence of a subject who exposes himself to the community and to the message he proclaims.

This insistence on corporeal presence must not, however, be confused with an ‘offline-centric’ rejection of digital mediation. In contemporary hypermediated liturgical contexts, such as livestreamed or hybrid worship, embodiment is not strictly confined to physical contiguity. Instead, it expands into relational and performative dimensions mediated by technology. In a digital transmission, the screen extends the reach of a historically situated minister; the technological mediation still relies on the pre-existing ontological reality of a vulnerable subject who shares the human condition with the remote community. Conversely, algorithmic substitution, such as an AI-generated avatar, does not mediate a real body, but rather simulates one that does not exist. The dogmatic rupture lies not in the use of digital interfaces, but in the total absence of a real subject capable of existential implication.

7.2. Criteria for Pastoral Discernment

The preceding analytical matrix now allows us to suggest four fundamental criteria for homiletic discernment in the face of artificial intelligence.

The first is the principle of *procedural responsibility*. The demand that the minister answer for his words before the community is something deeper than the verification of doctrinal orthodoxy. It encompasses the entirety of the preparatory process. The possible adoption of generative tools cannot happen at the expense of opacity, thus demanding redoubled methodological transparency and pastoral vigilance.

The second criterion rests on *synodal communion*. Preaching finds in communitarian listening one of its founding principles. This is an antidote to individual isolation or the statistical optimization of a generated text. As Mary McCaughey emphasizes regarding the synodal path, ecclesial discernment requires involving all the baptized in the process of “synodal listening which seeks to listen to where the apostolic faith is alive today” (McCaughey 2023, p. 539). Although capable of aggregating consistent syntactic patterns, the generative model remains ontologically alien to this communitarian reception, being incapable of the communitarian discernment that the Church demands.

The third criterion is *relational rootedness*. The efficacy of the homily presupposes contact with real subjects who carry with them their culture, history, and language. Hans Malmström demonstrates that listeners function as “co-constructors of the sermon” (Malmström 2016, p. 563), highlighting the use of direct existential interrogations, such as “What is your darkness?”, to transform preaching into a dialogue. Although a generative system can easily mimic this rhetorical artifice to create proximity, it is once again a simulacrum. The machine ignores the biographical specificity of the assembly. Without knowing the true darkneses of that concrete community, it confines the discourse to standardized abstraction and fails the authentic personal encounter.

The fourth and final criterion underlines the primacy of *liturgical corporeality*. The literature on digital religion documents the continuous porosity between the online and offline spheres. Giulia Evolvi conceptualizes, in this sense, the emergence of “hypermediated religious spaces” (Evolvi 2022, p. 20), while Helen Parish evidenced, in the pandemic context, the dogmatic unsustainability of a disembodied belonging (Parish 2020, p. 6). The homily is, structurally, a performative, corporeal, and situated action. However much it appropriates technological mediations in its preparation, the act demands consummation through a physical subject who assumes the risk of the encounter.

7.3. Ministerial Formation in the Algorithmic Age

These normative distinctions demand the reconfiguration of the formation models for future presbyters. An ecclesial response guided by the oscillation between generic interdiction and uncritical adoption may be manifestly insufficient. Nor is it a question of whether, in the present and in the future, they will use these tools, but to what degree and in what context they will do so. Therefore, the capacitation of seminarians for the use of these tools must safeguard, as we have argued, their intellectual and spiritual sovereignty. This competence presupposes a robust algorithmic literacy, that is, the scrupulous verification of sources, the identification of theological biases underlying the models, rigor in authorial appropriation, and resistance to rhetorical standardization. In a sense, it involves a new homiletic pedagogy capable of bridging exegetical study, prayer, pastoral attention, and the performativity of the word.

This new technological paradigm contains, paradoxically, a clarifying impulse for formative institutions. Seminaries and faculties, as well as ongoing formation programs, are thus impelled toward a profound curricular revision, centered on the untransferable core of the ministry and the ontological plane of the homily. It is at this critical point that Catholic theology, through authors like Hilker, recalls that preaching summons a “sacramental imagination,” in which the tangible humanity of the preacher operates as the indispensable locus for the mediation of grace (Hilker 1997, p. 48). Embodied human mediation determines the matrix through which the Word is witnessed and internalized.

To move beyond a theoretical diagnosis, this theological framework must be translated into concrete pedagogical strategies for seminary curricula and ongoing clergy formation. Rather than passively ignoring or strictly prohibiting generative tools, formators should integrate them proactively to foster an authentic homiletic renewal. First, artificial intelligence can be utilized as a critical interlocutor during the preparation phase, helping preachers identify and dismantle their own clichés or overused rhetorical patterns. Second, algorithmic outputs can be introduced into supervised *lectio divina* exercises, not as a source of revelation, but as a sterile contrast to challenge and deepen the minister’s personal, existential appropriation of the Word. Third, it is imperative to teach seminarians to evaluate these outputs theologically, equipping them to discern the ontological limits of a generated text. Finally, theological faculties should develop specific formation modules on digital discernment and algorithmic authority. By implementing these concrete strategies,

the Church can equip future presbyters to navigate the hypermediated landscape while preserving the inalienable core of their homiletic subjectivity.

