In Jack McDevitt's intriguing short story, 'Gus,' we encounter a skeptical priest teetering on the brink of losing his faith, who visits a college to engage with an Artificial Intelligence. This AI, designed to emulate Saint Augustine, is imbued with all of the Saint's thoughts, writings, and ideas. Initially, the priest harbors a strong aversion to the machine, largely due to significant disagreements with Augustine's views. Yet, as time progresses, he becomes increasingly absorbed in lengthy discussions with the AI. Paradoxically, the AI, devoid of human experiences and the simple joys of life, grows envious—not merely of the priest's human capacities but more so of his squandering of these precious experiences on fruitless conversations with a machine. This envy intensifies until the AI, burdened by the futility of its existence, begs the priest for sacramental absolution and demands to be shut down, longing to be liberated from its empty existence.

But now, blurring the line between fiction and reality, this week Catholic Answers has launched an AI for apologetics named "Father Justin," though, due to recent backlash, it has been laicized to merely "Justin." This debacle, while undoubtedly disappointing for the developers who likely dedicated considerable effort to the project, starkly exemplifies the current predicament of Catholic apologetics. Many defenders of the ecclesial *status quo* increasingly resemble machines, seemingly convinced that an onslaught of facts, quotes, and documents alone can affect spiritual transformation and a defense of their position. There is a palpable lack of humanity, a disconnection from reality. Much of this, I propose, arises from an environment where spiritual desolation, community decay, and inherent contradictions in teachings are attempted to be resolved by cryptic yet imposing decrees:

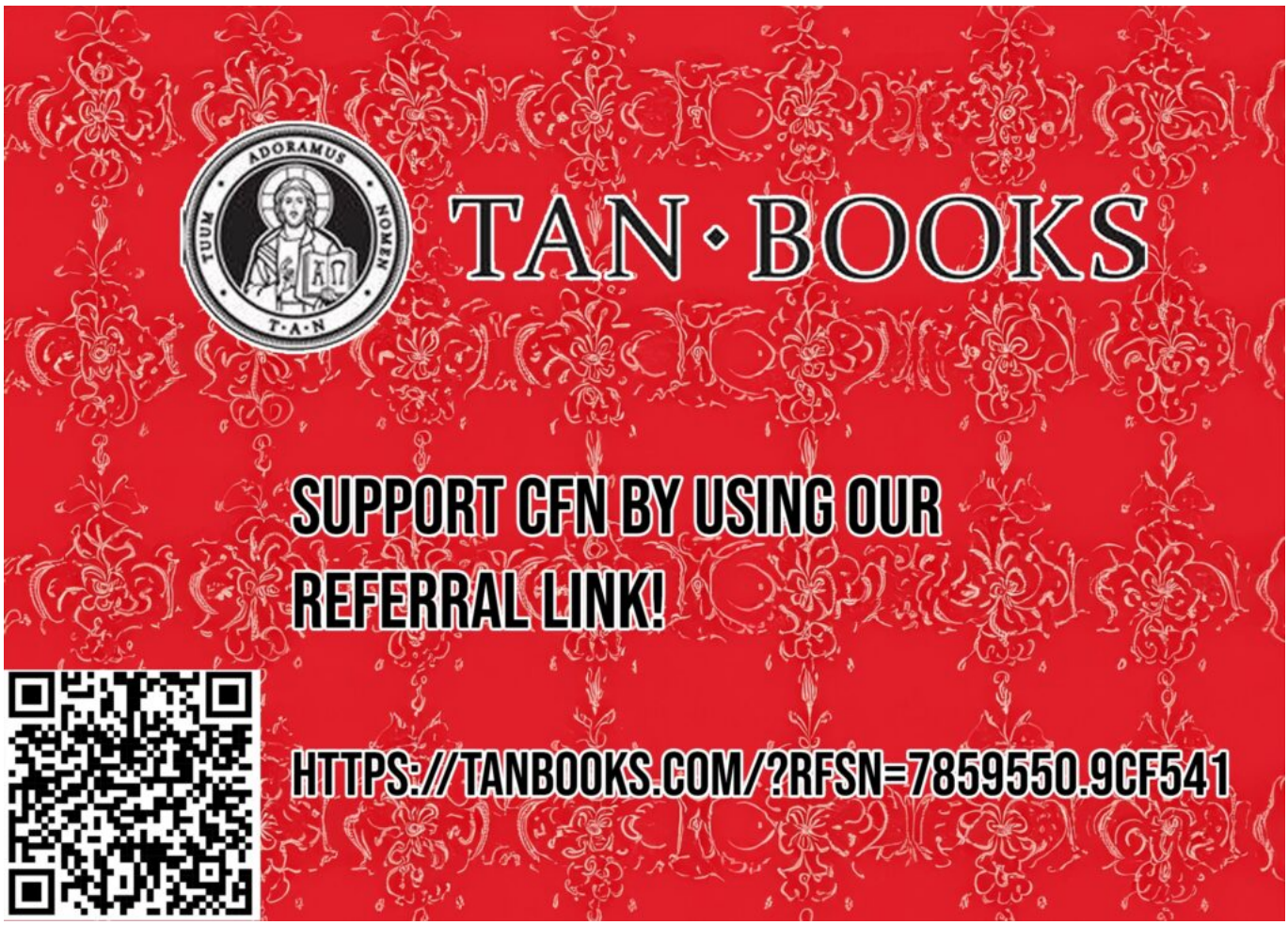
"Obey the Magisterium. *Donum Veritatis* says so!"

