

Hope as a Psycho-Spiritual Anchor: Navigating Formative Challenges in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

In the contemporary context of priestly and religious formation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) introduces both unprecedented efficiency and profound existential challenges. This paper examines hope not as a transient emotion but as a foundational psycho-spiritual virtue essential for holistic human and vocational formation. Engaging the tension between the predictive logic of AI and the transcendent nature of Christian hope, the study explores how formators can cultivate spiritual agency—the capacity of the human person to act intentionally and freely under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, making vocational choices that transcend algorithmic suggestions—and discernment among candidates living within a pervasive technological atmosphere. Situated within the Jubilee Year of St. Francis (2026–2027) and Pope Francis’s proclamation of the Year of Hope, the paper draws on the Franciscan values of *Minoritas* (minority), *fraternitas* (fraternity), and care for creation to propose a psycho-spiritual framework for formation in the digital age. It argues that while AI can simulate intelligence and influence vocational self-understanding, it cannot replicate the hope rooted in the *Imago Dei*. The study concludes that reclaiming hope as a psycho-spiritual virtue is a formative imperative, enabling future religious leaders to remain anchored in meaning, freedom, and transcendence amid the uncertainties of the AI-shaped world.

Keywords: Hope, Psycho-spiritual Formation, Artificial Intelligence, Spiritual Agency, Imago Dei, Discernment, Technological Culture, Human Transcendence

Introduction

Hope, as Pope Francis reminds us, is a theological virtue rooted in trust in Christ's promises and sustained by grace. The Year of Hope calls believers to “fan the flame of hope” and to look to the future with courage and vision. Simultaneously, the Franciscan Jubilee Year commemorates the life and witness of St. Francis of Assisi, whose radical simplicity and fraternity transform hope into a lived reality, offering a paradigm for the Church today.

In the current era, formation to religious life and the priesthood occurs within a “technological atmosphere” where Artificial Intelligence increasingly defines the boundaries of the possible. AI can serve as both a challenge and a tool for nurturing hope. For a seminarian or religious in formation, the sheer power of AI to predict, categorise, and even emulate human interaction can lead to a crisis of purpose. Reclaiming hope, especially when the relevance of religious and priestly life is frequently questioned, as a psycho-spiritual virtue, is therefore not merely a theological exercise, but a formative necessity. By integrating Franciscan values of *minoritas*, *fraternitas*, and care for creation with the transformative potential of AI, we can establish a psycho-spiritual framework for cultivating hope in our digital age.

Recent data from the 2025 State of AI in the Church survey reveals that 61% of church leaders now use AI tools daily or weekly—a dramatic increase from 43% just one year prior—and 64% use AI for sermon preparation, representing a nearly 20-point increase in twelve months (Deseret News, 2025). This acceleration is not limited to parish ministry; theological institutions from Harvard Divinity School to Dallas Theological Seminary have integrated AI-powered exegetical tools, virtual theological assistants, and adaptive learning platforms into their curricula (Papakostas, 2025). While such tools promise personalised learning pathways and administrative efficiency, they also introduce risks of theological distortion, epistemic conformity, and a significant diminishment of the capacity for self-realisation. This technological mediation threatens the erosion of the relational and formational aspects central to religious education, potentially replacing the internal journey of discovery with algorithmic efficiency.

Moreover, the integration of AI into formation contexts occurs against a backdrop of alarming clergy and seminarian burnout rates. A 2024 Hartford Institute report titled “I am Exhausted All the Time” found that approximately half of clergy had considered leaving their

congregation or ministry entirely in recent years, with digital fatigue, political polarisation, and pandemic trauma contributing to widespread emotional exhaustion (Episcopal News Service, 2024). Research further indicates that one-third of leaders from Abrahamic faiths experience traumatic stress levels comparable to or exceeding those in military service (Yankton.net, 2023). For seminarians and religious in formation, these pressures are compounded by the constant algorithmic stimulation of screens, social media, and digital communication platforms that fragment attention and undermine the contemplative practices essential to spiritual development. In this state of disarray, hope becomes a silent victim.

In this context, reclaiming hope as a psycho-spiritual virtue is therefore not merely an abstract theological exercise, but a formative necessity for the survival and flourishing of an authentic vocational identity. Hope provides the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual architecture that enables candidates to resist technological determinism, maintain an authentic self, and ground their identity in something transcendent rather than algorithmic.

The Biblical Foundation: Hope as *Hypostasis*

In the biblical tradition, hope (*elpis*) is not a vague wish but a “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb 6:19). The 2025 Jubilee, themed *Spes Non Confundit* (Hope does not disappoint), calls for a retrieval of hope as a spiritual “substance” (*hypostasis*).

