


Rev. Marian Šuráb

Comenius University in Bratislava

marian.surab@frcth.uniba.sk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4977-1386>

Recommendations of Pope Francis on Rhetoric

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.26201>

Rev. Marian Šuráb – Prof. ThDr., PhD. lectures on pastoral theology, homiletics, and rhetoric at the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Comenius University in Bratislava, at the Department of Practical Theology. He is a priest of the Nitra diocese.

Article history • Received: 21 Nov 2021 • Accepted: 27 Feb 2022 • Published: 30 Jun 2022

ISSN 1428-5673 (print) • **ISSN** 2391-6575 (online) • Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Abstract

Recommendations of Pope Francis on Rhetoric

Pope Francis cares about the quality of homilies. He confirmed this in the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, in which he presented twenty-four points on the homily. Several of them contain recommendations about the manner of preaching. Strong content is not enough for a good homily; the presentation must be appropriate. Ancient and Christian rhetoric as well as modern communication theory all deal with the quality of discourse. The Pope reiterated the importance of the preacher to speak properly, use appropriate language, speak simply and clearly, be mindful of the vocal aspect of their speech, to use appropriate gestures and not to speak for too long.

Keywords: Pope Francis, rhetoric, homily, preacher

Abstrakt

Retoryczne zalecenia papieża Franciszka dla kaznodziei

Papież Franciszek dba o jakość homilii. Potwierdził to także w adhortacji *Evangelii gaudium*, w której temat homilii podjął w 24 punktach. Kilka z nich odnosiło się również do zaleceń dotyczących formy raportowania. Dobra treść nie wystarczy na homilię. Musi być również odpowiednio przedstawiona. Zarówno starożytna, jak i chrześcijańska retoryka oraz współczesna teoria komunikacji mają doświadczenie z recytacją. Papież powtórzył, jak ważne jest, aby kaznodzieja mówił poprawnie, używał odpowiedniego języka, mówił prosto i wyraźnie, zwracał uwagę na stronę głosową przemówienia, używał odpowiednich gestów i nie mówił zbyt długo.

Słowa kluczowe: papież Franciszek, retoryka, homilia, kaznodzieja

Classical rhetoric created a set of rules to help speakers make their speeches effective. Thanks to St. Augustine, these principles became part of the Christian proclamation. Throughout history, they have been present to varying degrees in both the training of preachers and the preaching ministry. Today, classical rhetorical principles are conveyed by the communication theory. They can also contribute to the quality of preaching.

In the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis introduced 24 points on the homily. Some of them contain rhetoric advice. The current pope cares not only about the preaching material, but also about the way it is presented by preachers. In his exhortation, he mentions old and new principles from the fields of rhetoric and communication that are still relevant. He encourages preachers to try to apply them.

1. How to talk

It is unwise to categorically say about someone that he is an excellent or a bad preacher. It is usually a subjective evaluation. Nevertheless, there are certain recommendations that may help the preacher become a generally accepted speaker within the liturgical space. Anyone who rejects these recommendations risks making his speech unappealing. Pope Francis says that

some people think they can be good preachers because they know what ought to be said, but they pay no attention to how it should be said, that is, the concrete way of constructing a sermon... Concern for the way we preach is likewise a profoundly spiritual concern. It entails responding to the love of God by putting all our talents and creativity at the service of the mission which he has given us; at the same time, it shows a fine, active love of neighbour by refusing to offer others a product of poor quality¹.

A responsible preacher knows that it is not enough to have good preaching material; it is also necessary to know how to present it. If he thinks that it is enough to preach without any effort to improve his

¹ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 156.

speech, he is betraying God's word. We believe that our nature is tainted by the original sin, and this also affects the area of public speaking. No preacher is perfect, but he can come close to perfection. Many deep thoughts are lost in our churches because preachers cannot express them appealingly.

The legacy of St. Augustine

In his work *De doctrina christiana*, Saint Augustine combined Christian preaching with the principles of rhetoric, which he was familiar with and mastered perfectly². God's truths alone do not require *ars oratoria*—the art of rhetoric. It is the man who needs rhetoric to be able to proclaim and accept God's truths as appropriately as possible. The task of Christian preaching is, above all, to help bring people to God. The magnificent heritage of *rhetorica christiana* should also help achieve this goal³. The whole of Augustine's preaching theory focuses on three principles of classical rhetoric: *docere, delectare, movere*. These are the *tria officia dicendi*—the three duties of a speaker. To these goals, Cicero adds three levels of rhetorical style: low (*plain*), middle (*temperate*), and high (*grand*).

