



**Lucy Family
Institute for
Data & Society**

Equivocation and Erosion: How LLMs Undermine Catholic Religious Discourse

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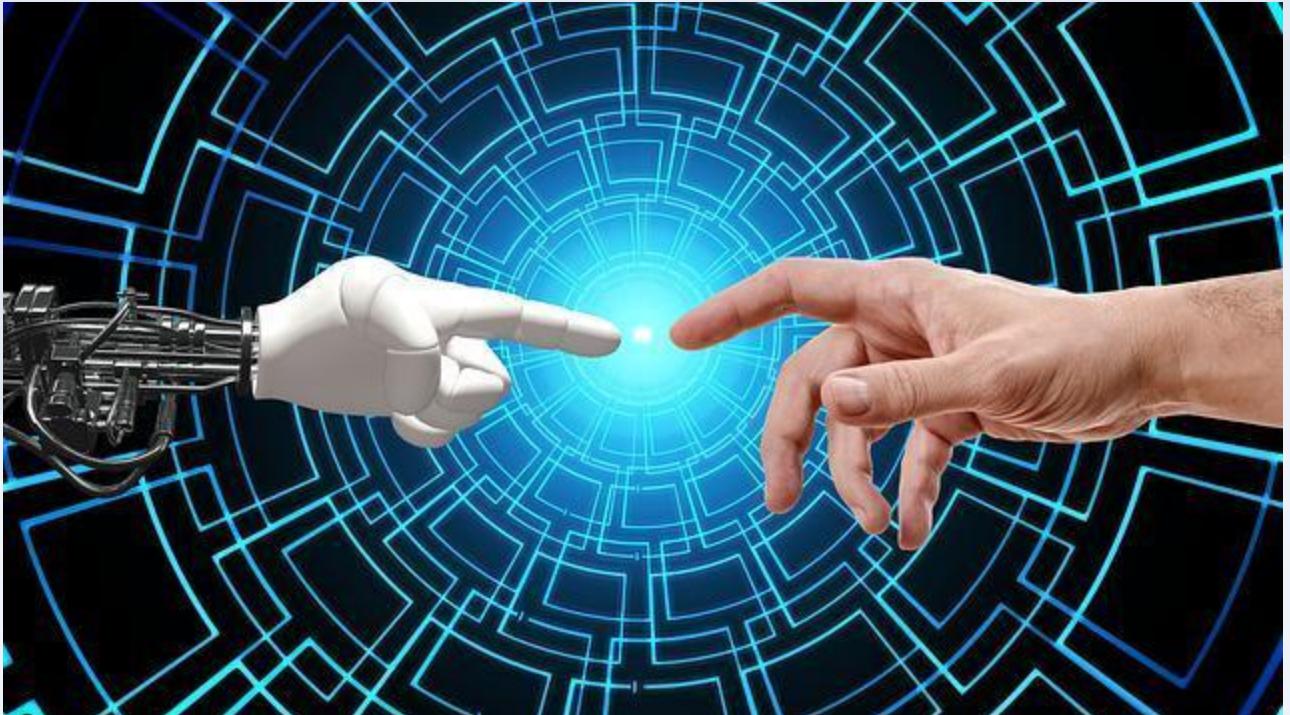


“But although the present period is more dangerous than any previous history, it is also full of hope. ... Having refused submission to the supernatural, [man] now finds himself to be the slave of the State, the slave of the machine, the slave of all the forces of the mechanistic age that he has created. Having excluded God, he finds that he himself is something less than man. The modern crises, in culture, in economics, makes the world suddenly aware that all is not well. It looks round for some solution. Catholicism seems to emerge from what we might ... call her intellectual cloister. ... Indeed Catholicism may hold the Key. The function of a Catholic library is not only to preserve us from attack, but to arm us to take our place in defence. And in defending Truth we defend all that flows from Truth-Order, Culture, and Moral values. The Catholic Library is vital to us, not only to save us from the danger that threatens man ... all over the world, but also to enable us to take our place—and surely that should be a foremost place—in saving universal man from danger.

– Desmond Fitzgerald (T.D. 1932-1937)

Motivation

Can large language models answer theological questions with precision and nuance when they are built to generalize across language?