While AI functions on the “predictive,” the Bible functions on the “Promissory.” AI calculates based on what has been; Biblical hope acts based on what God has promised. This distinction is vital for psycho-spiritual formation: the former creates a closed loop, while the latter opens a horizon.

The Psycho-Spiritual Architecture of Hope: Theoretical Foundations

Within the comprehensive framework of formative spirituality, hope functions as the dynamic bridge between the “already” of Christ’s accomplished work and the “not yet” of eschatological fulfilment. This tension—between what has been given and what is promised—creates the generative space where formation occurs. However, to fully appreciate hope’s formative power in the AI era, we must examine both its psychological structure and its spiritual transcendence.

Psychological Resilience: Hope Theory and Cognitive Architecture

From a psychological perspective, C.R. Snyder's Hope Theory (1991, 2002) provides an empirically validated framework for understanding hope as more than wishful thinking. Snyder defines hope as "a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Snyder et al., 1991). This two-component model—consisting of "willpower" (agency thinking) and "waypower" (pathways thinking)—operates through a dynamic, iterative feedback system.

Research consistently demonstrates that individuals with higher hope scores achieve greater success in academic, athletic, and vocational domains than those with lower scores—often exceeding predictions based on intelligence, skill, or prior achievement alone (Snyder, 2002; Mindtools, 2024). Moreover, hope functions as a critical protective factor against psychological distress. In an age characterised by rapid technological change and what recent research identifies as "digital burnout"—defined as mental and physical exhaustion from prolonged screen exposure affecting emotional stability, concentration, and physical health (Premier Neurology, 2025)—hope provides the cognitive buffer that prevents internal fragmentation of the candidate's developing identity. Critically, Snyder (1994) proposed that hope is not hereditary but entirely learned, with the foundational components established by age two through caregiver interactions. This developmental perspective has profound implications for formation programs: if hope is learned, it can be taught, reinforced, and cultivated through intentional formative practices. However, Snyder also acknowledged that certain societal forces can systematically undermine hope for particular groups, particularly when systemic obstacles create barriers to goal pursuit (Bernardo & Ramos, 2024). In the context of AI-saturated formation environments, we might ask: What systemic obstacles does algorithmic culture create? How might constant exposure to AI's deterministic predictions undermine seminarians' sense of agency?

Yes, adding a spiritual dimension is essential here. While the psychological critique addresses the shift from "individual" to "communal," a Franciscan and theological perspective further shifts the source of hope from "human effort" to "divine grace."

Here is the revised paragraph with the spiritual dimension integrated:

From Psychological Construct to Theological Virtue

Recent reconceptualisations of hope theory further emphasise its dynamic, contextual nature. Critics have noted that the original operationalisation of hope, while articulating an iterative process, often yielded a more linear, acontextual construct in empirical research (Colla et al., 2022). Moreover, the theory’s individualistic cultural framework may not fully apply to more collectivist cultures, where goals, agency, and pathways are defined interpersonally rather than individually (Bernardo, 2024). This cultural critique is particularly relevant for international formation programs and reminds formators that hope cultivation must be culturally sensitive and communally embedded.

Beyond these cultural and psychological shifts, however, lies a vital spiritual dimension: hope as a theological virtue. While psychological hope relies on human pathways and agency, spiritual hope is anchored in the “memory of God’s faithfulness” and the grace of the Holy Spirit. In the Franciscan tradition, this means that hope is not a product of successful planning or technological efficiency, but a gift received through *minoritas*—a recognition that when our own “pathways” fail, God’s providence remains. Thus, the formation of hope must move beyond building “resilience” to fostering a deep, prayerful trust in the transcendent promises of Christ.

Opportunities and Risks in Religious Formation

This analysis explores the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and religious formation, framing AI as a tool of Bayesian probability that predicts outcomes based on historical patterns. Though it offers administrative benefits, AI poses fundamental challenges to the unpredictable, transformative nature of spiritual “grace.”

1. Critical Risks: How AI May Limit Deep Theological Growth

The text identifies several “high-stakes” risks where AI may undermine the depth of theological development:

- **No Room for Grace:** AI works by predicting patterns based on data, but it cannot account for God’s unexpected action. Real spiritual change—like the transformation of St. Paul or St. Augustine—cannot be explained by data alone.
- **Distorted Understanding:** AI may repeat errors or present only one kind of viewpoint, creating an “echo chamber.” This can limit a student’s

ability to think deeply and engage critically with theology (Papakostas, 2025).

- **Loss of Authentic Experience/ An Erosion of Genuineness:** There is a risk that real encounters with God could be replaced by interactions with technology, where students engage more with AI than with Scripture or lived faith.
- **Focus on Output, Not Growth:** AI helps produce polished sermons and assignments quickly. But true formation comes through effort—prayer, reflection, and study—which AI can shortcut bypass (Capital University, 2025).