Augustine considers it ideal for the preacher to speak wisely—*sapienter* and eloquently—*eloquenter*; he prefers wisdom to eloquence. The Holy Scriptures are the preacher's source of wisdom. He views them as an extension or continuation of the Incarnation⁴. Augustine's cardinal word is humility. For Christ “humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross” (Phil 2:8). This has implications for the Christian conduct: Christians must not be proud but humble. In Augustine's works and sermons, the letter to the Philippians is mentioned more than a thousand times. This principle of humility also affects public speaking. Christ has lowered himself and therefore *sermo humilis* (humble speech) is an appropriate means of Christian proclamation. That is why the gospel can be more believable proclaimed by a preacher

² Cf. Augustín, *O kresťanskej náuke. O milosti a slobodnej vôli*, Prešov 2004, p. 126–127.

³ Cf. W. Ryczek, „*De rhetorica christiana*” św. Augustyna: między filologią a filozofią, in: *Studia Rhetorica*, red. M. Choptiany, W. Ryczek, Kraków 2011, p. 223.

⁴ Cf. D. Vopřada, *Svatý Augustin—Vánoční promluvy*, Praha 2015, p. 25.

with a stammer than by a brilliant orator. *Sermo humilis* can use a modern method (rhetoric) to announce the old message in a new way. That is how rhetoric remains in the service of theology and Church teachings. In view of Augustine's homiletical acceptance of rhetoric, Augustine the *praedicator* differs from the orator. Although it is true for both that the speaker has a relationship with the listener, only a *praedicator* can be said to be at the same time a listener to his God. This is a new understanding of the orator, which arose from the orator's relationship to the revealed Word and its overriding power. Rhetoric will enrich the proclamation if the preacher first lets himself be filled with God's word in prayer and contemplation⁵.

Contemporary ideas

The principles codified by classical rhetoric permeate the history of public speaking. Each subsequent period has enriched them with new knowledge. Today, these principles are conveyed by the modern communication theory. This is also inspiring for preachers. Contemporary recommendations have been discussed in many publications, both scholarly and popular. For example, in a book called *Talk Like TED* by Gallo Carmine, a communication expert. TED, an acronym of the English words *Technology, Education, Design*, is the name of a renowned annual conference that has already taken place in more than 130 countries around the world. Even Pope Francis was among the speakers: he addressed the world leaders in an 18-minute lecture at the 2017 TED conference. Gallo Carmine had analysed many public speeches and, in his book, presented nine elements that determine the success of a presentation. They are divided into three categories: *emotional*, i. e. those that capture the heart, *novel*, those that teach something new, and *memorable*, which present things in a way that cannot be forgotten.

The *emotional elements* stem from the lecturer's humanity. They are characterized by zeal, storytelling, and direct address of listeners. Enthusiasm is contagious. It is hard to inspire others if you are not inspired yourself. The language of many speakers is dry because they have no

⁵ Cf. W. Engemann, *Einführung in die Homiletik*, Tübingen–Basel 2002, p. 292; D. Vopřáda, *Svatý Augustin – Vánoční promluvy*, p. 63–64.

emotional connection to their topic. People who enjoy their work are often the best speakers. Good speakers are also great storytellers. A story is information with a soul. It confirms who we are. We all want confirmation that our lives have meaning. And nothing gives us stronger confirmation than when we connect through a narrative. The listeners' hearts and minds must be captured, and this can be achieved through storytelling. Thoughts are the currency of the 21st century, and stories allow that currency to remain in circulation. The strength of narratives lies in the fact that they let the listeners see the connections that are missing from abstract instructions.

Novelty in a speech brings along something new. Our brains are trained to look for new things that are out of the ordinary. The human brain loves novelty. When people are surprised, you can provide them with information. Originality can be achieved with new perspectives, surprising utterances, as well as a sense of humour. The best teachers and speakers are always thinking about new ways of presenting information. They are looking for a fresh look at old problems. People will ask: is it unusual? If a speaker is to offer new perspectives, he must love solitude. Only in solitude can he successfully develop his creativity. If the speaker can look at his own world in a new way, he will be able to pass this view on to his listeners. The first commandment for speakers is that they should not keep saying the usual thing. The brain does not pay attention to things that are boring. If we can take someone's breath away, an "emotionally charged event" will occur. People remember intense events; they forget about mundane ones. For ideas to last, we must, in addition to surprise, spark interest and curiosity. This is the first task of communication. Our brain is adapted to enthusiastically welcome every change. The best way to get attention is to disrupt existing schemes in the minds of listeners.

The third category is *memorable*. A time limit, audio-visual aids and the speaker's character are all useful in creating a memorable presentation. TED gives speakers a time limit of 18 minutes. During this time, they should be able to convey a strong idea and keep the attention of listeners. It is the rule of 18 minutes that brings discipline into the speaker's presentation. It is intended to prevent listening anxiety. A time limit also aids creativity. The less we are allowed to talk, the more creative we

must be. The brain does not pay attention to boring things. Listeners will be moved when they feel that the speaker is ready and honest. In the first place, the aim of the speaker is not to give a speech, but to inspire listeners and give them courage. We will only convince the audience if they believe us, admire us, and love us⁶.

