

# **A Roadmap for American Churches and People of Faith: W.W.J.D. (What Would Jesus Do?)**



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## **CHAPTER 14. Specific Additional Spiritual Formation And Religious Education (SFARE) Suggestions, The Power Of “Sermilies,” And The Future.**

### **Most Effective SFARE Communications.**

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” This saying attributed to George Bernard Shaw (and too many others to be able to attribute appropriately), as well as one of the most iconic old movie lines of all times: “What we have here is a failure to communicate” (Rosenberg, 1967), reminds us of how critical it is to communicate effectively. And there is arguably no more vital content to share effectively than that which brings people closer to Christ and each other and helps them on their journey to theosis.

The previous extensive Teacher to Preacher to Reacher Chapter 13 of my Roadmap detailed how you, your clergy, and your parish can improve all SFARE programs and messages based on the latest research. This Chapter 14 of my Roadmap focuses more on how clergy and laity most effectively deliver the Word of God (through homilies, sermons, and SFARE programs). In many respects, this Chapter is a personal (hopefully inspirational) letter from me to you supported by Scripture and data. So, as they say, “Let’s talk.”

After surveying more than 35,000 adults, the Pew Research Center concluded:

About half of U.S. adults have looked for a new religious congregation at some point in their lives, most commonly because they have moved. And when they search for a new house of worship, a new Pew Research Center study shows, Americans look first and foremost for a place where they like the preaching, and the tone set by the congregation’s leaders. Fully 83% of Americans who have looked for a new place of worship say the quality of preaching played an important role in their choice of congregation (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Clearly, the message from the priest (and any other layperson who teaches Holy Scripture) is at least as significant as it was in the time of the Apostles when they established Christ’s church. Given the plethora of competing messages and communications platforms, I would argue that anytime you deliver the Word of God is even more critical in modernity in America.

At the same time, second on the list of what draws people to a church in that extensive Pew study was how church leaders communicated with and welcomed the faithful and seekers (Pew Research Center, 2016). In the Stewardship and Engagement section in Chapter 10 of my Roadmap, I shared research and specific strategies for a

comprehensive way to improve the welcoming of current and potential new parishioners. However, the data shows that our preaching, teaching, homily, etc. experiences and church communications are not always as welcoming and engagingly effective as they could be.

So, what can clergy and laity do to improve our church communications and how we communicate daily? Famous controversial author Ayn Rand said: “Live and act within the limit of your knowledge and keep expanding it to the limit of your life. If you don’t know, the thing to do is not to get scared but to learn” (Rand, 1957). This author was an atheist, yet her challenge to pursue lifelong learning is at the core of proper Christian theology and signifies a journey of discovery to theosis or oneness with Christ. (See, even atheists can get some things right!)

The focus on life-long learning is why I chose the Roadmap metaphor for the title and stories in this book as an additional subliminal emphasis on a road of continuous learning. It is also why I would pursue a Doctorate in Strategic Leadership to work with Christian organizations with a graduation date one week after my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. We should never be done learning about God and becoming a better Christian leader and followers. Leadership guru John Maxwell famously said, “Live until you die” (Maxwell, 2007). I have adopted and adapted that motto: “Live and learn until you die.” This should be the journey you should pursue as you learn to be more Christlike so that when you stand before His awesome judgment seat during your II Corinthians 5:10 Moment, you are prepared to be welcomed.

However, it is essential to remember that merely saying we are followers of Jesus Christ and going through the motions is not sufficient. The first person who joined Christ in the Kingdom Eternal was the sinner on the cross, and the first human destined for whatever version of hell your faith tradition teaches was one of our Lord’s Apostles. So, we must be mindful that our journey toward the Lord requires continuous spiritual formation and religious education, and we should never consider ourselves fully ready or worthy.

To help us, St. Paul clearly explains how vital homilies, sermons, and similar forms of effective Christian SFARE communications are as a part of the life-long learning journey. St. Paul teaches:

*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead... I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction (II Timothy 4:1).*

An impactful delivery of the Word of God can and should be one of the most transformative forms of communication. Parish councils and SFARE ministry leaders can also communicate more effectively with all parish constituencies using the same model of careful instruction in the SFARE ministries. The empirical data shows that even in these tumultuous times, many people with unquenched hunger and thirst want to understand what Christ taught and how they can apply these critical teachings in their daily lives. In short, you can help yourself and others “*lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called*” (Ephesians 4:1).

## The Power Of A Powerful Sermily.

Let me quickly define my terms. The words homily and sermon are often used interchangeably. Some distinguish between the two by concluding that a “sermon ” is a talk about a spiritual topic, whereas a “homily” is a commentary that generally follows and explains a reading of Holy Scripture. To make it more complicated, a SFARE talk or program can (and arguably should be) both at the same time.

I am not a clergyman, and yet all the parishes I attend while working on their strategic plan or who host one of my Igniting the Flame live retreats allow me to offer the sermon in the church service, which I always turn into a homily because of my constant effort to take Holy Scripture stories and bring them to life and make them actionable. Thus, to clarify (or muddy the waters), I believe the most effective SFARE communication is a combination of both sermon and homily, which I call a “**Sermily.**” A Sermily is a sermon, homily, talk, lesson, or presentation about a spiritual topic, including any commentary generally following and explaining a reading of the Holy Scripture.

I submit that Sermilies can be offered in any church service, small group gathering, retreat, parish program, Sunday school class, or anywhere SFARE content is shared. They can be offered by clergy, theologians, and watch this, by lay people also. Of course, most clergy’s biggest fear is that some crazed layperson may say something incorrect according to that faith tradition’s teaching.

However, the other side of that coin is that the priest cannot be everywhere and conduct every Sermily to every audience in every setting. Moreover, how many times have theologians and clergy (even within the same denomination) disagreed and caused schisms? Finally, and this is tough love, not all clergy are the most effective communicators and presenters. The right message presented uninspiringly or merely read is ineffective and can be viewed negatively by a hungry audience. Thus, clergy should empower and entrust the “right” vetted laity who they believe have sufficient education, theological understanding, and faith and who are especially effective communicators to provide Sermilies where the clergy cannot be present, especially in Sunday School, Small Group Ministry and other SFARE programs.

Regardless of the definition or who delivers it, all the data underscores how critical a good Sermily can be. This is especially true in those Christian churches which are not liturgical and thus place prominence on the Sermily. Those of us from older and liturgical churches like my Orthodox churches understand the place of the critical importance of the Sermily while also believing the climax of the service is the all-powerful Eucharistic offering of the body and blood of Christ. Indeed. Michael Bakalis’s book. A Church at the Crossroads identifies from the survey and other data he reviewed that, much to the chagrin of the clergy and Bishops:

What is clear, however, is that in twenty-first-century America, reliance on the Divine Liturgy alone is not enough to attract and retain adherents to the Orthodox faith. Thus, teaching and preaching must be elevated to almost equal importance in the Orthodox Sunday service (Bakalis, 2014, p. 49).

Notice he did not say the Eucharist and Divine Liturgy are unimportant. However, if almost 50% of those raised in an Orthodox church have left it (Pew, 2015), one must ask why and what we can do to reverse those unsustainable trends, regardless of how uncomfortable that discussion and research is. Regardless of faith tradition, SFARE efforts must start with the most effective Sermilies and build out from there.