2. Strategic Opportunities: How AI Can Support Learning and Formation

At the same time, the text says we should not completely reject AI. When used wisely as a supporting tool, it can actually help in several ways:

- **Saving Time on Routine Work:** AI can handle basic tasks like scheduling and organising information. This gives formators more time to focus on personal guidance and spiritual accompaniment (Deseret News, 2025).
- **Making Learning More Accessible:** Tools like virtual assistants and translation apps can make theological resources available anytime, and to people from different backgrounds, including those with disabilities (Religious Studies Centre, 2025).
- **Supporting Individual Learning Needs:** AI can help students learn at their own pace and fill gaps in their understanding. It can also assist in studying Scripture more deeply—for example, through tools like Logos Bible Software—as long as human judgment is still used (MDPI, 2025).

The core insight is that AI should serve, not supplant, human interaction. By offloading the “informational” burden to AI, seminarians may paradoxically find more space for “relational depth”—redirecting saved time toward contemplative prayer, community building, and the cultivation of hope. The spiritual goal remains clear: AI can assist the scholar, but only the human heart can undergo formation.

3. Formative Strategies for the Digital Age: Cultivating Hope Amidst Algorithms

To cultivate this virtue, formation programs must move beyond technical literacy toward spiritual intelligence.

1. Cultivating Deep Interiority and Contemplation

To counteract “digital burnout” and algorithmic stimulation, formation programs must establish “protected spaces” for silence. In the Franciscan tradition, this is modelled on the **Rule for Hermitages**, where the “interior cell” of the heart is guarded even more carefully than the physical one. These practices move beyond informational processing toward a “silent centre” (Premier Neurology, 2025).

- **Structured Disconnection and the Spirit of Prayer:** Implementation of “Digital Sabbaths” and unplugged prayer. This aligns with St. Francis’ instruction that brothers must work faithfully but never extinguish the “spirit of holy prayer and devotion, to which all other temporal things must be subservient” (Rule, Ch. 5).
- **Contemplative Aloneness over Digital Stimulation:** Prioritising *Lectio Divina* and the “gaze of the soul.” St. Francis often sought out caves and solitary places to encounter the Beloved. Formation must encourage this “aloneness,” in which the candidate is stripped of the external feedback of social media to face God in the “poverty” of silence.
- **Relational Wisdom and the Guardian:** Utilising spiritual directors and “mothers” (as Francis called those in the hermitage). Formation happens in the “authentic formative fraternity”, where genuine presence and the “ear of the heart” provide an accountability that no AI can simulate.

2. Fostering Agency over Automation

Hope is rooted in agency—the belief that data do not predetermine human choices. Programs must encourage “value-based decision making” that defies algorithmic logic:

- **Discernment vs Data:** Favouring Ignatian discernment processes (attunement to consolation and desolation) over personality inventories or career-matching tools.
- **Moral and Creative Labour:** Engaging in complex pastoral case studies and original outreach projects that require prudential judgment rather than templates.
- **The Discipline of Struggle:** Maintaining academic rigour by limiting AI shortcuts. As noted by Capital University (2025), the “struggle” of writing and study develops the authentic theological voice required for pastoral ministry, reminding candidates that congregations entrust their souls to a person, not a tool.

3. Community as a Sign of Hope: Koinonia

In contrast to the one-to-one individualistic nature of AI, Christian hope is nurtured through *Koinonia* (communion).

- **Communal Practices:** Small faith-sharing groups, shared meals, and “inefficient” recreation provide protective factors against burnout (Episcopal News Service, 2024). Franciscan formation emphasises the vital importance of fraternal love, care, and correction. This implies a communal responsibility for the individual; a friar is never left to fend for himself in isolation. Instead, the community assumes a “shared personal responsibility,” not by forcing itself upon the individual, but by providing a constant assurance that the fraternity is there for you. This “safety net of presence” transforms hope from a private psychological struggle into a shared communal certainty.
- **Participatory Ecclesiology:** Utilising communal discernment for institutional decisions rather than top-down data analysis models a Church that listens for the Spirit. The practice of House Meetings and Chapters is essential here; it facilitates communal discernment, where individuals realise that their opinions matter and count. This participatory decision-making ensures that the formee is not just a data point in a system, but a member whose unique perspective is a vehicle for the Holy Spirit.
- **Solidarity:** Direct accompaniment of the suffering grounds abstract theology in the concrete presence of Christ.

4. Critical Digital Literacy

Candidates must be equipped to engage technology as “earnest seekers of truth” rather than passive consumers.