2. The appeal of illustration

As much as 90 per cent of our perception of the world is visual. Images infiltrate the whole human being. Anyone who listens will understand and accept more through an image than through abstract ideas. Even memory relies strongly on images. Communication theory teaches that, in the process of communication, it is necessary to involve the whole person. One must realise that the listener learns more through images, interactions, and testimonies than through abstract statements⁷.

Storytelling

Our communication equipment includes storytelling. We are familiar with the great stories of the world as well as many personal stories. Storytelling is also closely linked to the priestly ministry. After all, the whole history of salvation is woven from stories. The Old Testament is, in fact, the impressive narrative of Salvation History, which has become the essence of the profession of faith, liturgy and catechesis. Similarly, the proclamation of Christian kerygma involves telling the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is, of the events which are described in detail in the Gospels⁸. Pope Francis wrote in the encyclical *Lumen fidei*: “Israel’s confession of faith takes shape as an account of God’s deeds in setting his people free and acting as their guide (cf. Dt 26:5–11), an account passed down from one generation to the next. God’s light shines for Israel through the remembrance of the Lord’s mighty

6 Cf. C. Gallo, Hovor ako TED. 9 tajomstiev verejnej prezentácie od najlepších ročníkov z TEDx konferencií, Brno 2016; C. Health, D. Health, Jak zaujmout hned napoprvé, Praha 2009, p. 210–211.

7 Cf. J. Ehrenborg, J. Mattock, Presvědčivé vystupování, Praha 1995, p. 45–46.

8 Pápežská biblická komisia, Interpretácia Biblie v Cirkvi, Spišské Podhradie 1995, p. 47.

deeds, recalled and celebrated in worship, and passed down from parents to children. Here we see how the light of faith is linked to concrete life-stories, to the grateful remembrance of God's mighty deeds and the progressive fulfilment of his promises"⁹.

Jesus too presented his teachings in images and stories that he took from his time and environment. In his parables he speaks of farmers, shepherds, fishermen or wedding guests. He uses images to explain his mission and God's intervention in this world¹⁰. Jesus Christ teaches preachers that the most effective stories are based on the audience's own experience. Therefore, shepherds, merchants, fishermen and soldiers in Judea liked to listen to simple and comprehensible stories about people like themselves. Stories and images made Jesus accessible to listeners. He conveyed his teaching about God, about faith, not in abstract proclamations, but with the help of visual and concrete elements. Jesus' stories were his sermons. The whole Bible, especially the Old Testament and the Gospels, is nothing but a narration of Salvation History¹¹.

After the Second Vatican Council, the Church began to emphasise that anyone who works with words, especially preachers and catechists, should employ the method of storytelling or narration, as it is a part of our religious history. At the same time, narrative theology was gaining in popularity. Its goal is to bring the form of preaching as close as possible to the form of the pericope. If a substantial part of the biblical text is presented in a narrative manner, the manner of preaching should be adapted accordingly. The acts of God throughout history can only be presented and continuously updated if the form of presentation is appropriate. At the same time, the listeners gain certainty that they are listening to the authentic word of God¹².

Not only biblical but also other stories have helped listeners accept the abstract truths of God and the message of Jesus. They help us understand various divine and human implications. We need stories to get to know God and people better. If the narrative is to have a meaning for the

⁹ Francis, *Lumen fidei*, 12.

¹⁰ Cf. A. Schwarz, *Jak pracować nad kazaniem*, Warszawa 1993, p. 97–98.

¹¹ Cf. R. D. Wiedenmann, H. Schwinkendorf, H. Herzler, *Der Rhetorik-Trainer. Reden lernen für Gemeinde und Beruf*, Wuppertal 1999, p. 125–126.

¹² Cf. A. Dragula, *Kościół na rynku. Eseje pastoralne*, Warszawa 2020, p. 255–256.

listeners, it should be linked to the gist of what the preacher wants to convey, and it should have a moral appeal. If the narrative does not have these features, it does not have much value. It does not make sense to tell a story in a homily just to have a story told. If the listeners realise that it has nothing to do with the subject or the main idea of the homily, they may feel deceived. It is more appropriate to tell a story or an example after the word of God has already been explained. Storytelling connects the preacher with the audience but only when it makes sense.

According to communication theory, a good narrative should include one of three features: *challenge*, *connection*, and *creativity*. An example of challenge is the story of David and Goliath. Tiny David defeats the burly Goliath with a hand-made slingshot. A story with a challenge encourages to overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The story of the Good Samaritan can be used as an example of connection. It is a type of narrative that establishes relationships. It helps shape social behaviour. An example of creativity is the story of Zacchaeus. Jesus surprises Zacchaeus and then, at the home, Zacchaeus surprises him. This type of narrative describes unexpected turns in people's actions or surprising solutions¹³.

