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**STRATEGIES, METHODS, AND MEANS  
FOR ACHIEVING PERSUASION  
DURING THE SERMON**

– summary –

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## **STRATEGIES, METHODS, AND MEANS FOR ACHIEVING PERSUASION DURING THE SERMON**

Conforming our own lifestyle with the truths we confess is a non-negotiable requirement that canonical law demands of the priest and preacher alike. This means, on the one hand, to prove by our deeds that what we preach is achievable, and, on the other hand, that it really works. We recognize, however, that reaching the standard of holiness of life gets beyond objective control, so neither society (from the outside) nor even the person (the inner self, from within) could say about himself whether he has fulfilled any of the moral and spiritual law, and, whether he has achieved something in this direction, to what degree of plenitude would he arise. At the same time, the years of man's pilgrimage to this earth flow away in constant motion, so that no one, ever before the moment of the death of the body, can say that his condition has gained full stability and impregnability against sin<sup>1</sup>.

What is within our reach, with the much easier possibility of checking, correcting, and improving the level accomplished, is the acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge that will facilitate our access to the mind, heart, and will of the faithful. From the academic perspective, as well as from the pastoral-catechetical one, the study of *the power of persuasion* and of *the efficiency of homiletical communication* lies before the graduates of theology and the Orthodox priesthood as a never exhaustible path. Persuasive speaking means, during the sermon, to systematize the dogma on the understanding of the audience, but also to stimulate the members of the ecclesiastical assembly to translate the teachings received into daily behavior and conduct, into a way of life.

### **Motivation for choosing the topic**

The need to cultivate persuasion during the sermon does not require explanatory notes, as it relates to the evidence itself and to the essence of evangelical preaching. However, the motivation for choosing the topic of the doctoral thesis was determined by two factors.

On the one hand, in the practice of the pulpit throughout our country<sup>2</sup>, certain mistakes are being made. Firstly, some priests do not usually send a clear *message* to the audience, derived from the subject of the speech or from the meaning of the holiday. Secondly, some preachers find themselves guilty of lacking a real concern for *actualizing, applying and popularizing* the sacred text, dogma, or celebrated historical moment, as appropriate. It can even happen that these two mistakes that we mentioned occur simultaneously. The holiday as

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<sup>1</sup> „Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10, 12).

<sup>2</sup> We refer especially to the region of Moldavia, whose liturgical and cultic life we know of.

an event has already been consumed, but by remembering it we highlight its relationship and implications for today's generation. This is the engine that stimulates the intellectual assimilation and concrete use for believers in their daily lives. The culmination of the whole discursive effort materializes through the noetic and behavioral transposition in the social environment (in the life of the community) of what is understood from the sermon.

On the other hand, we believe that the systematization and analysis of homiletical principles, methods, and means in order to convince and persuade the parishioners *has not yet been sufficiently covered* in the Romanian-language church oratory, especially at the academic level.

### **General aims and objectives**

*The central purpose* that we pursued throughout the composition of this thesis was to formulate useful and viable strategies to increase the level of homiletical performance among Romanian preachers. We are particularly interested in *the effect* that a sermon will have on believers after they leave the place of worship. Specifically, it is of great interest to what extent the priest's speech reaches the mind, heart, and will of the listeners, because gaining the support of the interlocutor coincides, in our case, with feeding the three faculties of his spirit. The positioning of the homily inside the Holy Liturgy, at the end of the part attended by the catechumens and before the beginning of the Eucharistic part, is not fortuitous. The willingness of the audience to receive God's Word will never be more favorable.

*The main objectives* of the research were:

- listing and proving the benefits of streamlining homiletic discourse, regarding the *actualization* of evangelical norms and the persuasive transmission of the pastoral message;
- proposing concrete techniques and strategies for *persuasive communication*, in order to improve the homiletical activity of the Romanian Orthodox priesthood;
- highlighting the correct ratio of *argumentativeness* and *affectivity* in the content of the various homiletical genres in use;
- converting or adapting certified discoveries from *other fields* (sciences and disciplines of human wisdom and technique) related to the thesis, to improve the homiletical activity of the contemporary priest (according to the Vasilian principle and the ideal of alchemy);
- harmonious interweaving regarding the use of classical sources of orthodox homiletics and those from outside the field of right-praising theology (heterodox and secular works; research, studies, and concrete examples from the contemporary transdisciplinary environment);

- offering an innovative and stimulating perspective on the unprecedented means and opportunities available to the modern preacher for counterbalancing the challenges of contemporary secularism.

