News



Catholic actors Mark Wahlberg, left, and Jonathan Roumie are seen in the teaser for the Super Bowl ad for Hallow, a Catholic prayer and meditation app. (Courtesy of Hallow)



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A Catholic prayer and meditation app is hoping to inspire more than a Hail Mary pass or a bended knee in the end zone during Super Bowl LVIII this Sunday, Feb. 11.

A 30-second commercial during the second quarter will feature a prayer led by Catholic actors Jonathan Roumie and Mark Wahlberg and will remind fans that Lent begins just days after the big game.

The commercial is for Hallow, a Chicago-based company co-founded in 2018 by three University of Notre Dame graduates. The Super Bowl spot is intended to encourage Chiefs and 49ers fans to take a break from the game and enjoy a moment of prayer on the Lord's day — and will promote the app's Lent prayer challenge, which begins Ash Wednesday, on Feb. 14.

"Our hope is that it reaches out to someone who maybe hasn't prayed in a long time, that it might just allow someone somewhere an opportunity to let God into their hearts for the first time," Hallow CEO Alex Jones told NCR in an email interview.



Alex Jones, co-founder and CEO of Hallow (Courtesy of Hallow)

Jones declined to say how much the company is paying for the Super Bowl ad, but an average 30-second spot costs $7 million to reach the more than 100 million viewers of the championship game. CBS reportedly sold out the ad spots in a matter of weeks in November.

The Hallow ad will only run in 14 major markets, not every market, so it is "a fraction of the full national ad cost," Jones said.

"If we can reach out to just one person like that, someone in a tough place, someone lost — and help them to begin a journey back to God, then yes, it will have been worth it," Jones added.

The commercial begins with Wahlberg, who starred in the movie "Father Stu," inviting viewers to join him in prayer, saying, "God, we take this moment just to give you thanks."

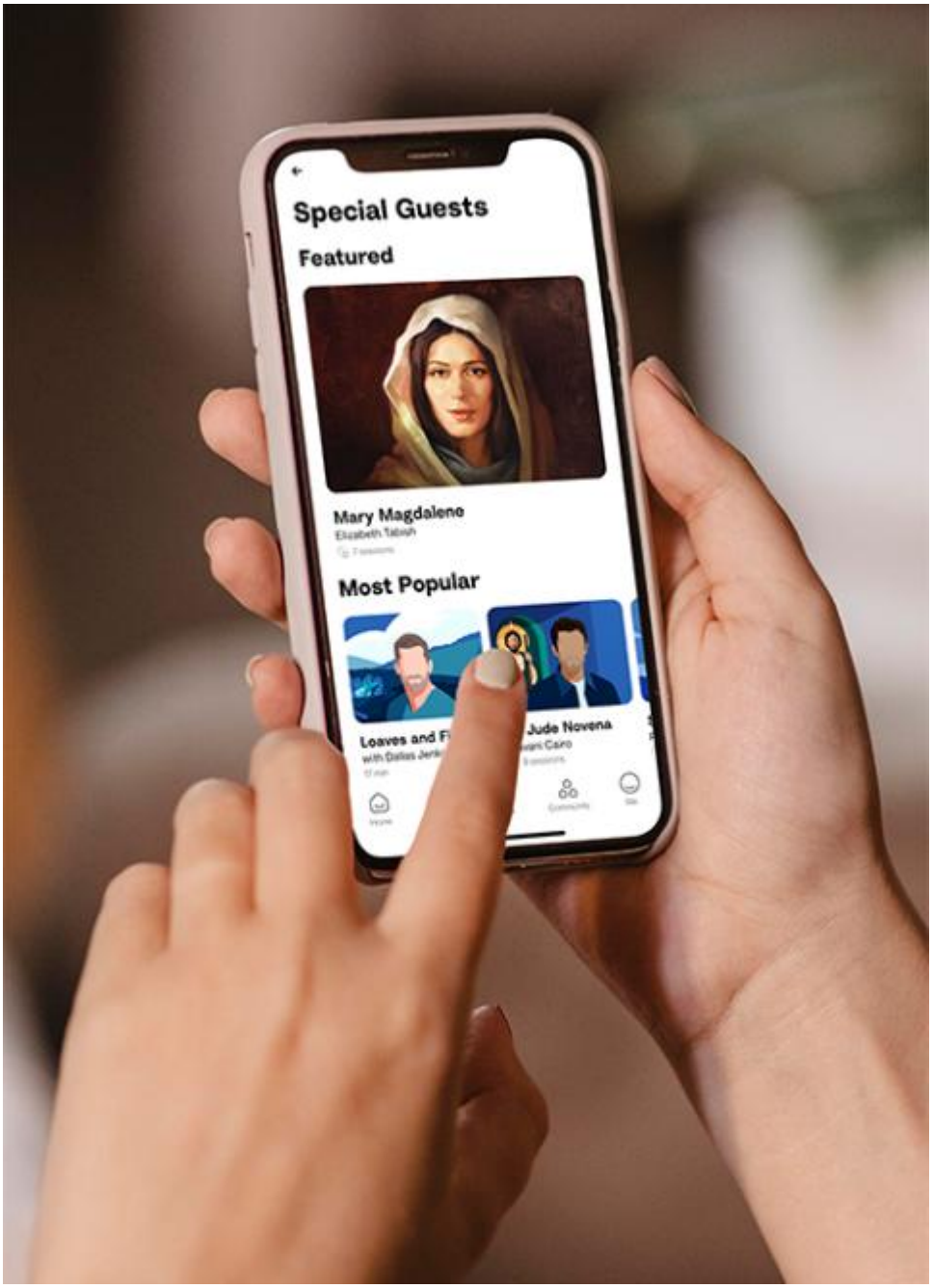
Wahlberg and Roumie, who portrays Jesus in the TV series "The Chosen," are "two of our closest and longest term partners," Jones said. "We've seen their work change thousands of people's lives — people who have fallen away for years, but see an invitation from Mark or Jonathan and are brought back into their faith for the first time."