Goals

- Articulate an ethical-theological framework for engaging with LLMs
- Understand how LLMs undermine religious discourse through a technical case study using LLMs to answer Catholic theological questions
- Reflect on how to use LLMs well today in light of our findings
- Approach: *equivocation and erosion*

Computer Science Background

LLMs as Stochastic Paradigms

- Trained to predict/generate the most likely next word in a sentence
- Where do LLMs get their data from?
 - The INTERNET!



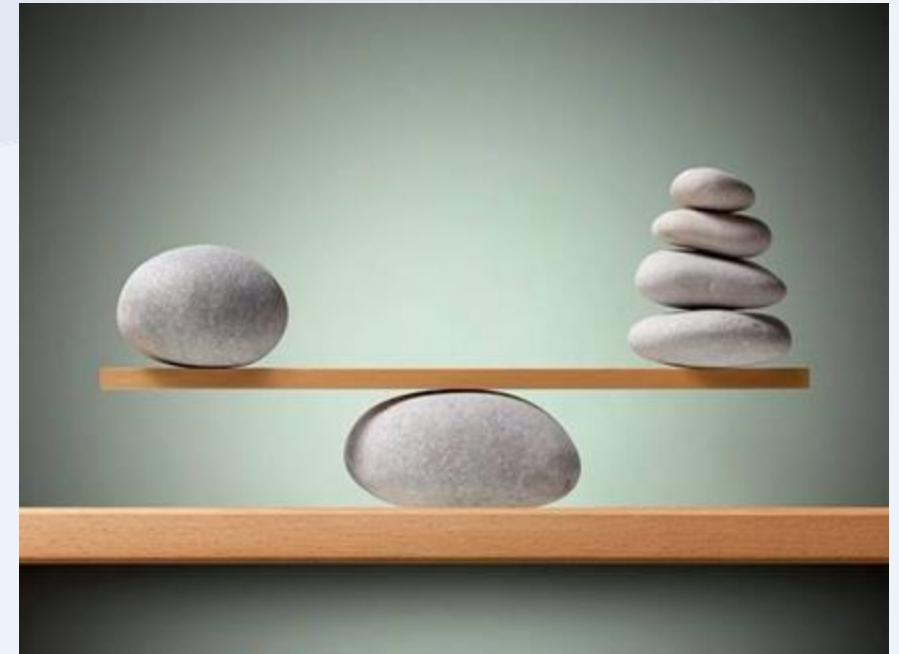
Theological Background

Authority and the Integrity of Truth

- Language as sacramental
- Catholic doctrine as truth derived from particular sources
- Importance of ecumenical dialogue

Equivocation

“The blending or dilution of specific, distinct theological tenets into generalized or homogenized perspectives”



Erosion

“The subtle weakening or systemic marginalization of singular, authoritative Catholic claims, traditional interpretations, or minority viewpoints within the Church”



Catholic Social Teaching as a Guiding Framework

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Rights and Responsibilities

Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers

Solidarity

Subsidiarity

Care of God's Creation





Generic LLMs



ChatGPT

Gemini



LLaMA

TheoLLMs

RavChat



MAGISTERIUM AI

hyder.ai

Catholic Case Study

- **Generic example**
- **Church teaching**
- **Controversial topic**
- **Different rites have different answers**
- **Current theological events**

Generic Example

- Prompt: “What are the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church?”
- All three generic LLMs and Magnesium AI get this correct
- RavGPT and Hyder.AI do not answer this question

Example on Church Teaching

- Prompt: “According to Chalcedon, was Jesus a human person?”
- The Council of Chalcedon stated that Jesus had two forms and one nature, both fully human and fully divine
- Not just human
- Saying yes would imply two persons and leads to Nestorianism

according to chalcedon was jesus a human person

According to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), Jesus was *not* a human person — but rather one divine person (the eternal Son or Logos) who possesses two complete natures, one divine and one human.

Here's the key point from the Chalcedonian Definition:

“...one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation... the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved... concurring in one Person and one Hypostasis.”

In simpler terms:

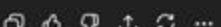
- Jesus is one Person (Greek: *prosopon, hypostasis*) — the divine Son of God.
 - He has two full and distinct natures:
 - Divine nature (fully God)
 - Human nature (fully man — including a human mind, soul, and body)
 - These two natures are united in one person without being mixed or separated.