The strategies, methods, and means that we have formulated aim with priority at *streamlining* the ecclesiastical discourse, its advancement from the level of the wooden language or the emission of generalities and platitudes to the level of a lucid, organized, and especially *convincing* expression. We must contribute, through our preaching, to the formation of better Christians, to bringing parishioners closer to Lord Christ and His Church. Among the techniques we have focused on, we note:

- starting in argumentation from *a common background* of knowledge and evolving from simple to complex;
- *free speech* and use of *orality*;
- the prevalence of *narrative* as a norm or frame for presenting ideas (storytelling, providing examples and analogies, etc.);
- stimulating the interlocutors' imagination or *creating images* during the sermon (the visual favors co-participation, has the role of involving, and imposes itself more easily in the shaping of beliefs);
- developing a *dialogical* style of expression, by using interrogations and maintaining a permanent connection by sight with the listeners;
- approaching a *positive*, optimistic, parental and gentle way of addressing (not self-sufficient, exclusive, quarrelsome, and eternally critical) – see “Pygmalion effect” (pp. 118-121);
- stimulating *discovery* (when the high general culture of the homilist is intertwined with the science of exposition, deep truths are transmitted through simple phrases and ideas, which will determine the perception of the richness and height of Orthodox theology towards the members of the audience);
- highlighting, without exception, the *Christocentric* characteristic of church oratory (we do not preach ourselves);
- capitalizing on *Holy Scriptures* as a fundamental homiletic source, thanks to the attributes enjoyed by the sixty-six books of the biblical canon: the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the dogmatic infallibility, the ageless topicality of the contents, etc.

## **Thesis structure**

The doctoral thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter (*Strategies for preparing and delivering a successful sermon*) presents the synthetic methodology for drawing up a homily, respecting the natural order of the well-known logical-psychological moments. The emphasis is on free speech, but only based on personal study and adherence to a previously developed plan of ideas. At the same time, we underline the condition of conforming the facts or the experience of the priest with the confessed teaching, as a primary impetus for the faithful to follow the living example of their spiritual father.

The second chapter (*Persuasion during the sermon*) focuses on achieving the goal stated already in the title of the paper. To preach the Gospel convincingly is the very essence of Christian pastoral care. In this regard, we insisted upon the argumentative dimension of the church oratory. Knowing the classification and direction of argument ensures the substance of the homiletical contents, demonstrating at the same time the credibility and good intentions of the preacher. Forwards, the difference between the concepts is marked: argumentation is the prerogative of the measurable or quantifiable sensory realm, while the persuasion proves more suitable to the metaphysical realities, incomprehensible to the human mind and power, to which theological apophatism refers and invites. Truths of faith transcend the empirical framework and logic of the natural, but homiletics does not seek to manipulate consciences, but to educate and stimulate them to fulfill the authentic Christian vocation that God has impregnated inside the intimate fiber of human nature. The rule of giving the sermon in a liturgical setting is not oriented to respect a tradition, but to aim at a religious-moral improvement or a change of state among those present. Thus, the ultimate challenge facing the church speaker is to gain access to the listener's system of attitudes and values. Resistance to persuasion or the individual's reluctance to change represents one of the innate fundamental components of the human mechanism of defense and conservation, opposing to unfair argumentation or psychological exploitation. Confronted with man's natural inclination to behave by automatism or habit, and to protect his own attitudes, convictions, or beliefs, the preaching priest is thrown into an unequal struggle. Therefore, overcoming the resistance to persuasion is a goal that can be achieved only through the synergy between the oratorical mastery and personal example of the homilist, on the one hand, and the charitable intercession of the Holy Spirit, on the other. As the duty of the preacher is fulfilled, the decision to receive the word and to comply with the facts rests exclusively with the believers, on the grounds of respect for free will (Deuteronomy 30, 15-20).



The third chapter (*The Art of Preaching – Tradition and Modernity*) highlights the balance of forces established between the argumentative and persuasive function of the oratory. Synergy and balance are the terms that most accurately describe the ideal of the weight of rationality and emotion in a sermon. In accordance with the middle way principle, we establish also the optimal proportionality between the modern techniques of obtaining adhesion, respectively the traditional apostolic and patristic norms by which the Word of God was proclaimed throughout the different historical epochs: until the appearance of the printing press, until the production of electricity, until the digital means of transmitting information. In order to address the danger of syncretism and eclecticism, the homiletical contents are anchored in Christocentrism and ecclesiocentrism, the foundation of Scriptures and Tradition remaining to be the basic resource or the core of Orthodox preaching until the end of the ages. For the finale, we plasticized the unlimited potential for collaboration between old and new, proposing the capitalization and applicability of an ancient legal theory. The *Stasis* system may be used during three processes: choosing and organizing the homiletic material for a given topic, ordinating arguments for backing the idea supported, and identifying the most practical and effective solutions for updating or adapting past events (occurred in the history of salvation) to the needs of contemporary man.