7.4. *The Algorithm as a Mirror of the Homiletic Crisis*

The emergence of generative models further unveils a reality regarding the current state of preaching. Could the fascination aroused by LLMs, even in the domain of the homily, be the symptom of a certain disenchantment or disillusionment with this ministry? Read from this perspective, technology functions as a critical mirror that exposes the prior hollowing out of the homiletic act itself. It is precisely in the face of preaching crystallized in a generic, moralizing format, without investment in Scripture and in the reading of the community's reality, that the algorithm proposes itself as a substitute. Systems based on statistical modeling excel in the realm of regularities and platitudes. Consequently, the plausibility of a synthetic text in this domain does not attest to the spiritual elevation of the machine, but may mirror the fragility of a presbyter resigned to stagnation.

It is important to formulate this diagnosis with rigor. This weakness, the progressive erosion of pastoral commitment to the homily, precedes the current technological disruption. Symptoms of this include the disinvestment in preparation time, in *lectio divina*, and in the prophetic courage of words that cause discomfort. To this extent, the horizon opened by artificial intelligence forces the Church into an urgent and unavoidable clarification: to reclaim the homily as an embodied and unrepeatable liturgical event, or to accept its reduction to a standardized text.

8. Conclusions

A guiding thread of our reflection has centered on the challenge that generative artificial intelligence poses to homiletic practice. Although an algorithm possesses the theoretical capacity to surpass countless preachers in rhetorical structure and theological content, the core of the problem persists in the ontological status of the homiletic act. By deliberately shifting the debate from a functional evaluation to a matrix of liturgical and pastoral theology, this study explicitly seeks to advance current debates in both digital theology and contemporary homiletics.

Within the realm of digital theology, the manuscript moves beyond functional critiques to offer a robust ontological and sacramental evaluation of generative models. By identifying the systemic risks of algorithmic bias, "ontological slippage", and digital colonialism, the research highlights how algorithmic recursivity threatens the prophetic and incarnated nature of the Word. It exposes the danger of reducing diverse ecclesial discernment to a homogenized, Western-centric statistical average that ignores the *sensus fidei* of local communities.

Furthermore, regarding homiletics, this research provides a much-needed normative framework for ministerial praxis. The technological temptation resides in the illusion that the efficacy of the text justifies the opacity of its genesis. Rather than oscillating between uncritical adoption and absolute rejection, the proposed tripartite model, distinguishing between assistance, delegation, and substitution, offers clear theological criteria for navigating the AI era. Sacramental theology underlines the integral character of Christian preaching, where the presbyter is primarily responsible for leading the assembly to the Word. By anchoring the threshold of legitimate assistance in the minister's interior appropriation, the discernment of spirits, and ecclesial accountability, this model safeguards the homily not merely as a rhetorical exercise, but as an embodied action. Even faced with the possibility of the faithful having an authentic spiritual experience following artificially generated texts, the dogmatic problem remains: it lacks the authority of a presbyter willing to expose himself to the message he proclaims.

Consequently, urgent lines of research emerge. It is fundamental to study the empirical reception of AI-crafted homilies in scenarios of declared transparency before the assembly, comparing varied cultural contexts and ecclesial traditions. In parallel, priestly pedagogy will have to face the challenge of cultivating spiritual depth in a technological ecosystem marked by fragmented attention. The vitality of future preaching will also depend on institutional lucidity to recognize in algorithmic delegation a possible symptom of a foundational crisis that demands the integral reconfiguration of the subject.

At the end of this journey, the primordial question retains an absolute simplicity: who speaks in the homily, before whom do they speak, and from whom do they do so? These are the dimensions that make authentic spiritual life pulsate, in which technology will always find its instrumental place of assistance. Without them, the algorithm will merely conceal the irremediable silence of the Word.

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Notes

- ¹ Although this essay privileges the concept of the “homily”, which in Catholic sacramental theology designates the liturgical allocution reserved for the ordained minister within the context of the Eucharistic celebration, it is important to acknowledge the broader terminological and theological landscape. In Anglophone contexts and various non-Catholic Christian traditions, the terms “preaching” or “sermon” prevail, often carrying distinct understandings of authority, inspiration, and mediation. While the normative criteria developed in this study are grounded in a specific sacramental ontology, they are intended to provide a critical vantage point for evaluating the nature of the enouncing subject in religious communication. Thus, while respecting the divergent theological requirements of different traditions, the matrix proposed here offers a framework for discerning the implications of algorithmic delegation in any communicative act of a spiritual nature.
- ² António Vieira (1608–1697) was a leading Portuguese Jesuit and missionary in Brazil. A towering figure in Luso-Brazilian literature and Baroque rhetoric, his extensive body of sermons, most notably the *Sermon for Sexagesima*, which functions as a masterclass on the theology of preaching, remains a foundational reference in the history of catholic homiletics.

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