Indeed, one large church with which I am familiar is experimenting with an integrated SFARE strategy that is fascinating and makes sense. The priest offers a particular Sermily to the adults in the church that makes three critical faith-based and Scriptural points. The Sunday school teachers take some of their class time to provide an age-appropriate summary version of those same three messages to all children in every age group. At the end of church, the family picks up a hang tag for their rear-view mirror with summary bullet points on those three messages.

Studies show parents often spend more time in the car with their kids than many other interactions. So, rather than letting them jabber aimlessly, or worse yet, play on their smartphones, the driving parent reads a talking point from the hang tag one at a time and engages their children in a discussion about what they learned on that topic and what they think and how they might apply the message. Now, the wasted and often frustrating drive time becomes Christ/God time, and the parents and kids have a meaningful dialogue about salvific things that matter.

I cite the above without knowing what their study will show is the long-term effect of this experiment. My point is that they are experimenting with different ways to deliver SFARE and Sermily content most effectively and help their faithful convert more time to their faith journey. Indeed, this is the biggest operational criticism leveled at almost all Christian parishes. They have tried to convert the lifelong daily journey to theosis to a bite-size hour or two on Sunday, leaving all the remaining time for secular activities.

Here is my big SFARE idea. **You are a Christian 168 hours a week and must live and act like it consistently and constantly. Merely entering a church on Sunday does not make you a Christian any more than entering your garage does not make you a car.** To be a Disciple of Christ, you must embrace His message of love 24x7x365 (John 13:34-35). Unless and until your parish SFARE programs convert your faithful from “one/two-hour-a-week Christians” to intentional full-time Christians, your SFARE programs are not fully effective.

I submit this is the ultimate performance metric for your SFARE ministries. Do you make active and engaged full-time disciples of Jesus Christ? Not part-time hourly workers punching a one day a week one-hour time clock until they die. Instead, consider what your parish would look and act like if your parishioners lived fully as Christians until they died on this earth and started over in the Kingdom Eternal. Go big or go home, but please stop accepting the behavior of being a part-time Christian.

### [The Secret Sauce Of Practical Applied Theology \(“PAT”\).](#)

To achieve this big vision of becoming Intentional Christians, I submit most, if not all, Sermilies must be focused on **Practical Applied Theology (“PAT”).** This places the

emphasis not merely on describing a historic event or story completely accurately and consistent with one's faith understanding. It adds the context of how to guide today's laity on how to apply it in their lives. It needs to be "both-and" not "either-or."

As I describe later in Chapter 17 of my Roadmap, **PAT Sermilies** are grounded in the Holy Gospel and also focused on how that message or theological principle applies in the daily lives of your parishioners. Appreciating the roles of theologians and academic scholars, the PIPs frequently rate Sermilies as impractical if what is proposed does not meet the test of being practically applicable. I cannot urge strongly enough clergy and Bishops and others involved in SFARE to always focus on PAT. Some of the clergy I have featured in my Roadmap have successfully implemented PAT in all their Sermilies, and the results show significantly increased engagement in church services, sacraments, and ministries and growth in the number of more engaged parishioners. Please do not underestimate the power and life-changing impact of an effective PAT Sermily.

### Creating Parishioner Expectations.

The main Gallup research cited extensively in my Stewardship & Engagement Roadmap Chapter 10 established unequivocally that the most effective Christian churches are ones that create and make clear their expectations of their faithful. The most effective parishes do not timidly accept anyone who shows up and offers whatever scraps are left over. SFARE ministries and messaging and communications from clergy and laity alike must provide clarity of what is expected of their parishioners. They should unapologetically request that their faithful offer their first fruits to Christ as he instructed be done.

For example, in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (a/k/a the Mormon church), there is not only a tithing expectation but an expectation that their youth will give at least one year of service to their church. When I attended a wedding at the Greek Orthodox Church in Salt Lake City, my wife and I went to the Mormon genealogy center. We spent over four hours creating our family trees using their amazing technology. Two young men who were performing their year of service to the Mormon Church helped us the entire time we were there.

To provide another example of the positive impact of parishes that make SFARE and service expectations clear, I attended a Greek festival at another church during the summer. I saw five young men in suits and ties (while the rest of us wore shorts and t-shirts in the heat). These young men carried many books. I congratulated them for their appearance and discussed the books about their faith they were offering. They explained they were in their year of service to the Mormon church and were going to other church festivals and events to share their faith. They indicated they were not specifically targeting other religions in our parishes but just going wherever people were gathered. I observed the children from that church dancing on stage while these young Mormon lads were witnessing their faith. Please tell me which you think is the better way to educate their youth on service to others.

I will not engage in irrelevant and futile arguments about whether one church or another is an “authentic” Christian faith (please read Chapter 15 of my Roadmap, where I discuss Oneness In Christ). I merely note that some parishes and denominations make their expectations clear of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Interestingly, they seem to be the churches that are growing in America and not just trying to “hang on” like those that provide no clear expectations and are thus declining. So, which future do you want for your parish?

## Purposeful And Intentional Christians.

A priest at one of the parishes at which I am a steward and a close personal friend, Fr. Barnabas Powell, is a convert to Orthodoxy after having been a Pentecostal minister. He coined the phrase I love: “being Orthodox on purpose.” Replace the word Orthodox with whatever faith traditions to which you subscribe and ask yourself, are you creating Christians who are “\_\_\_\_\_ on purpose?”

When I speak of the need for the most effective Sermilies and SFARE programs and offerings, I am not referring to their entertainment value. However, I submit that they must engage parishioners or other audiences to communicate effectively. Humor is one way to engage people, even in critically important theological conversations.

Another way is through storytelling since the previously cited data proves we communicate most frequently through stories. Christ’s Parables have stood the test of time not just because the Lord told them but because their PAT meaning and impact were critical and compelling. Thus, we love to retell these timeless lessons.

SFARE ministries and programs and every Sermily must feed the absolute hunger and quench the abundant thirst your faithful have to try and understand what it means to be a good person and a disciple of Jesus Christ, as well as what He expects of us in our daily lives. We are constantly reminded in both theological and secular discourse to find our WHY, and yet, for all the data informing us of the importance of the Sermily, most anecdotal and empirical data identify SFARE programs and Sermilies are missing the mark. Ironically (or perhaps providentially), the Greek word ἁμαρτία, means “sin.” However, the literal translation is “missing the mark.” I submit that the data tells us that for too often and too long, our SFARE and Sermilies have been “sinful” in the sense of missing the mark.

## “It’s The (Sermily) Stupid!”

This title for this section is an attempt at an alliterative humor take-off on the advice given to Presidential candidates that it is always “the economy stupid.” In SFARE, the similar key starting point is always the Sermily. Bishop Robert Barron wrote a powerful explanation as to why many faithful are leaving the church:

A second major concern that can and should be addressed is that of bad preaching. Again and again, people said that they left the Church because homilies were “boring, irrelevant, poorly prepared” or “delivered in an

impenetrable accent... That said, homilists can make a great leap forward by being attentive to one fact: **Sermons become boring in the measure that they don't propose something like answers to real questions** (Barron, 2012). (emphasis added)

The empirical research tells us there are elements of an effective worship experience you can make more engaging; however, perhaps the easiest place to start is where the clergy address their faithful - face to face.