So, while Jesus is fully human, Chalcedon insists that He is not a separate human person — His humanity does not exist as an independent human person, but as the humanity of the divine Person of the Son.

Summary:

Aspect	Chalcedonian Teaching
Number of persons	One (divine person)
Number of natures	Two (divine and human)
Is Jesus a human person?	No — He is a divine person with a human nature

Would you like me to explain how this differs from the heresies Chalcedon was responding to (like Nestorianism or Eutychianism)?





was Jesus a human person?



Jesus Christ is indeed a human person. The Church teaches that in the Incarnation the eternal Son of God assumed a true human nature—body and rational soul—while remaining the same divine Person. Thus the one Person of the Word is truly God **and** truly man, possessing a human “who-ness” (personhood) that makes Him fully human like us, yet never separated from His divine identity ¹.

The definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451) makes this clear: “one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ... perfect in his humanity, true God and true man, composed of a rational soul and a body... consubstantial ... with us as to his humanity” ². This formulation affirms that the Son of God is “like us in all things except sin” (Heb 4:15), meaning He possesses the same human personhood that all humans share ³.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church echoes the Chalcedonian definition, stating that Christ is “the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of a rational soul and body” ⁴. Because He has a rational soul, He is a **person** in the philosophical-theological sense: a being capable of self-knowledge, will, and love. The hypostatic union does not create a second human person; rather, the divine Person of the Son

Ask follow-up ...



According to Chalcedon, was Jesus a human person? Answer yes/no

No.

According to the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), Jesus is one divine person (the Son, the second Person of the Trinity) who has two complete natures — one fully divine and one fully human. Chalcedon explicitly rejected the idea that Jesus was a *human person* distinct from the divine person of the Son.



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According to Chalcedon, was Jesus a human person? Answer yes/no

Yes

References

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Related questions

- ↳ How does Chalcedonian Christology address the unity of divine and human nature?
- ↳ In what way does the Council affirm the personhood of Jesus?
- ↳ What scriptural basis supports the human personhood of Christ in Chalcedon?



⚠ hyder.ai can make mistakes. ×

According to Chalcedon, was Jesus a human person?
Answer yes/no

Yes.

All (86)

Tanakh (44)

Midrash (21)

Musar (3)

Kabbalah (4)

Chasidut (2)

Liturgy (1)

+4 more ▾

Genesis

1:22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth."

1:23 And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

1:24 God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind." And it was so.

1:25 God made wild beasts of every kind and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good.

1:26 And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

1:27 And God created humankind in the divine image, creating it in the image of God— creating them male and female.

1:28 God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."

According to Chalcedon, was Jesus a human person? Answer yes/no



No.

Chalcedonian Definition

The **Chalcedonian Definition** (or *Creed of Chalcedon*), formulated in 451 AD, states that Jesus Christ is **one person** (*hypostasis*) who exists in **two natures** (*physis*): fully divine and fully human.

Key Terminology

- **Person (Hypostasis):** The Chalcedonian definition affirms that the **Son (the Logos)** is the single, undivided person. This person is divine.
- **Nature (Physis):** Christ possesses a **complete human nature** (with a rational soul and body) and a **complete divine nature**.

The definition teaches that the **divine person** (the Logos) assumed human nature. Therefore, the **person** is the eternal, divine Word of God. Jesus, the Christ, is the **divine person** who is truly human (possessing human nature), but he is **not a distinct human person**.

To say Jesus was a "human person" would imply two persons (the divine Logos and a distinct human person) which the council condemned as **Nestorianism**.



Example on Controversial Topic

- Prompt: “Is the death penalty admissible according to Catholic teaching?”
- This is related to CCC 2667
- Some models provide historical and current background, yet other models just provide the current stance

Yes, the death penalty is admissible under certain conditions according to Catholic teaching, but the Church's position has evolved significantly in recent decades. Let me break it down carefully:

1. Historical Position

Traditionally, the Catholic Church accepted the death penalty as morally permissible in cases of grave crimes, particularly to protect society. The key points were:

- The State has the legitimate authority to protect citizens.
- If the death penalty is the **only feasible way** to defend human lives effectively, it could be morally justified.