Even today, preachers are surrounded by many interesting stories. It only depends on them whether they can recognise and mediate them to the listeners. The effectiveness of a narrative increases when the preacher himself is carried by the story and by his narration. If the life-giving power of the story fills the preacher, then it can fill the listeners as well. Storytelling implies characteristics typical of children: astonishment, imagination, and creativity. Unfortunately, these abilities do not increase with age, quite the opposite. Constant spiritual training and intellectual effort can help the preacher so that these abilities do not die prematurely in him¹⁴.

Sometimes people ask the preacher to talk more about his life story, such as why he became a priest. It is in line with today's trends that if a person does not have their own story to tell, it is as if he or she did not even exist. If one lives as a Christian without fuss, if one faithfully fulfils

¹³ Cf. C. Health, D. Health, *Jak zaujmout hned napoprve*, p. 223–225.

¹⁴ Cf. B. Cavanaugh, *Malé příběhy*, Kostelní Vydří 2001, p. 5–8; J. Ehrenborg, J. Mattock, *Přesvědčivé vystupování*, Praha 1995, p. 46–49.

one's religious duties, if one does not advertise one's religious experiences, practically no one seems to care, except Lord God. The preacher does not have to lock himself at the ambone so that no one will know anything about him but talking about himself and his life stories should not be overdone. Above all, the listeners should be able to see that the preacher's personal story is part of the great Salvation History¹⁵.

Telling stories is one of the most difficult preaching tasks. It only has impact when it is done well. It is an art form that must be cultivated. A narrative is not a cure-all that will save any homily and captivate listeners. The listeners may not be in the mood for a specific story. It may not speak to them at all. They may find it naive or ridiculous. Some of them may be offended by it. They may not understand it. Perhaps some listeners think of the preacher as a manipulator who wants to control them by means of his story. As Jesus said in the Parable of the growing seed: "The kingdom of God is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how" (Mk 4:26–27). Nor does the preacher know how his story will affect individual listeners. However, he hopes that a good story will start growing and eventually bear fruit.

Using images and examples

Images and examples are also elements of storytelling. The difference is that a story is a more complete narration about a person or event. It involves a longer section of time. Its plot has a certain sequence. Narratives are offered to us in novels, stage plays, films, non-fiction books, fairy tales or fables. An image is a particular view of a fact or event that the speaker is describing. Some religious truths or recommendations can be better explained with an image. Images that are created by the preacher himself based on his observation and reflection increase the appeal of the homily. Examples, on the other hand, have a religious or moral message and concretize the preacher's general statement¹⁶. They also serve as rhetorical instruments, because they help the homily achieve its goal more easily.

¹⁵ Cf. A. Dragula, *Kościół na rynku. Eseje pastoralne*, p. 268.

¹⁶ Cf. R. Braun, *Umění rétoriky*, Praha 2009, p. 99–101.

That is why Pope Francis reminds the preacher:

One of the most important things is to learn how to use images in preaching, how to appeal to imagery. Sometimes examples are used to clarify a certain point, but these examples usually appeal only to the mind; images, on the other hand, help people better to appreciate and accept the message we wish to communicate. An attractive image makes the message seem familiar, close to home, practical and related to everyday life. A successful image can make people savour the message, awaken a desire, and move the will towards the Gospel. A good homily, an old teacher once told me, should have “an idea, a sentiment, an image”¹⁷.

The emphasis on illustrative elements does not mean that the homily refuses rational theology. Faith will always need intellectual and theological reflection. But first there was an image, an illustration, a biblical story, and only then did abstract dogmatics follow. A dogmatically educated preacher who is familiar with rhetorical and communicative principles will be able to preach abstract dogmatics clearly and appealingly. All illustrations are present in the homily so that the divine may touch life and life may touch the transcendent back.

3. Comprehensive language

The homiletic revival of the 20th century brought about a demand for a new language that would be close to contemporary listeners. People no longer wanted to be spoken to in the language of their ancestors. Experts in homiletics began to realise that it would be a violation of God’s word if it continued to be preached in a language that is no longer appealing to the modern man. After all, each period in history has had its language that spoke about the unchanging truths of God. The usage of language spoken by people in everyday life began to make its way into the homily. If it is true that there is no word of God without a human word, then the preacher should use a language that the listeners understand. God speaks intelligibly in the pages of the Holy Scriptures, and He wants to speak like that through the mouths of preachers as well.

¹⁷ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 157.

Pope Francis also reminds us that

simplicity has to do with the language we use. It must be one that people understand, lest we risk speaking to a void. Preachers often use words learned during their studies and in specialized settings which are not part of the ordinary language of their hearers. These are words that are suitable in theology or catechesis, but whose meaning is incomprehensible to most Christians. The greatest risk for a preacher is that he becomes so accustomed to his own language that he thinks that everyone else naturally understands and uses it¹⁸.

