

[Spirituality](#)



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When they were little, my kids watched enough Barney on TV that one of his catchy [jingles](#) still pops into my head when I stand at the bathroom sink: "But while I'm brushing my teeth / And having so much fun / I never let the water run / No, I never let the water run."

Thanks to that peppy purple dinosaur, I'm reminded to turn off the faucet during my morning routine because, as Pope Francis warns in *Laudato Si'*, "the environmental repercussions" of water scarcity could soon "affect billions of people."

Barney's merry tune comes to mind even more these days as I'm inundated with a tsunami of ads hyping new AI-driven tools and toys. Artificial intelligence has even invaded tooth-brushing: [Oral-B](#) introduced an AI-powered electric toothbrush that "tracks where your [sic] brush and gives you real-time feedback for your best results every day." Just connect with the Oral-B app!

If that high-tech appliance doesn't remind users to turn off the faucet, it should, given the water use associated with AI. And it should remind all of us about AI's increasing environmental threats. If you're worried like me, I have a proposal: Let's give up needless and frivolous AI for the 40 days of Lent.

I say "needless and frivolous" because AI does offer exciting possibilities for advancing science, medicine, commerce and data management. Its cheerleaders insist that it will even help combat climate change. Be that as it may, there are many wasteful and unnecessary AI applications whose environmental impact makes them hard to justify.

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Ads for the new Motorola Razr phone boast access to Gemini — Google's "family of multimodal artificial intelligence models." And what might be done with this epoch-changing technology? The ad suggests this: "Help me write a thank you note to my dog groomer." Really? Anyone able to write that prompt is capable of expressing gratitude for Fido's trim without a machine's help.

A trailer for the latest Minions movie aired during last year's Super Bowl featured a cavernous room of maniacally giggling yellow mischief-makers seated at computers, generating grotesque pictures of people with misshapen bodies and too many fingers — an ironic dig at the 34 million images created with AI each day. Many are

for personal amusement. A fair number are porn.

In 2023, Amazon grew concerned that AI-generated "books" flooding its Kindle Direct Publishing marketplace crowded out quality, human-crafted publications. To stem the tide, Amazon restricted new works from individual accounts to three *per day*. Which still allows contributors to add more than 1,000 titles per year, many with pirated or stolen content.

This proliferation of "needless and frivolous" AI-spawned content has aptly been labeled "slop" — a runner-up for the Oxford English Dictionary's [word of the year](#). Slop is advancing climate change, which Pope Francis has [called](#) "a road to death." As someone concerned for the environment, this really burns me up. Because it's helping to burn up the planet.

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By 2027, the water required to provide energy for AI, cool its associated data centers, and manufacture its computer chips will be four to six times the annual "water withdrawal" amount of Denmark. And with AI, only clean freshwater will suffice.

Asking ChatGPT to generate a 100-word email with AI is equivalent to pouring out a 16.9 ounce bottle of water. One in 10 working Americans doing that every week for a year would require the same amount of water consumed in Rhode Island in just a day and a half: 435,235,476 liters.

Also, water consumption for AI inflicts harm on communities and farms in the U.S. when data centers are constructed in water-scarce or drought-prone areas such as [Arizona](#), [Iowa](#), [South Carolina](#), [Oregon](#) and [California](#), where Silicon Valley itself continues to [sink](#) from groundwater depletion.

Similar dynamics are playing out in the Global South. Developing economies that lured data centers with financial incentives have experienced water scarcities, driving pushback and resistance. In [India](#), the booming tech sector guzzles millions of liters of water while 500 young children die each day because they can't access enough that's clean to drink.

The environmental impact of AI involves more than water use, of course. Next year, the energy required to power AI will rival the annual electricity consumption of [Japan](#) — straining power grids, warming the planet, and polluting the air through increased burning of natural gas and coal from aging power plants that, until recently, had been slated to close.

In addition, data centers are regularly upgraded with new equipment and more powerful chips to handle rapidly advancing AI applications, generating massive e-waste with toxic and hazardous materials. By 2030, this waste will be equivalent to throwing out 13 billion iPhones each year, adding to our planet's "immense pile of filth," as *Laudato Si'* laments.

Be creative! Think outside the box! Better yet, think outside the chatbot: Don't ask ChatGPT to generate ideas. The brain God gave you is far more efficient.

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Giving up unnecessary AI for Lent can help reverse this trend. Think of it as one of the "little daily actions" which, according to Francis in *Laudato Si'*, can "change the world," "benefit society," "restore our self-esteem," "help us feel that life on earth is worthwhile," and "call forth a goodness that ... inevitably tends to spread." They make a dent. And an even bigger statement.

To make such a statement this Lent, here are 10 suggestions:

1. Delete or disable AI-centric apps on your phone. Sound harsh? Well, if you gave up beer for Lent, would you keep a six-pack in the fridge?
2. Write your own thank you note to the dog groomer. In fact, write everything yourself. You'll help the planet, arrest brain rot and deskilling, and maybe avoid plagiarism.
3. Don't make silly AI-generated images. Uploading a single photo to Instagram is like turning on a lightbulb forever. The carbon footprint of an AI image is much more.
4. Are you a gamer who participates in multiplayer games that employ AI? Substitute with board games, or go to a local trivia night.

5. Don't use AI tools for Internet searches, and maybe change your browser. A ChatGPT-powered search requires nearly 10 times the electricity of one with Google.
6. If you own a "self-driving" vehicle, turn off the automated features, if you can. Keep your hands on the wheel. Apply the brakes yourself.
7. Are you a parent using AI to generate narrated bedtime stories for your kids? Read a book with them instead.
8. Support human creatives — musicians, writers, filmmakers. Patronize the arts. Go to a concert. Buy a book.
9. Refuse to use the AI add-ins and assistants foisted on you by Zoom, Adobe, Slack, Outlook, and other digital tools.
10. Are you a church leader looking for [ways to celebrate](#) the 10th anniversary of the publication of *Laudato Si'*? How about encouraging a Lenten AI detox?

An AI-free Lent is one way to "resist" the "technocratic paradigm," as Pope Francis pleads in *Laudato Si'*. Be creative! Think outside the box! Better yet, think outside the chatbot: Don't ask ChatGPT to generate ideas. The brain God gave you is far [more efficient](#).

AI consumes a lot of power, and is increasing in power over society and individual lives. This Lent, we have a chance to save some of that power, and take some power back.

Even if you do not embrace my proposal for an AI detox this Lent, remember to turn off the water when you brush your teeth. And please — for the love of God and the planet we all share — just use an ordinary toothbrush.

Related: [Hope for an AI doomer: *Laudato Si'* responds to today's technology with promise](#)

This story appears in the **Lent 2025** feature series. [View the full series](#).