- **Theological Critique:** Coursework should explore the philosophical assumptions of AI, and institutional guidelines must clarify that AI “does not replace divinely appointed sources” (Deseret News, 2025).
- **Algorithmic Awareness:** Training in “spiritual self-defence” helps candidates understand how algorithms manipulate engagement and truth.
- **Integrity and Privacy:** Establishing clear citation practices and data privacy boundaries to protect the sanctity of conscience.

5. Hope-Specific Interventions

Applying Snyder’s Hope Theory, formation programs can scientifically bolster resilience through two primary cognitive components:

1. **Pathways Thinking:** Exercises that help candidates brainstorm multiple routes to a goal when obstacles arise.
2. **Agency Thinking:** Enhancing confidence through “Success Programming,” tracking “small wins,” and narrative reframing of failures as formative steps.

6. Addressing Digital Burnout

Digital burnout directly impairs the cognitive processing required for hope.

- **Neurological Restoration:** Education on screen-time neuroscience (Premier Neurology, 2025) and on institutional norms such as “Screen Time Limits” and analogue study methods. Just as Francis moved from the noise of Assisi to the silence of the caves, one must move from digital noise to analogue study methods that allow for deep, contemplative processing.
- **The Gift of Rest:** Reclaiming the Sabbath as a neurological necessity and implementing “Community Technology Covenants” to ensure shared spaces remain tech-free, mirroring the “Hermitage” model, where hope is protected from the “dissipation” of the world.
- **The Aglow Spirit of St. Francis:** St. Francis was “burnt out” in his final years—prostrated by illness, failing eyesight, and the “Great Temptation” concerning the future of his Order. However, he kept his spirit aglow. He did not seek “solutions” in a predictive logic but in prayer and solitude and in realisation of *minoritas* and in the solace of the *fraternitas*.

The Franciscan Witness and the Digital Jubilee: A Synthesis of Hope

This section integrates the radical, lived hope of St. Francis with the contemporary challenges posed by Artificial Intelligence. It frames the current technological era not as a threat to be avoided, but as a “digital culture” where Franciscan values can offer necessary corrective and creative directions.

• The “Sine Glossa” Perspective

St. Francis’s commitment to living *sine glossa* (without compromise or gloss) provides a profound theological critique of algorithmic mediation. While AI operates on the logic of probability and prediction, Francis’s radical trust in Divine Providence reminds us that:

Active Fidelity: Hope is not passive optimism but a lived commitment to the Gospel. **Presence over Proxy:** In a world of digital simulacra, the

Franciscan witness prioritises the authentic, unmediated encounter with Christ and the marginalised.

• Discerning AI through a Franciscan Lens

The text posits that AI can either amplify despair—via disinformation and isolation—or nurture hope through education and accessibility. The Jubilee of St. Francis serves as a framework for this discernment:

Franciscan Value	Application to AI Realities
Simplicity & Transparency	Advocating for ethical AI that is “transparent, accessible, and serving human dignity” rather than opaque and proprietary.
Fraternity & Dialogue	Utilizing AI to bridge intercultural and interfaith divides, echoing Francis’s inclusive embrace of all humanity.
Care for Creation	Leveraging AI-driven technologies to enhance ecological awareness and sustainability, as envisioned in the <i>Canticle of the Creatures</i> .
Psychospiritual Integration	Using AI as a “servant” tool for prayer and counseling while ensuring it never becomes the “master” of formation.

• Technology as Servant

The Franciscan approach to the Digital Age is one of critical engagement. By maintaining the “silent centre” and the “struggle” of formation mentioned in previous sections, the Franciscan tradition ensures that technological tools remain secondary to the relational and spiritual depth of the human person. The Jubilee becomes an opportunity to baptise these tools into the service of fraternity and the common good.

Conclusion

Hope is the virtue that allows the formator and the formee to look at the challenges of AI—including ethical dilemmas and existential anxiety—and see not a threat, but a “new frontier” for Christ-formation. As we conclude, we affirm that the “integrity of the person” in the digital age depends on an anchor that is not manufactured by human hands, but is received as a gift of the Spirit.

In this contemporary digital landscape, the Franciscan spirit reveals a profound and universal relevance. While born within a specific religious tradition, the values of *minoritas*, *fraternitas*, and the pursuit of a “silent centre” transcend the boundaries of Franciscan orders. They offer a vital framework of hope to everyone—including lay professionals, students, and families—who find themselves adrift in a world of algorithmic determinism. By modelling a life that prioritises “being” over “producing” and “communion” over “connectivity,” the Franciscan way provides a roadmap for anyone seeking to reclaim their authentic self from the “technological atmosphere.”

The age of AI is not the end of formation but its renewal—an invitation to return to what has always been essential, to distinguish more clearly what is central from what is peripheral, and to ground the formative enterprise more deeply in the only foundation that cannot be shaken: Jesus Christ, “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8), who is Himself our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

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