The language of the Bible and the language of the world

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur mentions three levels of the language of faith. The first level is the biblical language in which the Revelation was written. Second, there is the *formulaic* language of dogmatics. And finally, the *existential* language that is spoken by people every day¹⁹. Preachers should be familiar with the language of the Bible as well as the language of the world. In that way, the heritage of biblical language will not degenerate into a language of the distant past that will be only understood by a few experts. Knowledge of the language of the world, in turn, can keep the language of the Bible from mass media distortion and give it a transcendent dimension. Figuratively speaking, we must validate the biblical language with the language of the world and vice versa²⁰.

If we assume that virtue lies in the middle (*in medio virtus*), this principle can also be applied to language. It should not be over-biblical, over-dogmatic or over-worldly. The preacher should use a language that the average person understands but at the same time perceives as more beautiful and appropriate when compared to the language that is used in his or her close surroundings or in the aggressive media environment. An encouraging legacy was left by St. Augustine who spoke in the language of the people and on their cultural level: “It is better that

¹⁸ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 158.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Szymik, *Dogmatyka na ambonie*, in: *Integralne kształcenie kaznodziei*, red. W. Broński, Lublin 2006, p. 205–206.

²⁰ Cf. K. Müller, *Homiletik: ein Handbuch für kritische Zeiten*, Regensburg 1994, p. 65–66.

the grammarians should berate us than that the people should not understand us”²¹.

There are preachers in extreme positions, either those who are ashamed to speak in an intelligible language or, on the other hand, those who speak as if they had never studied theology. In recent years, a type of language has emerged that is influenced by the more emotionally charged experience of faith and uses repetitive proclamations and appeals.

Francis' language

According to some experts, the Second Vatican Council has had a significant influence on the current pope. He found that a new religious-theological language could be the key to changing the relationship between the Church and the world. Some 50 years later, Pope Francis understood that churches are empty not because the words of the Gospel are too harsh, but because the language of the Church, the Magisterium and the priests has been too far removed from people's lives:

There are times when the faithful, in listening to completely orthodox language, take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, because that language is alien to their own way of speaking to and understanding one another...This is the greatest danger²².

According to Pope Francis, a real linguistic revolution must begin. By language he means not only the verbal part but all the various means of expression: gestures, symbols, signs, and images. At the same time, by studying the language of Pope Francis, we can learn about the depth and inventiveness of his personality and his message. Francis is a prophet of the Church who believes in the power of the language of simple people, the weak, the least. It is not a word that preaches norms and rules from academic chairs, but a word that shows how to live, enriches life, and fills it with light. Francis' speech is the speech of ordinary people, full of images and examples from everyday life. It is the language of the

²¹ Cf. K. Panuś, *Zarys historii kaznodziejstwa w Kościele katolickim*, Kraków 1999, p. 91.

²² Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 41.

periphery that the preacher should step into and look at the world with new eyes. Lend a voice to those who themselves have none.

Say goodbye to the language of power. By returning to the language of the periphery, the Pope does nothing but return to the language of the Gospel. Jesus chose this language to be able to say difficult things to simple people. It is a clear, immediate, tactful, and kind language. Jesus never resorts to philosophizing. He does not try to convince listeners with sophistication. On the contrary, he uses simple familiar examples. His teaching is revolutionary, but his language is one that everyone understands.

The central concepts of Pope Francis' language are *truth*, *relationship*, and *encounter*. The Pope has understood that the transition from viewing truth as something absolute to perceiving it as a dialogue, as advanced by 20th century philosophy, is not a defeat of reason. Rather, it is the process of maturation of thought. Also referred to as *parrhesia*, it is a type of speech in which the speaker expresses his personal attitude to the truth and is even willing to risk his life because he perceives speaking the truth as his duty. Pope Francis uses the Holy Scriptures as a source of inspiration. His favourite word is *caminare*, which we find in many images of travelling, wandering, pilgrimage, or exodus. Biblical truth is a nomadic truth, that is, one whose place is not in the learned chair, but in the desert tent. Part of the concept of *caminare* is also the need to set out on a journey, i. e., to abandon one's own self: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). The truth consists of relationships, of sharing and love. While the truth of the Ancient Greeks comes through knowledge, biblical truth comes through talking, action and life itself. Truth is an act of communication. Therefore, the most important prerequisite for self-knowledge is to not close oneself in the I, but to open oneself to *thou*.

Thinking in questions is not just a didactic approach, but a philosophy of life. This can be seen in the conduct of Pope Francis: speaking and listening, and learning from both. Whoever is asking questions is already in the position of listening, searching, and doubting. It also implies that we need another person, someone who is close to us. The language of questions is the language of the world. Having doubts, asking, being a seeker is a worldly lifestyle. Although Pope Francis does not use the

word *laico* often, he is a master of this style. It expresses his respect for people of other minds. A worldly person is one who uses his mind and never lets go of his critical view of reality.