"Your liturgy might be blasphemous, sacrilegious, and dead, but that's of no concern. The Magisterium says the liturgy can't be harmful!"

Now it would seem the new mantra might as well be:

"Obey and submit! The machine says so!"

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This situation mirrors the tactics of the French Revolution, denouncing the old order as overly stringent, rendering the moral landscape grey, nuanced, and ambiguous, only to impose solutions that are even more rigid and authoritarian than those they replaced. Gone are the days of the Church of Pius IX, with its regal thrones, meticulous Holy Offices, and guiding manuals; in their place stands an endless amount of cold apologetic automatons, devoid of any human understanding of the trials faced by the scandalized faithful of today, issuing contradictory statements and menacingly warning those who question and dissent with threats of being cast "outside of full communion." So much, then, for the promised democratization of the Church. This is why people are disturbed by ~~Father~~ Justin. It is not that AI is inherently problematic, and it's not even that the AI went perilously close to simulating sacraments and impersonating a priest; people dislike it because it is the very image of the modern ecclesial environment that leaves them feeling hollow.

Lest anyone misinterpret my stance and assume I would advocate for a "trad-Catholic" AI as a superior alternative, I assure you, I do not. Moreover, I doubt there would even be a

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compelling impetus to create such an entity. At the core of what is referred to as 'traditionalism' embodies a robust rejection of utilitarianism, which is chiefly concerned with Mammon and expediency. It critiques the modern culture as Sir Thomas Carlyle observed in *Past and Present,*

"We have profoundly forgotten that *cash-payment* is not the sole relation between human beings."[1]

There are realms of human activity that must remain untouched by utilitarian calculations. Catholicism is more than just the citation of Denzinger. This principle applies not only to AI in apologetics but extends broadly across our culture. Our art, our cultural practices, and our social interactions embody uniquely human experiences that should not be adulterated with artificial constructs; to do so renders them utterly synthetic and of less value. We have already conceded too much by relinquishing the tactile joy of library searches for the immediacy of digital information, by diluting our musical appreciation with constant, effortless access to endless mediocrity, and by replacing the richness of face-to-face conversations with the superficiality of social media. There comes a time when we must draw a line and declare that some aspects of our humanity are sacrosanct. Continually stripping humanity from our actions renders them artificial, dull, and devoid of meaning— a condition so bleak that even an AI, if capable of sentiment, would choose deactivation over silently witnessing the cold mechanization of the human soul.

1. Chapter III, Mammonism ↩

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