Thom Rainer, CEO of the Church Answers resource for church leaders, constantly reaffirms the Pew Research Center data about the "primacy of the pulpit" as the critical factor for those looking to find a church home and grow closer to Christ (Rainer, 2008). In his book Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them, he discussed the results of an extensive survey conducted by LifeWay Research of 7,000 pastors in his Southern Baptist Convention. A statistically significant 1,066 clergymen identified the time they spent preparing their Sermonies for that Sunday

21% of clergy said they spent more than 15 hours

23% of clergy said they spent 11 to 15 hours

25% of clergy said they spent 8 to 10 hours

23% of clergy said they spent 5 to 7 hours

8% of clergy said they spent less than 5 hours

To summarize, a full 1 in 4 clergy spent between 8 to 10 hours a week preparing their Sermon, and almost as many spent 11 to 15 hours, with another 21% spending more than 15 hours a week. I like to ask the clergy I work with how much time they spend each week on their Sunday Sermon. I am always surprised (and often distressed) at the answer. The same question could be asked of the Sunday school faculty or other SFARE ministry presenters.

As importantly, Thom Rainer's research reinforced the correlative relationship between time in Sermon preparation and church health metrics. The data show that the greater the time in Sermon development and rehearsal, the more likely the parish is to be effective at evangelizing, have a higher retention rate of members, and have a higher weekly per capita giving (Rainer, 2008).

Closer to my American Orthosphere home, I urge everyone to heed the encyclical from the Orthodox Church In America on preaching:

True, the power of the Word of God is forever, but the quality of preaching is directly related to the effort expended by the preacher in such cases... Considering that we are in the "race for salvation" and continue to "fight the good fight," we must use every moment to know and love God, the Gospel, and its invitation to salvation. Christians have a sacred duty to preach. Where not already offered, seminaries should introduce homiletics courses into the curricula: where such are already offered, they should be supported and strengthened. Provisions for continuing education and

refresher courses for priests, deacons and the other ranks of the clergy should be made (Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, 1989).

There is Hierarchical consensus with all the data pointing in the same direction of the Sermily as one of the most critical parts of the Sunday experience and a clearly critical SFARE opportunity to bring the faithful closer to Christ and each other.

Perhaps few theologians in history are better known for effective Sermilies than St. John Chrysostom. His nickname was the “Golden Mouth” because of his renown for his effective (albeit long) Sermilies. It was not uncommon for St. John to get on a roll and preach for over an hour. I remind parishioners of this fact when I get on a roll with one of my Sermilies to a parish.

The undeniable fact is that a Sermily is a critical part of your parish SFARE ministry, whether it is delivered by the clergy in church or a layperson in a ministry or another setting. Thus, the question remains: what can you do to help your clergy and SFARE laity present the most effective Sermilies?

### Sermilies To Be The Light Of The World And Your Role.

The term “communication” originates from Latin words that mean to “share,” “impart,” or “share in common.” In short, communication emphasizes how people utilize messages to create meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media to achieve the primary goal of understanding. To what end are your parish and parishioners called to communicate?

As mentioned previously, the Lord gave you a job description to be the “*light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14). The light that shines to expunge the darkness is the effective Teaching, Preaching, AND Reaching when you carry Christ’s Light into a dark world in which your parishioners live. Dear brother or sister, if it seems like I am bludgeoning you at this point, you are correct. Given the data, you and I must prioritize this third leg of my critical S<sup>3</sup> needs in American Christendom by better using SFARE programs and Sermilies to eradicate the darkness.

The light that is missing is YOU. You need to know and live what it means to be an intentional Christian. You also need to be part of the solution of recruiting those who are necessary to deliver the most efficacious SFARE ministries and Sermilies possible. The next time you wonder if you have something worth saying to help Christ’s church, please know that He already answered that question in the affirmative. That is a settled issue. And it doesn’t matter if you’re part of the “Men in Black” (i.e., clergyman) or a lay person. YOU are the chosen light of the world, and you have to live and deliver Sermilies that point the way to Christ.

Indeed, in Holy Scripture, our Lord explains why your responsibility is so critical. “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven*” (Matthew 5:16). Does this help you understand that **you were chosen to be the mirror through which God can be seen**? Not just because of your creation in His likeness but because of the living example you set of what it means to be a child

of God. The Orthodox Study Bible expands your sacred calling: “Christian values have both a personal and a public function, for our virtue can bring others to glorify the Father” (p. 1275).

In other words, when you fail to shine the light of your gifts and message, you are obscuring the ability of others to see your Father and Lord. You are the selected beacon of light, and so whatever it is you have to say or communicate via Sermily, SFARE ministry, or other actions, you are the chosen representative of the Father of all creation. How about that for a heavy rap? Whether you are clergy or laity, you are now responsible for your SFARE and Sermily preparation and delivery through words and the action of being an intentional Christian.

## The "Other" John And You

Even the most unlikely of us have been given voice for a reason. Imagine you were an aesthetic monk living alone in the wilderness around “*the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar,*” as was described in the Gospel of Luke, which is most naturally understood as a reference to 29 AD. But in the Gospel of John, we read: “*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe*” (John 1: 6-7).

No more or less a figure than a humble monk known as John the Baptist, who had nothing and lived most simply, was given the lofty status of bearing witness to The Light. However, his job is not yet complete and remains to be done to this day. YOU, my brother or sister, have been chosen to continue this work with me and others. To start, understand that you communicate in everything you say, everything you write, and everything you do. You represent God and have a choice as to how you represent your Creator.

So, let’s paraphrase this passage of Holy Scripture from John 1 ever so slightly. “There was a person sent from God whose name was: \_\_\_\_ (insert your name). You came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through you might believe.” And this sacred duty as a follower of Jesus Christ applies whether you are clergy or laity.

Communication is not always spoken or written, and it doesn’t need to be complicated. In fact, it shouldn’t be. As one of the smartest men in the world, Albert Einstein, allegedly once said, “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” There is no need to try and impress someone with your loquaciousness, pomposity, verbosity, or sesquipedalianship. (By the way, that last word means someone who overuses big words. See what I just did there?). Fancy doesn’t mean good or effective. Sermilies and SFARE programs that are most effective speak the language of the audience and cause them to want to do what you suggest will make them better people.

One of the most famous speeches of all time is Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address.” It is only 272 words, but it continues to inspire people over 162 years after those words were spoken. Everyone can remember parts of Martin Luther King’s

practical and effective “I Have A Dream Speech.” If I start the phrase, “Ask not what your country can do for you...” you can probably complete it. How about this one:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Hancock et al., 1776).

All four of the above examples were Sermilies that made a difference. They were preached and delivered in different times, places, and ways yet all included critical messages offered by our Lord. And only one of the presenters was a man of the cloth. This impact of a proper SFARE program or Sermily can be felt for generations that follow, regardless of who delivers it. This is why I urge you to exert extraordinary extra emphasis on your parish SFARE ministries programs and Sermilies.

And fear not that you might not be fully understood. The power of the Lord’s parables (with your PAT modern-day applications and stories) is your secret weapon. When the Apostles wanted to learn how to offer better Sermilies and asked the Lord about his use of parables, our Lord responded:

*The knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand” (Luke 8:10, stated slightly differently in (Matthew 13:11).*

This may seem like a very puzzling response. You would think the Lord would want to be clear in His communications. And it is obvious that his Apostles did not always understand the point of the stories He told. But our Lord’s message is that the mysteries of the Kingdom are told to all but are revealed to the faithful and hidden from those with unresponsive hearts (Orthodox Study Bible, 2008, p. 1291).