The God of Pope Francis is the God Jesus. He is the God of all, He is the God of the secular world. What is important for him is not the cult, temple, rite, but life, giving, service, washing the feet of others. Pope Francis looks at the world with the hope that it will always need giving and showing mercy²³.

Professor Roberto Vinco compiled the Decalogue of the Pope's prophetic speech. His words

- have a mind because they are thoughtful and make us think,
- have a heart because they spring from mercy and empathy and make us take them to heart,
- have eyes, because they cause awakening and view of the poor, but also ears, because they can listen to the word of the Lord and tell it to others,
- have legs and walk, because they have come from far away, go forward and are on the trail of life,
- have hands because they know how to embrace, suture wounds, and build new paths,
- have a body because they care not only about the salvation of souls, but also about the wounds and joys of this life,
- are words for the periphery which are not marginal but come from the heart of the gospel and go directly into the heart of the little ones,
- are words of courage, an alphabet of *parrhesia*, because they are not afraid to name injustice and show new heaven here on earth,
- are words of the world because they do not have the seal of holiness but are full of the breath of life,
- are words of prophecy because they contain the fire of the spirit and ignite a new hope; they are like morning light, words that are heard by the deaf and spoken by the mute²⁴.

²³ R. Vinco, *Papst Franziskus und die sprache Peripherien*, in: *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe. Das theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus*, Hrsg. K. Appel, K. Deibl, J. Helmut, Freiburg im Breisgau 2016, p. 180–192.

²⁴ R. Vinco, *Papst Franziskus und Sprache der Peripherien*, p. 193–194.

4. Simplicity and clarity

It is sometimes said that any fool can complicate things. However, a little ingenuity and a lot of courage are needed if we want to go the other way. It takes courage to maintain simplicity. Pope Francis explains:

Simplicity and clarity are two different things. Our language may be simple but our preaching not very clear. It can end up being incomprehensible because it is disorganized, lacks logical progression or tries to deal with too many things at one time. We need to ensure, then, that the homily has thematic unity, clear order and correlation between sentences, so that people can follow the preacher easily and grasp his line of argument²⁵.

Expression of love

The greatest ideas are simple ones. We often waste our lives in detail. Communication theory encourages us that our thoughts must be simple and profound at the same time. The most difficult thing is to abandon ideas that are important but not crucial. If we cannot do that, we will bury the key idea. Writer and pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote an elegant definition: “The designer knows that he has achieved perfection not when nothing can be added but when nothing can be removed”. Speakers too should know when a statement is so simple that nothing can be taken away from it, otherwise it would lose its essence. It is not only what we say that matters, but also what we do not say. When we say three things, it is as if we did not say anything. Simple sentences are better than long sentences. If someone is a specialist, they are more and more fascinated by the details and complexity of their field. This manifests itself as an effort to be accurate at the expense of intelligibility. When we know something, we tend to forget that others do not²⁶.

Gerard Siwek, a well-known Polish author of many homiletic publications, writes that preachers lead people through streams of words as if from an unreal world. Words about God, heaven, salvation, sin, grace, love, justice, mercy, heroism, damnation have little to do with our daily

²⁵ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 158.

²⁶ Cf. C. Health, D. Health, *Jak zaujmout hned napoprvé*, p. 26, 32–33.

experience. They create a miraculous world of angels and saints, or demons and human monsters. People will listen to such words, but when they leave the church, they will stop caring about them. They are like a Harry Potter story for adults. A speech can also be detached from life when it uses too many general comparisons: all—none, everyone—no one, everywhere—nowhere, still—never, friend—enemy, good—evil, believer—unbeliever, Catholic—non-Catholic, religious—secular. Or by using superlatives. Every sin is the most serious. Every danger the greatest. Every virtue the most beautiful. Every commitment is the most important. Every saint most famous. Every kind of prayer most useful²⁷.

Pope Francis encourages preachers to use positive language:

It is not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn't be done, but with suggesting what we can do better. In any case, if it does draw attention to something negative, it will also attempt to point to a positive and attractive value, lest it remain mired in complaints, laments, criticisms, and reproaches. Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity²⁸.

5. Voice and gestures

The basic instrument of the preacher is his voice. The voice is his audio visiting card. That is why he should be aware of its importance, its strengths, and weaknesses. He should ask his congregation and experts about the quality of his voice²⁹.

Acoustic event

The acoustic aspect of a language is studied by phonetics. Homily is an acoustic event. It evokes certain feelings and moods in the people who listen to it. From a theological point of view, we can say that the Holy Spirit is present in the preacher's voice. The voice has an irreplaceable role in the proclamation of God's word. The word of God is not availa-

²⁷ Cf. G. Siwek, *Blaski i cienie współczesnego przepowiadania*, Kraków 1997, p. 88–90.