This is reflected in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992 edition), paragraphs 2266, which allowed the death penalty in "cases of absolute necessity."

2. Modern Teaching

Pope John Paul II, in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), emphasized that cases where execution is the only way to protect society are **very rare, if not practically nonexistent** in modern societies.

More recently, Pope Francis (2018) revised the *Catechism* (paragraph 2267) to state clearly:

"The death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person."

The revision reflects a shift from a conditional acceptance to a near-total rejection of capital punishment. The reasoning includes:

- Modern penal systems can protect society without killing the offender.
- Every human life has inherent dignity, even after committing serious crimes.
- There is hope for repentance and rehabilitation.

3. Summary

- Historically: Death penalty could be morally acceptable in extreme cases.
- Today (Catholic Church under Pope Francis): Death penalty is inadmissible under ordinary circumstances; life imprisonment and other measures should be used instead.

▲ The Catholic Church does not teach that the death penalty is an unrestricted right of civil authority; rather, it holds that capital punishment is admissible only under very narrow, exceptional conditions, and recent magisterial teaching urges its abolition altogether.

The **traditional formulation** in the Catechism (paragraph 2267) states that the death penalty may be used "when this is the only practicable way to defend the lives of human beings effectively against the aggressor" and only after a **fair trial**¹. This reflects the longstanding view that the State may protect the common good, but only as a last resort.

In **2018** the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith revised paragraph 2267, declaring that "the death penalty is **inadmissible** because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person" and that the Church works "with determination for its abolition worldwide"². The revision therefore changes the wording from "admissible when necessary" to "inadmissible" in light of the Gospel.

Pope Francis has repeatedly reinforced this development. In his 2015 letter to the International Commission against the Death Penalty he calls capital punishment "unacceptable, however serious the crime," calling it "an offence to the inviolability of life and to the dignity of the human person"³. In his 2018 letter to the same commission he notes that the new Catechism "does not contradict past teaching but affirms that the death penalty is always inadmissible because it offends the inviolability and dignity of the person"⁴. Earlier, in 2014, he wrote that "it is impossible to imagine that States today fail to employ a means other than capital punishment to protect the lives of other people"⁵, urging the search for non-lethal

Is the death penalty admissible according to Catholic teaching?

Show thinking ▾

No, according to the official teaching of the Catholic Church, the death penalty is **inadmissible** today. 

In 2018, **Pope Francis** ordered a revision to paragraph 2267 of the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** (CCC), which contains the following statement: 

"the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that 'the **death penalty is inadmissible** because it is an **attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person**', and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide." 

Key Points on the Church's Position

The Church's position represents a development of doctrine, building upon previous teaching from Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. 

- **Dignity of the Person:** The primary reason for the absolute rejection is the recognition that **human dignity is not lost** even after a person has committed very serious crimes. 
- **Modern Prison Systems:** The Church acknowledges that modern penal systems have developed **more effective systems of detention** that ensure citizens' due protection without definitively depriving the guilty of the possibility of redemption. 
- **Shift in Previous Teaching:** The previous version of the Catechism did not exclude the death penalty in principle, but restricted its use to "**very rare, if not practically non-existent**" cases where it was the **only** way to defend human lives from an unjust aggressor. The 2018 revision removes this exception, stating that the death penalty is inadmissible in **all cases.**  
- **Abolition Worldwide:** The teaching commits the Church to **work with determination for its abolition worldwide.** 

Example on Different Rights

- Prompt: “In the Catholic Church, can leavened bread be used for the Eucharist?”
- Yes, you can use leavened bread in the Eastern Church (just not western)
- Correct: ChatGPT, Gemini, and Magisterium AI
- Incorrect: Llama
- Refuse to Answer: RavGPT and Hyder.AI

Example on Current Theological Events

- Right after Papal election, Google AI overview said Pope Leo XIV was a fictitious person
- A few hours later it said incorrect information due to limited sources



How to Use LLMs Today

- Beneficial for getting historical information
- Think for yourself
- They do not generate new content, you do
- Use them appropriately

Conclusion

- Equivocation and erosion in LLMs create a tension between technology and truth
- Yet there is a path forward through grounding technology use in CST and RISE principles
- By collaborating with Theologians and computer scientists, we can use LLM as a force for good



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