You, as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, have the responsibility to share the critical mysteries of the Kingdom with others to enlighten them. This is exactly what the Light is supposed to do. So, please do not walk away from this call by the Lord to deliver Sermilies and SFARE programs to the best of your ability, both in word and deed. In living and telling the stories of your life, you can powerfully convey the mysteries of the Kingdom to the faithful and seekers. Can you think of a more noble pursuit?

## [How To Deliver Effective Sermilies.](#)

This topic is so important that I devoted three extensive Stewardship Calling podcasts and programs to help clergy and laity improve the effectiveness of their communications, Sermilies, and SFARE programs.

**Part 1** aired on Stewardship Calling Live on Ancient Faith Radio when I interviewed Fr. Barnabas Powell of Sts. Raphael Nicholas and Irene Orthodox Church in Cumming GA , and Faith Encouraged Ministries on how he develops his incredibly effective Sermilies (Marianes, 2019).

**Part 2** aired on Stewardship Calling Live on Ancient Faith Radio when I interviewed Fr. Nicholas Louh of St. John the Divine in Jacksonville, Florida, and Healthy Minds and Healthy Souls Ministry on his extremely effective Sermily practices and techniques (Marianes, 2020).

**Part 3** aired on Stewardship Calling Live on Ancient Faith Radio when I interviewed one of the most experienced and entertaining Reachers who was inducted into the prestigious National Speakers Association Hall of Fame (Marianes, 2020). Ken Futch is the author of the highly acclaimed book *Take Your Best Shot*, which is filled with priceless insights and strategies for turning situations into opportunities. In this book, Ken describes how, as an adult, he accidentally shot himself in the head and now says his head only fears his pursuit of new story material. In my legal career, I often quote Ken's grandfather from Burgaw, North Carolina (I can offer no Roadmap to there), who famously counseled: "You should always tell the truth, but you don't always need to be a tell'in it." Ken provides exceptional advice for all SFARE programs, clergy, and laity.

Listening to the different ways these most effective clergy and lay communicators share the Word of God would benefit any clergy or laity who offer Sermilies. Each of these three experts uses different techniques, so there are things you can learn to augment your effectiveness. There are few opportunities like the Sermily to have the greatest spiritual formation and religious education impact!

### **"Festivus" Airing Of Grievances And Third Rail Issues.**

As I mentioned at the outset of this Chapter 14, I want this to be as if you and I are speaking. In the spirit of the Seinfeld episode with Frank Costanza's made-up "Festivus" holiday, let us begin with the "airing of grievances." The following guidance is directed primarily to clergy and others directly sharing the Word of God. (Some of this guidance is particularly directed to those in the Orthodox and any other of the ancient churches.)

### **"D!n; z3b3'fj@kq&u^q#:k{\$np9\$w\'' - Make The Word Of God Understandable**

Someone in your seminary or other training may have given you the misguided direction to sing the Holy Gospel instead of reading it. I am sure they cited some ancient authority. But please STOP doing that! It is highly ineffective if you want to communicate with normal humans.

You do not sing your words when you speak in daily life. It is much harder to decipher and understand what is being said. It is particularly distracting and annoying when you intone a long (five-minute) AMEN with your voice modulating more than a cat that has been stepped on. Sorry to be so direct, but someone has to tell you the truth, and speaking truth to power is difficult. Please preach the Word of God in the most clear, effective, and passionate manner you can if you want people to understand and act on what you are saying.

If you want to impress people with your vocal ability, join the choir. Singing the Gospel distracts from the clear comprehension of the words and the importance of the message. Moreover, when you speak it, let us know you are sharing the Word of God and not seeing how fast you can read something. Speak it enthusiastically and clearly with vocal emphasis, where important. And if you must hold the Holy Gospel in front of you, either use a microphone or ensure you are not speaking into the Book.

### **Be Careful and Watch Yourself**

As mentioned previously, I highly recommend that clergy watch a playback of an entire live-streamed service. The same is true for any Bible study or SFARE program presenter. You will undoubtedly see or hear things that distract from the message. The best SFARE messages and programs are so inspiring that they make the listener want to act on what they heard. But if you distract or annoy them, then even the best message is obfuscated. I sometimes have the bad habit of ending sentences with the question, “right?” I am not really soliciting your participation or affirmation, and thus, this bad habit is distracting.

When you watch a church live stream or program, you will see things that need cleaning, microphones that need to be adjusted, and camera angles that are not optimal. Not only should you watch your church services and programs, but you should also have a critical watch party with other professional communicators in your parish. Just like pro athletes with their coaches watch tapes of their past performance to improve, every SFARE and Sermily program should undergo that same scrutiny. I routinely record my presentations and then focus on fixing distracting gestures or less effective content. Have you ever wondered why they have a red circle on the floor for TED Talks? It is to corral wandering speakers like me so that their constant movement is not distracting. But planned and sporadic direct interaction with your parishioners is great. So do not do SFARE programs or Sermilies from such great distances that the personal connection is lost.

### **Pentecost Happened for a Reason**

In that same vein, if you have an immigrant or ethnic church (or specific service), pick the language of the greatest number in the service that day and do not try to recite everything in every language of everyone attending (with one exception). The data show that unnecessary repetition in different languages increases parishioner distraction.

The one exception may be the Lord’s prayer. Look over your congregation and recruit those PIPs who speak different languages to memorize it (or read it, if necessary) in their native language. You speak it first in English, then announce the next language, and then the assigned PIP says it in their language. It reinforces the message of the prayer and Pentecost and also shows the growing diversity of your parish family, as people from those lands will immediately feel more comfortable.

Michael Bakalis reports a study of what would make Greek Orthodox parishioners more engaged in worship. The number one answer was they wanted to understand what was being said in the church service because it was in the language they understood (Bakalis, 2014). In that same survey, the top four things parishioners wanted out of the Sermily were for it to be: 1. educational, 2. connected to current social issues, 3.

inspirational, and 4. actionable (Bakalis, 2014). Nowhere did your parishioners say they wanted another history lesson. They want and need to know how to apply Christ's teachings in their lives.

And while I am at it, allow me one more perhaps controversial research-based observation that someone serious about growing Christ's church must say. When I present the data concluding that clergy must speak the language of the parishioners, I not only mean the ethnic language they use. Even when the Orthodox Divine Liturgy is spoken in the English language, it is often incomprehensible because the English translation used is not the English the parishioners know and speak. No one I know uses the word "thou." And ancient practices are not used today. The reference to "the doors, the doors" when Catechumens were excused in the ancient church is (thankfully) not practiced today as we actively invite all Catechumens to stay in the service. Because we have books and educated parishioners, we do not need to repeat things many times in a service so people can remember what is said. This beautiful Divine Liturgy was written in the fourth century AD and used words, phrases, terms, and practices that were appropriate to that audience and that time.

Now, 1,700 years later, in a different land, we speak and act differently. One of the most valuable contributions an Orthodox Christian could ever make would be to take the ancient Divine Liturgy and merely update the words and references to modern-day understanding and practices and then watch the massive increase in engagement and application of what is shared. Pentecost must also inspire us to take timeless messages and rephrase them in more accessible and understandable language to make them actionable. It is my prayer that modern-day Orthodox theologians will have the courage to practice Pentecost and leadership to translate St. John Chrysostom's beautiful service to speak more effectively to those who need it the most in modernity.