The teaser for Hallow's Super Bowl commercial (YouTube/Hallow)

The two actors will help lead Hallow's "Lent Pray40 Challenge" this year. Other Lenten guides include Fr. Mike Schmitz of the "Bible in a Year" podcast; actor Jim Caviezel, who portrayed Jesus in Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ"; EWTN host Jeff Cavins; Tammy Peterson, wife of controversial author Jordan Peterson; Sister Mary Bernice, a Missionary of Charity; and Sr. Miriam James Heidland, of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

Last year, Hallow came under fire for partnering with actor Liam Neeson for its Advent series. Conservative Catholics criticized Neeson, a dual U.S. and Irish citizen, for his support for the overturning of an Irish law banning abortion. At the time, Jones said he consulted Hallow's advisers and defended the decision to work with "non-traditional partners and people from different backgrounds."

Hallow's advisers include Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana; John Cavadini of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute for Church Life; Fr. Stephen Grunow of Word on Fire; and Andrew Abela of the Catholic University of America's Busch School of Business, among others.



A screenshot of the Hallow app is seen in a publicity photo. (Courtesy of Hallow)

Other offerings in the app include a daily rosary, daily Gospel, daily saint, novenas, examens, Christian music, Gregorian chant, and Sunday sermons from Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota.

While there is a free version, subscriptions for full content are $9.99 a month or $69.99 a year. A family plan and Spanish-language version are also available.

But the Hallow commercial will not be the only religious ad during the Super Bowl. The "He Gets Us" campaign will make a second Super Bowl appearance, after running two ads during last year's game.

That multimillion-dollar media campaign seeks to rebrand Jesus as relatable to modern people, portraying him as an immigrant, a refugee, a radical, an activist for women's rights, and a bulwark against racial injustice and political corruption.

Advertising industry experts warn that the use of religion to sell secular products can be risky because it can turn off nonreligious customers, and any advertising of religious products runs the risk of offending folks with different religious beliefs. But it seems that most viewers enjoyed the "He Gets Us" ads last year, ranking one of them in the Top 10 and another in the Top 15 of nearly 50 ads according to USA Today's "Ad Meter."

In an interview with NCR, Catholic commentator Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese called the Hallow ad's use of nationally recognized actors "a smart move."

Advertisement

However, last year's revelations that the "He Gets Us" campaign's major donors — including Hobby Lobby co-founder David Green — had ties to conservative politics and far-right ideology sparked criticism. The organization is now operating under new ownership led by a former Domino's and Wendy's chief marketing officer.

Hallow's investors include Scott Malpass, the only American appointed to sit on the Vatican bank's board; billionaire GOP-megadonor Peter Thiel; and Eric Kim of Goodwater Capital, which Jones described as " the largest consumer tech-only venture fund in the world that also happens to be founded by two incredible men of faith and explicitly rooted in the mission of Micah 6:8: 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.' "

Last year, Hallow raised $50 million in funding, bringing its total to more than $100 million.

The company was founded by Jones, Erich Kerekes and Alessandro DiSanto and was born out of Jones' struggle with his faith during college, which he admits was a dark

and empty time in his life. After graduation, while working for McKinsey & Co. in Chicago, Jones reached out to a priest he knew from Notre Dame who ultimately reintroduced him to the power of prayer.



The co-founders of Hallow, from left: Erich Kerekes, chief technology officer; Alessandro DiSanto, head of growth; and Alex Jones, CEO (Courtesy of Hallow)

Jones' return to the faith came during meditation with Scripture. "The passage was about Jesus teaching the Lord's prayer," Jones told the author of a profile on Notre Dame's website. "The word 'hallow,' to make holy, stuck in my mind. It gave me a deep sense of peace — and changed my life."

He and a group of fellow Notre Dame grads began building the app, and in 2018 Jones, Kerekes and DiSanto left their full-time jobs to focus exclusively on Hallow. According to a press release from the company, "Hallow is now the #1 Catholic app in the world and has been downloaded 10 million times and used to pray over 300 million times across 150-plus countries."

Last Ash Wednesday, it reached the No. 3 spot on Apple's AppStore's top 10, the press release said.

But financial success is not a guarantee and the start-up is still not yet profitable, Jones told NCR.

"We're still investing to try and build something that really has a chance to reach out to the folks who are the hardest to reach, and to do that we have to try and take some really big swings," he said.

Perhaps a football analogy would have been more apt.