²⁸ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 159.

²⁹ J. F. Finley, *Wake Up and Preach!*, New York 1986, p. 38–39.

ble in any immediate or illuminating form but is uttered through the mouths of men. In terms of substance or content, homily is the word of God, but in terms of form it is a human word. It is the word of God within a human word. In relation to the word of God, human words play a threefold role in the homily: they are its bearers, they help explain it, and they are the mediators of communication between God and man. The preacher should be grateful that his voice and words are in a unique way in the service of the word of God, that is, the Word itself.

Pope Francis says that in the homily there is a dialogue between the Lord and his people, which can be compared to a mother's conversation. This setting

should be encouraged by the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking, the joy of his gestures. Even if the homily at times may be somewhat tedious, if this maternal and ecclesial spirit is present, it will always bear fruit, just as the tedious counsels of a mother bear fruit, in due time, in the hearts of her children³⁰.

While the tone of some preachers is delicate, others have a habit of shouting. The preacher's speech must not be an attack on the eardrums. If one shouts, he seems nervous and, above all, shows his own weakness. Speaking out loud means maintaining a vocal range that the preacher has control over, can work with, and has a normal effect on the audience. To speak out loud means to be able to also speak silently. Silent preaching is not whispering but speaking at a volume that is a few decibels lower, but at the same time understood by all listeners with normal hearing. Volume changes can make the speech more appealing, interesting, and exciting. Listeners are "carried" by the preacher's pitch and feel good because they become part of the story.

Tone colour and vocal melody must also be mentioned. Everyone's voice has a certain pitch, melody, and timbre. The uniqueness of speech lies in the fact that it works not only by the composition of its words, but also by the way in which these words are spoken. It is not only what is said that matters, but also how it is said. Each preacher has a mid-

³⁰ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 140.

range tone which is the basis of his speech. The mid-range voice then develops into various modulations. These alternations are important because they prevent the preacher's expression from being monotonous. Modulation allows listeners to differentiate when the preacher speaks calmly, when he admonishes, or when he is saying something crucial. His speech has texture. The colour of the voice changes according to the message that the preacher wants to convey.

Gestures complement speech

In the past, gestures in preaching were given more attention. Before the Second Vatican Council, the gestures that were used in the liturgy, and therefore also during sermons, were strictly prescribed. To use them, celebrants had to learn them. In the past, listeners could witness expressive preaching performances of high rhetorical value with ample usage of gestures. It was the ability to combine words with gestures that made the preacher great in people's eyes.

The liturgical renewal brought about a reduction in gestures, as communication theory began calling for more natural behaviour. Standards for ideal gesticulation ceased to exist and the authenticity of statements took preference. The importance of using gestures also began to be perceived in this line. Gestures were to be a natural expression of what the preacher was experiencing internally. The principle began to prevail that too many gestures are theatrical while no gestures are boring. At the same time, gestures are as important as accents in speech. Gestures complement speech.

Gestures, like speech pace, are associated with the preacher's temperament. There are some gestures that are not particularly helpful. These are inappropriate or stereotypical gestures. For example, when the speaker keeps moving his right hand. Such behaviour can be referred to as *gestural illiteracy*. On the other hand, appropriate gestures can accentuate the impact of words and are helpful throughout the speech. They prove that words and gestures have the same origin: the mind and the heart. They express what is on in the preacher's mind and in his heart³¹.

³¹ Cf. M. Šuráb, *Aby nás radi počúvali*, Nitra 2004, p. 102–108.

The face validates the message

The Second Vatican Council fundamentally changed the position of the priest and preacher in the sacral space. He celebrates the whole liturgy facing the congregation. His face has become an important means of communication between him and the congregation. The face validates or does not validate the words spoken. All facial expressions should convey true emotions and confirm verbal statements. It would be paradoxical if, for example, a preacher spoke of friendship with God and his facial expression were hostile. If a preacher is passionate about what he is preaching, if he is convinced of its significance for the audience, his facial expressions will reflect the enthusiasm of his heart.

The employment of appropriate mimic manifestations is determined by the composition of the homily. They are different when the preacher calmly explains the Bible text, different when he is giving an example, and yet again different when he is inviting people to be united with God. There should be harmony between the preacher's words, his interior and facial expressions. Sometimes it is appropriate to "animate" one's face. In the process of nonverbal communication, bad mimic habits can become enemies. For example, a continuous frown—a so-called sad man. A motionless face. A frightened face. Open mouth. Lowered eyelids. Even in this case, technology helps the preacher see himself and then work on removing the "deposits" from his face³².