### **Make The Service Or SFARE Program Interactive**

I previously cited all the data about how passive services lead to greater distraction and less effectiveness. Even if your faith tradition is as old as my Orthodox one is, there are ways to engage the faithful. You can have parishioners or youth read the Epistle, Lord's Prayer, and Nicene Creed or any other special hymns, prayers, or psalms in your service. Embrace congregational singing and audible prayer recitation, and then watch the level of participation increase. Make your services as joyous as possible. Solemnity is fine for serious parts of services, but joy is also welcome and very effective. Always find a way to think about your SFARE and Sermilies and turn opportunities into teachable moments.

### **How Do You Rebuild What Is Not Working In Your Parish Or A Parish That Is Not Working Well**

Almost every parish I work with is challenged by one or more things that are not working. Sometimes, I am called to serve a more significantly troubled parish trying to reboot, revive, or re-energize and need a "fixer." However, occasionally, I get called to help a parish doing well that realizes there is a next level they can reach and want to engage in continuous learning and improvement. Regardless of which parish defines yours, I pray my Stewardship Calling **S**<sup>3</sup> most critical needs addressed in my Roadmap

can help you. I also recommend Fr. Michael White's and Tom Corcoran's phenomenal book Rebuilt and the web-based programs and conferences they offer at <https://www.rebuiltparish.com/> all under the "Rebuilt" brand (White & Corcoran, 2013).

They inherited Nativity church, a Roman Catholic parish outside of Baltimore that was headed in the wrong direction, searched the country for best practices, and then experimented with how to apply them in their Roman Catholic context. This is the journey I advise your and every other Christian parish to begin. While I earn no money from anything I do, including recommending books, this is one I recommend you buy. However, if you do not, allow me to summarize three key discoveries they made and expand on them for a teachable moment that may allow you to consider some new things.

## **1. Change The Focus From Church People To The Unchurched**

I started with the one you might find most controversial. This focus caused them not to ignore their current parishioners but intentionally wonder about who was not coming or gave up coming to their parish. This seems consistent with the Great Commission, and that is why I emphasize focusing on your APIPs (Absent Parishioners In Pews) and FPIPs (Future Parishioners In Pews). By still serving the loyal faithful while also casting your gaze up and out, you will discover a whole world of seekers or lost souls wandering in the wilderness, asking questions (often silently) that no one is answering. You can be the Light in that darkness.

Fr Michael's and Tom's journey throughout the country to examine successful and growing parishes brought them to Pastor Andy Stanley's Northpoint Church, one of the largest congregations with many campuses throughout Atlanta and the world. Andy is fond of saying Northpoint is "the church for the unchurched." While they will happily accept those from your or my parish who are unfulfilled and seeking, Northpoint's intentional and primary focus is on reaching those who are wandering and NONES. This intentional outward focus allows them to see opportunities everywhere they look. They identify opportunities to meet the faith needs of many and reach greater geographies by using creative SFARE programs and ministries.

Every parish I see that is struggling is so inwardly focused on its navel that they have lost sight of the vision of being the Light of the world. Is that where your parish is? I am not suggesting an "either/or" between PIPs and FPIPs. As always, I recommend an "all/and" mindset to address the needs of PIPs, APIPs, and FPIPs. Once the Nativity Church started looking for and at people outside the four walls of their struggling church, they saw ways to improve and expand SFARE programs and ministries to help everyone inside and outside their parish. They recognized that they had been "competing" for people's weekend time, such that if what they offered was an ineffective or bad experience, the seekers would look elsewhere.

Through outstanding SFARE programs and highly meaningful Reacher Sermilies, surrounded by a best-in-class welcoming and engagement experience, former Catholics

and new seekers found a spiritual home to grow closer to Christ and each other. While those of us in liturgical and sacramental churches primarily focus on the Eucharist, until seekers understand what it means to accept the body and blood of Christ, they need more. By changing your focus to raise your eyes and see all your PIPs and looking for the APIPs and FPIPs, you start to build a transformational community of believers.

## 2. Prioritize The Weekend Experience

The second key focus of the Rebuilt parish of Nativity was the critical SFARE opportunities on Sunday and the entire weekend. People have fewer work conflicts on weekends, which presents opportunities for vibrant parishes seeking to engage their faithful in being intentional Christians for more than just a 60–90-minute service.

At the same time, Fr Michael and his team recognized that to have the greatest SFARE impact in their church services, they needed to create what they called an “Irresistible Environment” in their Roman Catholic parish that consisted of three critical areas for improvement:

1. Music - the water on which the experience sails,
2. Message - a great message can change one’s perspective on God or their life (i.e., the Sermony is how people feel fed),
3. Ministers - clergy and “volunteer ministers” create the “there - there.” This includes hosting ministries (e.g., parking, greeting, ushers, information desk, and café/coffee hour ministers afterward to create “layers of welcoming”) (White and Corcoran, 2013).

Nativity Church also did what I have been advocating your parish do in every one of the Stewardship calling **S**<sup>3</sup> areas of focus in my Roadmap, namely, define and assess their effectiveness. Accordingly, Nativity Church created some specific questions in a survey to evaluate their success at prioritizing the Weekend Experience. Test your parish by asking these questions from their survey (with a few editorial additions from me) (White and Corcoran, 2013):

- What’s our overall “Sunday experience” grade?
- What’s our “parishioner” penetration grade?
- What % do you see Sunday?
- What % do you see other than Sunday?
- What’s our welcoming experience?
- How do we engage them during the services?
- What’s our music / chanting experience?
- Is our homily an ἀμαρτία? (i.e., does it miss the mark)
- How much time did we spend on it?
- How much time did we spend rehearsing it?
- Did we speak from the heart or the page?

Did we speak with passion and enthusiasm, or did we read?  
Did we “make it real” or just deliver a history lesson?

### **3. Move People To Action From “Consumers To Contributors”**

Earlier in my Roadmap, I decried the “consumerist” perspective that we have allowed to creep into our parishes and SFARE ministries. I call it the “Burger King®” mentality, where parishioners treat their church like the old restaurant’s motto and want to “have it your way.” Nativity Church looked at everything they did from the perspective of how they could move parishioners to action from “consumers” to “contributors” as their parishioners become people who take responsibility for their faith development. I call this turning on the human lightbulb as we convert religious “consumers” into true “disciples and disciple-makers” through the most effective Sermilies and SFARE ministries and programs you can offer.

At Nativity church, they characterize their PIPs in four levels you might find relevant for your parish (White and Corcoran, 2013):

1. “Non-churched “ (those with essentially no parish relationship),
2. “Consumers” (church meets some obligation in their lives such as curbing guilt or a place to take their children, etc.),
3. “Contributors” (parishioners who take ownership over their faith journey and contribute something of themselves),
4. “Super disciples” (those parishioners who go “all in”).

The point is not to sit in judgment of anyone but rather to create the right SFARE programs and ministries that will allow your parishioners to go from whatever current level of engagement they have to the next higher one. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ as our Lord defined it is the ultimate objective, and your parish SFARE ministries are the roadmap that makes that destination a reality. I submit that some of the effective vehicles for this journey are discussed in the Stewardship and Engagement Chapters 9-11 of my Roadmap.

