

## Environmentally Conscious Franciscans about the Use of AI

**BCTOR:** How do I respond to Franciscans who are environmentally conscious about the use of AI when they bring up environmental concerns about high energy usage raising energy costs, and about using up water systems? There were a few more environmental issues I don't remember. One was, how can I trust AI to give me an accurate reply.

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When Franciscans raise questions about AI and the environment, the instinct behind the question is actually very Franciscan. It comes from the spirit of Francis of Assisi, who looked at the world and called the sun brother, the moon sister, and the earth our common home. So the best response is not defensive but appreciative. You can acknowledge the concern and then widen the lens a little.

### 1. Start by affirming the Franciscan instinct

- “Your concern is exactly what we would expect from followers of St. Francis. Care for creation is not optional for us.”
- You could even connect it with Pope Francis and his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which reminds us that every technology should be evaluated in light of the **common good and care for creation**.

### 2. Acknowledge the environmental reality (honestly)

**AI does use significant computing power. Data centers consume:**

- electricity
- cooling systems (often water)
- large server infrastructure

**The concern is legitimate. But it helps to put it in context:**

- Data centers worldwide use roughly **1–2% of global electricity**.
- Many companies are rapidly moving toward **renewable energy**.
- Cooling systems are increasingly shifting to **recycled or non-potable water**.

In other words: it's a real issue, but it is also **being actively addressed**, just like energy concerns with any technology.

**A helpful analogy:**

- Printing thousands of pages, shipping books, and running offices also consumes energy and resources. AI simply concentrates that activity in a digital infrastructure.

### 3. Turn the conversation toward stewardship

A Franciscan response is not **“technology or creation.”**

**It is “technology used responsibly for creation.”**

**AI can actually help environmental stewardship:**

- climate modeling
- monitoring deforestation
- improving energy efficiency
- managing agriculture and water systems

Many environmental scientists now use AI to **protect ecosystems.**

**So the question becomes:**

*How do we use technology as stewards rather than consumers?*

#### **4. Address the “Can AI be trusted?” question**

This is where a simple analogy works well.

AI is **not an oracle.**

It is more like a **very fast research assistant.**

**It gathers patterns from vast amounts of information, but:**

- it can make mistakes
- it should be verified
- it should not replace judgment

**A healthy rule is:** “Trust, but verify.”

Which is exactly what scholars, theologians, and preachers already do with books, articles, and internet sources.

#### **5. The Franciscan discernment question**

You might conclude with something like this:

- “The real Franciscan question is not whether a technology exists, but how we use it.
- Does it serve wisdom, compassion, and care for creation? Or does it serve convenience alone?”

**Used well, AI can help:**

- research Scripture
- preserve wisdom traditions
- communicate the Gospel
- support education

**Used poorly, it becomes noise.**

*The discernment belongs to us.*

## 6. A short one-sentence response (for conversation)

“AI does use energy, but so do printing presses, and computers. The Franciscan question is whether we use the technology responsibly and for the good of creation.”

### Artificial Intelligence Is a Powerful Tool.

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Artificial Intelligence is a powerful tool. It uses energy. It requires computers and water-cooled systems. These are real concerns, and people of faith should care about them. Followers of Francis of Assisi have always believed that creation is a gift entrusted to our stewardship, not a warehouse of resources to be used carelessly.

#### **But every tool humanity has ever used required resources.**

- Printing presses required forests for paper.
- Libraries required buildings, heat, and electricity.
- Even monasteries once required forests to heat their walls in winter.

Yet those same tools also preserved wisdom, spread learning, and carried the Gospel across centuries.

The question is never simply “**Does this tool consume resources?**”

The deeper question is:

“**Does this tool help us serve truth, wisdom, and the good of others?**”

#### **Artificial Intelligence, can be used wisely or foolishly.**

- It can generate noise, confusion, and laziness.
- Or it can help teachers teach, researchers discover, and preachers uncover insights hidden in vast libraries of human knowledge.

And like any research assistant, *it must be used with judgment.*

No thoughtful person should accept an AI answer without reflection and verification.

*The tool serves the person.  
The person serves the truth.*

#### **So perhaps the most Franciscan question about technology is not:**

“Should we fear this tool?”

#### **But rather:**

*“How can we use this tool in a way that honors creation and serves the human family?”*

Because in the end, even the most advanced machine still waits for the same thing every tool has always waited for: A wise pair of hands.

## A Pocket-sized Answer

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### A Simple Response

“You’re right that AI uses energy and water for cooling data centers. That’s a real environmental question, and as Franciscans we should care about it. But every tool humanity has used has required resources. Printing presses used forests for paper, libraries use buildings and electricity, and even monasteries once burned a lot of wood to stay warm.

The Franciscan question isn’t simply whether a tool uses resources. The deeper question is: *Does this tool help serve truth and the common good?*

AI is like a research assistant. It can help organize information and spark ideas, but I still verify what it says. The responsibility stays with the person using the tool.”

“AI shouldn’t be treated like an oracle. It’s more like a fast librarian who pulls books off the shelf. You still have to read them carefully.”

“St. Francis of Assisi didn’t fear tools. He just insisted that everything be used with humility and care for creation. That seems like the right approach here too.”

## Three Calm, Factual Points

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Think of them as conversational “trail markers” to keep the discussion grounded rather than emotional.

### 1. AI’s energy use is real, but it’s a small slice of global electricity

All the world’s data centers together account for roughly **1–2% of global electricity use**. That includes everything: cloud storage, streaming video, email, banking systems, and AI.

Yes, AI contributes to that total, but it is **not the dominant energy consumer people sometimes imagine**.

#### A helpful comparison:

- Air conditioning in buildings uses **far more electricity globally**.
- Cryptocurrency mining has at times used **similar or greater amounts** of energy than many AI workloads.

In other words, it’s a legitimate concern, but not the environmental giant some headlines suggest.

### 2. The tech industry is rapidly moving toward renewable energy

Many major data-center operators are aggressively purchasing renewable power.

Companies like Microsoft, Google, and Amazon are among the **largest corporate buyers of wind and solar energy in the world.**

Their reason is partly environmental and partly economic:

- renewable power is increasingly **cheaper and more stable**
- large data centers can be placed near renewable sources

So the infrastructure behind AI is gradually becoming **cleaner than older industrial models.**

### **3. AI is also helping environmental science**

Ironically, some of the same technology people worry about is **actively helping environmental protection.**

**Researchers use AI for:**

- predicting climate patterns
- monitoring deforestation from satellites
- improving energy grid efficiency
- detecting methane leaks and pollution

In other words, AI can also be **a tool for stewardship**, something that resonates strongly with the spirit of Francis of Assisi and the ecological concerns highlighted by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*.

#### **A One-line Summary**

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“AI does consume energy, but it’s a relatively small part of global electricity use, the industry is shifting heavily to renewables, and the same technology is actually helping scientists protect the environment.”

*Every new tool first raises fear, then curiosity, and finally responsibility.*

- Printing presses did.
- Electric lights did.
- The internet did.
- Now AI does.

The enduring question stays the same: *What kind of people will we be while using it?*