In order to maintain its coherence, thematic unity and organic character, our exposition went through the following stages of development:

- we brought back to attention the value and viability of composing a speech with respect to the classic *logical-psychological moments*;
- we presented the advantages of *free speech*, according to the *plan*, based on a serious prior *preparation*;
- we have dealt extensively with the human *attitude*, as a collection (set) of convictions, values, beliefs, automatisms, habits, preconceptions, and biases to which the instinct of self-preservation and individual protection is triggered (known in the specialized literature as *resistance to persuasion*);
- we chose *persuasion* as the leitmotif or point of reference to which the very purpose of the priest ascending to the pulpit must refer (not to the detriment, but instead of *conviction* and *argumentation*), due to the transcendental specificity of Christian preaching and the metaphysical implications of homiletic genres and structures;
- we have constantly highlighted the *Christocentric* character and the *biblical* background of the art of preaching in Orthodoxy;

- we encouraged the foray into *related disciplines* when their findings, proving effective in their area of influence, would not affect the evangelical ethos and authenticity of preaching;
- finally, we suggested a model for assimilating the theory of *stasis*, a procedure of legal investigation lost in the mists of antiquity, demonstrating its role in structuring the material during the *Inventio* stage, its social-pastoral applicability, and the naturalness of this rhetorical technique for evolutionarily discovering and organizing ideas.

### **Results acquired during research**

At the beginning of the doctoral dissertation, we proposed the hypothesis of crystallizing *strategies, methods, and means to achieve optimal persuasion during the sermon*. In this regard, we appreciate that so far we have highlighted thoroughly:

- the obligation to *prepare in advance* a church lecture and to present it *freely (by heart)*, according to a well-defined *plan of ideas*;
- the significance of extracting and transmitting a clear and stimulating *message* to listeners at the end of each homily;
- the importance of *actualizing and adapting* all the truths of faith (that emerge from the thematic framework) to the level of understanding and real needs of the contemporary Christian, as well as the symbols and meanings specific to each religious holiday or sacred text, depending on the chosen homiletic genre;
- encouraging the preacher to critically investigate and selectively take certain certified discoveries in *other fields or sciences*, insofar as they conform to the rules of evangelical preaching, in support of the positive development and improvement of the contemporary priest's homiletic activity (according to the Vasilian principle and the ideal of alchemy);
- conforming one's life to the confessed teaching, as a *personal example* or sermon of the facts.

In accordance with the principle of discernment or of the royal way, each clergyman devoted to his homiletic and catechetical mission will seek balance in all things, adapting his speeches in order to „articulate the two components: *rational rigor* and *emotional effectiveness*”<sup>3</sup>. That is, the relationship of fusion between logic and rhetoric will be configured so that argumentative discourse becomes „the emergence of a «new alliance»: argumentativeness («art du bien dire») + figurativeness («art du beau parler»)»<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniela Roventă-Frumușani, *Argumentarea. Modele și strategii*, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

### **Elements of novelty and personal contribution**

Regarding the contribution of this thesis to the enrichment of the orthodox thesaurus of homiletic theory, we would like to thank in particular the coordinating professor for the opportunity to focus our attention on a topical issue and to make a pioneering foray into bibliographic materials from various sciences and related disciplines, for the benefit of an academic approach to the preaching paradigm.

As elements of own contribution, we mention:

- the use and concentration of a large volume of *foreign language literature* (theological and laical), to facilitate the access of Romanian pupils, students and preachers;
- covering a *level not yet sufficiently explored* in the Romanian homiletic literature;
- the substantial capitalization of a theoretical and practical heritage of great utility, *from outside the field of orthodox homiletics* and theology in general;
- promoting and explaining less common concepts for the study of orthodox homiletics: *persuasion* and *argumentation*;
- emphasizing the requirement *to speak truly convincingly* from the pulpit and offering solutions for accomplishing this task, so that the evolution and extent to which parishioners assimilate *rationally and emotionally* the teaching received could be programmatically followed, the ultimate goal being *the reflection of their faith at a behavioral-actional level*;
- the revival of *Stasis* theory, a legal technique of Antiquity designated to investigate and solve a specific case or problem, according to a precise interrogative algorithm (we pursued its adaptation and application in homiletics).