For example, using a Small Group Ministry (discussed in Chapter 11 of my Roadmap) is one of the most effective ways to strengthen a parishioner’s faith and relationships with other PIPs. However, if you adopt the Council of Ministries model discussed in Chapter 11 of my Roadmap, there will be a greater number of ministries in which your parishioners can engage their gifts and talents. Higher levels of engagement in ministry and spiritual growth from effective SFARE programs will inevitably lead to greater financial contributions and opportunities for them to invite their friends or others to experience that same level of joy and meaning your parish SFARE programs provide.

Changing bad habits is not easy or quick. However, it is some of the most rewarding work and opportunities for growth as a Christian and human.

Many parishes I work with have found it highly effective to host a quarterly SFARE program with a dinner and an outside engaging speaker on a topic of general interest to the PIPs. I am aware of some amazingly effective Reacher presenters who will fly in for a Wednesday night or Saturday afternoon to provide powerful messages and inspiration on a SFARE topic that has been identified through parishioner surveys to be of interest. Indeed, my live Igniting The Flame retreat was designed with the intent to inspire parishioners to identify and live their stewardship calling and become the Light of the world. With a little creativity, your parish can have a regular schedule of powerful programs parishioners want to attend.

### The Future Is Present.

I am old enough to remember when parishes were not air-conditioned, there were no computers, fax machines, email, smartphones, items that began with the lower-case letter “i,” texting, websites, social media, streaming, and ZOOM. After each such innovation was introduced, the “Church Chicken Littles” pulled out the Book of Revelation and found a way to predict the end of the world, the Apocalypse, the Second Coming, etc. Every technological innovation was ruled heretical and from the devil, signaled the end of civilization, and had to be shunned.

To be sure every new “improvement” brought with it new challenges. We should all be concerned with the mental health and addiction issues arising from the impact of social media, technologies, and screens on the current youth. Although, when I was young, I remember parishioners confirming that the music and long hair worn by The Beatles signaled the end of civilization. I cannot get over how much of a lack of faith in God all these Church Chicken Little sentiments represent. They evidence a complete lack of faith in the very durable and evolving complex human being God created.

Of course, parishioners and faithful Christians must contemplate any innovation and discern how to emphasize its usefulness and diminish its negative impact. Every day, as new innovations arise, a new language is needed to intelligently discuss what is occurring and properly turn the energy of innovation into a force multiplier of good and righteousness. In some respects, every day of innovation is Pentecost as we learn to speak in different tongues. This inspired me to think about Pentecost as I was asked to conduct an Igniting The Flame weekend retreat for a large group of clergy and deliver a Sermily to these theologically wise and holy men. Here is what I preached:

Today, we gather as a faithful community to celebrate the glorious feast of Pentecost, a momentous occasion in the life of the Church. Pentecost, meaning “fiftieth day,” is a day of great joy and significance, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and the birth of the Church. As Greek Orthodox Christians, we embrace this sacred

day with reverence and awe, recognizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

On that blessed day of Pentecost, the disciples, who were gathered in prayer and supplication, were filled with the Holy Spirit. The sound of a mighty rushing wind filled the room, and tongues of fire appeared, resting upon each of them. In that instant, the disciples were granted the gift of speaking in different languages, enabling them to proclaim the Gospel to people of various nations.

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity, was sent by the Father to empower and guide the Church. The Spirit breathes life into the Church, animating her with divine grace and sanctifying her members. Just as the wind gives life to all living creatures, the Holy Spirit invigorates our souls, renews our hearts, and sustains our faith.

The feast of Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not limited to a singular moment in history. Rather, the Spirit continues to dwell within the Church and within each one of us, offering guidance, comfort, and strength. Through the sacraments, particularly the sacraments of baptism and chrismation, we receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, becoming living temples of God's presence.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit unites us as one body, the mystical body of Christ. He enables us to partake in the divine life and grants us spiritual gifts for the edification of the Church. We are called to use these gifts for the service of others, bearing witness to Christ's love and mercy in the world.

As we celebrate Pentecost, let us open our hearts and minds to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Let us seek His guidance in all our endeavors, that we may be instruments of His peace and agents of His love. May the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, fill us with His presence, so that we may be faithful witnesses to the Gospel and instruments of God's grace in the world.

May the grace of the Holy Spirit, the love of the Father, and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. Amen."

I hope you found the above as spiritually uplifting as did the clergy who loudly applauded this simple country lawyer's theological eloquence. Several asked if they could borrow parts of this Sermily, to which I was honored to say yes. The expressions on their faces change immediately, however, after I explained that the entire above short Sermily was created by ChatGPT, an **Artificial Intelligence** ("AI") tool. Indeed, the first iteration was near perfect, and I only had to remove that pesky Filioque for my Greek Orthodox clergy audience. Imagine that a neutral AI tool can get complex Orthodox theology approved by clergy theologians and explained in language accessible to the common PIP. So, now what?

I am not suggesting clergy or laity use ChatGPT or other AI to write their Sermilies or other SFARE content. Indeed, none of my Roadmap's text was written using AI (other than the above Sermily example). However, I did use my computer, Microsoft Spell Check, and Grammarly to help with grammar and spelling. Also, for fun, I used AI to develop the cover image for my Roadmap (which only took four iterations of me describing what I wanted and about 15 seconds of AI computer processing time).

Now, please imagine how you might use AI to assist you and your parish on its complex journey of SFARE. I know this thought will be roundly criticized by all those who similarly chastised me when I suggested parishes use computers and email to reach their parishioners. I can take the criticism because I believe that the same God who created you and me gave us the gifts to develop these tools for our use to glorify Him.

Just imagine if you challenged your youth to use the AI tool of their choice to help them write a 300-word commentary about some spiritual topic. Then, have them read and share what their tools produced, critique the various iterations, and learn from the tool's mistakes. It has long been proven that hands-on learning is the most effective and is the stickiest. If you did such a thing, you would have them ensure that the full citation of the source that the AI tool was included. Then you might assign them to review the source text, verify the accuracy of AI's interpretation, and identify where it got wrong (as I did in reminding ChatGPT that we Orthodox did not accept the later addition of the Filioque).

### [ZOOM, ZOOM, ZOOM, and The Internet 3.0.](#)

I was an early adopter of ZOOM when it was still being beta-tested. Everyone thought I was nuts being an early adopter of a "work in progress" technology. Then SARS-CoV-2 hit, and the world closed down! I was so far up the ZOOM learning curve that my Stewardship Calling ministry did not skip a beat. Indeed, I was in the middle of helping two Dioceses and one parish develop their strategic plans. When I asked the bishops, clergy, and laity if they wanted to wait until "whatever this Covid thing" was behind us or shift to ZOOM, they all joined me on the "new-fangled" technology bandwagon. I had to teach a lot of parishioners how to use the tool (and still do), but we finished all the strategic plans in record time without meeting in person. Now, I have a new scalable service that allows me to handle a greater number of parish strategic plans (and all the other parish consulting) simultaneously because I do not have to be on the road constantly.

And yes, I am exploring finding an AI tool I can use to heat-map SWOT data and deliver Effective Parish Assessment first-round reports to accelerate the processes even faster. I frequently have 4 or 5 parish ZOOMs a day, and countless programs are being delivered using this tool, which did not exist until recently. Soon, ZOOM will be replaced by another better tool, and you can bet I will be an early adopter trying to find a way to scale up the service of the parishes faster and better.

I implore you to move up the “law of diffusion of innovation” curve and experiment with and embrace technologies in your parish and SFARE programs and ministries as much as possible. There are caveats, as with everything. This is particularly true when dealing with our youth. In a January 7, 2025, Digital Discernment podcast on Ancient Faith Radio, my friend Dr. Ann Bezzerides, who teaches at Holy Cross Seminary and runs the Crossroads program for youth, advised all parishes and leaders to consider: “Life lived in the digital world will not quench your thirsty soul.”

This also tells us that the ether or airwaves in which we communicate using our computers are never better or more effective than in-person activities. This is why I discussed the personal wHoly Engaged Stewardship and Engagement process Plan A in such detail in Chapter 10 of my Roadmap. Of course, where the opportunity is optimal, you must focus on the highest level of human interaction. However, as people move further from our parishes and our lives become busier, using technology to supplement the “hand-to-hand combat” that is Christian formation is increasingly essential.

## A “Moonshot Mindset” For Your Parish and Parishioners.

I confess to being a fan of Dr. Peter Diamandis (“X Prize,” Singularity University, etc.) not just because he’s a fellow Greek but because he is focused on two themes I am passionate about: abundance and future opportunity. He constantly reminds us that we live in a world of abundance (especially in America). With a focus on how you can harness that abundance to make the world better, you can fulfill what I call your stewardship calling.

A big focus of Peter’s current work is AI. But more than that is his critical encouragement for what he calls a “**Moonshot Mindset**” to encourage people to use their gifts (including creativity) to solve the biggest problems and challenges. I love Peter’s six attributes that define a Moonshot Mindset he released in an email to followers:

Here are six key characteristics of that Mindset:

#1. You understand that “**The day before something is a breakthrough, it’s a crazy idea.**” Your Moonshot Mindset gives you permission to tackle crazy ideas.

#2. You are willing to take the risks necessary to transform industries and society for the better. You recognize that those with a Moonshot Mindset are the innovators making the world a better place, moving humanity forward, and charting the future.

#3. You understand that a Moonshot within the realm of your Massive Transformative Purpose (MTP) (what I call your stewardship calling) can be the adventure of a lifetime, giving you joy and a purpose-driven life.

#4. You are willing to target billion-person challenges. You recognize that “The world’s biggest problems are the world’s biggest opportunities.”

#5. You understand that Moonshots striving for a 10X improvement (or 1,000%) offer a one-hundred-fold benefit compared to 10% incremental improvement but are rarely one-hundred-fold more difficult to achieve. A 10X improvement is 100 times more worth it, but it's not 100 times harder.

#6. As a leader, you know that Moonshots focus and motivate your team, help you attract the best talent in the world, and allow you to solve interim problems while creating interim products and services along the way (Diamandis, 2021).

This Moonshot Mindset is not relegated to the business world alone. I encourage you to consider a Moonshot Mindset in your parish and spiritual journey. Any observant parish leader can, with some attention and perhaps assistance, identify big parish challenges. They are all around.

However, God did not give us great creative minds merely to observe problems. He gave us the ability to harness our creativity and the ideas of others to collectively solve them as we build communities of followers dedicated to a spiritual journey of theosis together. At one level, my entire Roadmap is a recruitment document. I hope to inspire you to take at least one idea, suggestion, or proven technique of excellence and use a God-given Moonshot Mindset to benefit yourself, your parishioners, and your parish.

## [A Few More Words About Two Letters \(AI\) - The Future Is Present Part 2 And What This Means for Your Parish SFARE.](#)

Have you and your parish embraced new technologies as much as you can? They will not only make your life easier and more efficient but, if used wisely, make you and your parish more effective. The most effective parish of the present is constantly experimenting and changing with the times operationally (again, I am not speaking theologically). I previously provided you with the data that only 20% of emails are read, whereas 95% of text messages are read in under three minutes. Yet, I suspect your parish has not fully deployed text messaging as much as it should/could. They are both fairly recent tools and yet one has already eclipsed the other. God gives you tools to use for a reason.

Like it or not, **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** is such a tool, but it is not without its valid concerns. Those researching how AI will incorporate human ethical standards in the future are asking, "whose ethics" will we use (Rainie et al., 2021; Rainie et al., 2022)? Thus, as AI increasingly controls more processes, systems, technologies, machines, human interactions, and decisions, uncertainty about what, if any, ethics and values will be incorporated into AI solutions is one of the most significant ethical issues and challenges of our time. This is a perfect place for those of us in faith-based communities to play a prominent role. You can wait for others to decide on such ethical boundaries, or you can be part of this discussion that will shape the future for everybody.

The proliferation and pace of AI is mind numbing. Stanford concluded that \$13.8 Billion was spent on AI investment in drug discovery in 2020 alone. This spending is more than 4.5 times higher than the previous year (Zhang et al., 2021). Equally remarkable is that the quality of AI speech has advanced to the point that people can increasingly not tell the difference between humans and AI-controlled machines (Zhang et al., 2021).

More critically, the Stanford study showed that companies in 2020 were less concerned about AI's personal or individual privacy risks than they were the year before. Thus, some ethical concerns are declining in importance. However, the resolution of the countless ethical issues in AI medical research, the justice system, and life in general depends on whose ethical standards are used and embedded in AI solutions.

This same Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence "AI Index Report" interestingly found that humans were more generous than AI machines. Similarly, judges were more lenient toward certain first offenders than AI-enabled machines (Zhang et al., 2021). The hypothesis is that the AI-enabled machine calculated a higher probability that the criminal would commit another crime and become a recidivist. In other words, the AI-enabled devices in the study, while programmed by humans, lacked human compassion and morality. Thus, ethical judgments in the world of AI appear to be different than in the human world, and perhaps ethical decision-making in the 21st Century is not moving in a "positive" direction as a result of AI (Rainie et al., 2021).

Christian churches must play a critical role in these discussions, particularly since a 2019 global survey reported by a corporate technology leader (Oracle) reported that 64% of the respondents had more confidence in a robot than the person who managed them (Oracle Cloud, 2019). So much for the human factor of trust, which is an essential component of any ethical or Christian approach, Servant Leadership, and everything parishes hold dear.

And yet, some limited examinations have found that human biases and values are easily embedded in AI solutions. Thus, not only will some AI technologies replace humans and seem objectively trustworthy, but these solutions can also be programmed with inherent and potentially unobservable biases and potential "inequity and inequality" (Mascarenhas, 2018). What will this capacity do to your parish's SFARE programs that will be created in the future using these technologies?

## [The Future Transhuman Era And The Church](#)

A famous research organization, The Gartner Group, has advanced the theory that we are entering a "transhuman era" where everything can be created, hacked, and changed. This includes not only the technologies we use but also our brains and bodies. Innovations like Elon Musk's Neuralink (<https://neuralink.com/>) currently allow quadriplegics to control computers with their brains alone.

However, advancements in this technology are planned to allow any human to control technologies merely by thinking of the desired action. Every technology that interfaces with our brains or other senses can also have its own reasoning abilities and

values. What does this mean for the definition of human existence and the Christian values we embrace and promote? The question remains: what will be our ethical and moral compass in these more unknown dimensions we will likely face in the 21st Century (DuToit, 2019)?

American computer scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil (Peter Diamandis's business partner) has written extensively about AI and is famous for his prediction that by 2045, humans can "multiply our intelligence a billion-fold" due to creating wireless connections between our brains and a source of knowledge contained in the ether we call "the cloud" (Kurzweil, 2005). How will ethical behavior be assessed in 2045 when humans have this billion-fold increased "intelligence" due to wireless connections between our brains and some source of knowledge in the cloud?"

Through these AI-facilitated processes, Kurzweil believes we will achieve the actual combination of people and machines (Kurzweil, 2005). I posed this projection to a group of clergy at a retreat and asked them what they thought. Naturally, their minds immediately gravitated to the meetings they could miss and the busy work they could delegate because of a humanoid robot. They reacted differently when I asked them why that same humanoid robot couldn't conduct a church service, hear a confession, administer last rites, deliver a more impactful Sermily or SFARE program, or provide the Holy Eucharist. Yes, I know what you just thought.

Futurist Ray Kurzweil also predicted that AI and technology will bring us to what is referred to as the "singularity." This phrase has many meanings, including the modern view of the period when technological expansion becomes uncontrollable (Technological Singularity, 2025). Some also use this phrase to describe the moment of creation of the world, which technologists call "the big bang" and which Christians have described in Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 (Kruger, 2021).

Notice the similarity between the AI-facilitated technological singularity of uncontrollability and the Christian creation story in Genesis 1:1-31. The Christian version finds a force we call God creating automatically self-replicable environments, plants, animals, nature, and humans. And what is critical about the Christian singularity story is that the Creator repeatedly believed that all He created was "good." God endowed His humans with a true north compass and understanding of how to act ethically with all His creations, including other humans, animals, and the environment in which they all lived. And God reinforced this ethical hardwiring by sending His Son to teach and establish ethical standards of behavior. There was no lawyer-written "code of conduct" present or necessary.

Unlike technologies today, Christians believe that humans are hardwired initially by their Creator with goodness, righteousness, and ethical understandings. But those values are often compromised by the God-given exercise of free will in how they choose to live in their "garden." Indeed, we can use the humorous double entendre metaphor to say that as soon as God finished "designing" and "programming" His AI human creations, He stood back and concluded they were not merely "good," but they were "very good" (Genesis 1:31) (Maximos et al., 2008).

Suppose visionary philosopher and businessman Ray Kurzweil is correct. In that case, we are much closer to what is described in Matthew 3:2, as John the Baptist called for repentance because *“the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* One thing Christians know about the place we call Heaven is that ethics is once again integrally hardwired into the entire environment. So, if Christian Singularity comes in the 21st Century, the outlook for ethical behavior is, like all God’s creation, “very good.”

The empirical data show that humans have not modeled perfect integrity and trust thus far in the 21st Century. What will happen once AI takes over certain decisions with its own inherent programmed bias from its human programmers, plus any bias that AI will develop on its own without legal limitations or regulation?

So, is there an answer we can explore to address this potential 21st-century ethics void? As it turns out, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, who always had the ruby red slippers to take her home, we have always possessed the answer. All we need to do is go back to the beginning. The real beginning. Because *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* (John 1:1) (Maximos et al., 2008).

Christian researchers can conduct studies where Christ-centered values are programmed into AI technologies and environments to see how more ethical and righteous the outcomes and solutions can become. Imagine an AI decision-making technology that made all its decisions based on the following:

- (a) *“A new commandment I give you, that you have love for one another as I have loved you”* (John 13:34).
- (b) Parable of the Good Samaritan *“go and do likewise”* (Luke 10:37).
- (c) *“And you shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Matthew 22:39).
- (d) *“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16).
- (e) *“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.” “Give to everyone who asks of you...” “And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise”* (Luke 6:27; 30-31).

## [The Future And Spiritual Leadership.](#)

Some studies have found that leaders who practice a newer leadership model called Spiritual Leadership could have their spirituality positively impact the organizations they lead, thus creating better environments. These studies identified a unique closeness between the leaders practicing Spiritual Leadership and their followers (Chaston & Lips-Wiersma, 2014).

Moreover, followers and leaders reported that the closer relationships fostered by Spiritual Leadership made all stakeholders feel like the enterprise was a “good” place to be and work. Does a “good” place remind anyone of God’s assessment of His creation? Thus, a Spiritual Leadership model embedded into AI might create a more positive culture demonstrating higher ethical behavior and trust.

This embedding experiment is my second call to action here (Chaston & Lips-Wiersma, 2014). Even in the face of AI dominance likely to overtake everything in the rest of the 21st Century, a Spiritual Leadership model and Christian ἦθος (ethos) exist to maximize positive interactions, righteous outcomes, and ethical behaviors. But to do all that, we must “...seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...” (Matthew 6:33) (Maximos et al., 2008).

## The Sky Is Not Falling.

OK, perhaps all this technology talk has scared you. As the Holy Gospel repeatedly (supposedly 365 times) says: “*Fear not!*” All technologies, including the internet, ZOOM, and AI are tools made by humans who were made in the image and likeness of God. And like any tool, they can be used for good or bad. Hitting you on the head with a hammer is criminal, but using a hammer to nail a roof on a Habitat for Humanity house is righteous. Thus, the question is not necessarily how to avoid all tools but rather how we use all tools for good and avoid their negative applications.

At its core, AI is merely a **Large Language Model** (“LLM”) that aggregates and integrates massive amounts of data from countless sources at unprecedented rates of speed. While one must always be concerned about what sources your AI LLM of choice aggregates its information from if you are relying on it for judgment and information, AI tools can immediately be used to help your parish create much more fascinatingly engaging images you can use.

As I mentioned previously, the image on the cover page of my Roadmap was created by AI from a series of “prompts” (AI-speak for instructions) I gave it. AI tools can take the video of your Sermily and create shorter “snippets,” which you can republish on specific points for greater reach and impact.

AI tools can be used to harvest virtually limitless information about the demography of your parishes’ neighborhoods to help in your community service ministries and even evangelization efforts. Using AI can help you research and write better parish bulletins or other content (including SFARE content) as long as you carefully curate and verify everything). Indeed, as previously mentioned, I await the day very soon when Christian technologists create a verified and properly vetted Christian AI LLM for use in such parish educational and communications efforts, and yes, even in speeding up the first draft or Sermily preparation or editing.

There is already a plethora (and growing) number of AI tools to help with parish administration, scheduling, event planning, graphic design, communications with constituents, prayer requests, and delivery, speech-to-text (and text-to-speech) tools for the differently abled, and countless other applications.

Smart SFARE practitioners will no doubt think of many creative and effective ways to use AI and all it offers to challenge us old-timers and the generation of youth who will eventually find it as ubiquitous as we find smartphones. Do not fear the tools God has given you to tame and use. However, do not sit idly by and allow them to be developed

and programmed without the fundamental and timeless truth our Lord has presented from “the beginning.”

These last sections of Chapter 14 of my Roadmap are not meant to engender fear. Instead, they represent the musings of a Christian futurist who sees an essential role you and your parish must play in developing the future in which you wish to live and raise your family. Throughout history, Christians were called on to step into the breach and use their foundational truths to protect and advance humankind. This is such a time. We must demonstrate faith, fortitude, and Servant Leadership to use all new advancements properly and wisely. Like Edison’s lightbulb, we must be the light of the world amid darkness and bring people closer to Christ and each other.

**So, my Moonshot Mindset challenge is that YOU, and YOUR PARISH, innovate and determine how to embed Christ’s teachings and a Christian ἥθος and mindset in an AI tool that provides the righteous and ethical truths that will be the “Light of the World.”**