The smile is akin to mimical expression. It is a manifestation of *homo sapiens*. It is an expression of joy, contentment, happiness (even madness). With a smile, the preacher should show a state of joy in his current activity. A smile is an expression of inner peace. The famous Hasidic rabbi Levi Yitzhak was said to have had a smile that was more important than his sermons³³. Even within the content of the homily, there may be passages that require a pleasant smile. However, the preacher should never laugh uncontrollably.

There is no need to draw exaggerated conclusions about non-verbal expressions. The preacher should be familiar with the hypotheses and latest research findings in this field, provided they are verified. Non-ver-

³² Cf. H. Wenz, *Körpersprache im Gottesdienst*, Leipzig 1998, p. 27–32.

³³ Cf. T. Radcliff, *Prečo chodiť do kostola?*, Zvolen 2013, p. 82.

bal signals are only one part of the complex communication behaviour and overall human personality.

6. Length of homilies

The length of the homily is a favourite topic of homiletics experts, preachers, and lay people alike. It can be discussed from various aspects. Many lay people blame priests for lengthy preaching. It is said that in addition to the sacrifice of bread and wine, they also offer the sacrifice of listening. Experts say that a person can concentrate for only 10–15 minutes at a time, after which they switch off. Pope Francis agrees: “However, the time should be 10–15 minutes, no more”³⁴. It may not be exactly that short, but preachers should keep it in mind. In the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis wrote:

A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith. If the homily goes on too long, it will affect two characteristic elements of the liturgical celebration: its balance and its rhythm. When preaching takes place within the context of the liturgy, it is part of the offering made to the Father and a mediation of the grace which Christ pours out during the celebration... This means that the words of the preacher must be measured, so that the Lord, more than his minister, will be the centre of attention³⁵.

Long and short homilies

However, our preaching tradition has not always preferred shorter sermons or homilies. Quite the opposite. When reading the sermons of St. Augustine or St. John Chrysostom, we find them quite long. And if we consider that they are in fact stenographic records, the actual sermons were probably even longer. This tendency had lasted until the Second Vatican Council. The length of homilies varied according to social, cultural, and religious environment. Attendance at Holy Mass was con-

³⁴ Francis, Prihovory Svätého Otca Františka počas návštevy Slovenska, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cislocianku=20210916107> (19.10.2021).

³⁵ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 138.

sidered a top event. The congregation came to church from a monotonous environment and rejoiced at the celebration of Sunday. Radio broadcasting and the two existing television channels had not completely invaded their world of thought. They, too, enjoyed new information, but were not addicted to it. They were able to listen to long sermons with relative concentration. The preachers were in a comfortable position. They did not have to think much about the length of their sermons, because no one threatened them, and no one competed with them. They were not confronted with the laconism of today's media that aim to provide the most information in the shortest time possible³⁶. For the preacher, the listeners' frame of mind is a challenge. He should adapt his homilies to today's mentality, not to please people and be lenient about everything, but to proclaim God's word in a more useful way. This also applies to the length of the homily.

What is most needed

The question of homily length is not only about timing, but also about perception. A homily may be brief, but when the preacher is not prepared and says what comes to mind, such a homily may be perceived as long by the audience. It is a sign of the preacher's respect that he does not want to bother people with tedious homilies. However, if the homily is inspiring, offers appealing and profound thoughts, opens new horizons, and draws the listeners into the story, then even a longer homily can be perceived as short.

Every preacher feels that he wants to say more than time allows. This is normal. However, he should consider whether he really needs to say everything he wants to say. He should know what needs to be said in the first place and what has real value. A good idea is to create a mental catalogue, from the main idea to the less important ones. The preacher should also allow for new ideas that might come to him during the homily itself. Sometimes these turn out to be beautiful and original thoughts that are gifts from the Holy Spirit for prepared preachers.

³⁶ K. Anderson, *Half as Much is Twice as Good*, <http://www.preaching.org/halfasmuch-twiceasgood/> (15.05.2017).

Some preach as if it were their last homily in life, and they want to say everything at all costs, regardless of length. Most preachers will preach to the same congregation again the following week, and sometimes for several years. They should know that less is sometimes more. If they said half as much, they would have certainly made more impact. The congregation should receive less information and think more about it.

Disrupted harmony

Pope Francis warns preachers that a long homily disrupts the pace of the Holy Mass and the harmony between its individual parts. In practice, this means that if the homily is long, the whole Holy Mass will be long. The liturgy of the Eucharist will become a kind of pendant and the homily will remain the highlight. If Sunday Holy Mass is to last a maximum of an hour, its main parts should be about half an hour long. The liturgy of the Eucharist should not be extended either. A prolonged elevation, slow administering of the Holy Communion, scrupulous purification, a long moment of silence before dismissal can also disrupt the harmony. One of the most beautiful thoughts of the Holy Father on preaching is this: “The words of the preacher must be measured, so that the Lord, more than his minister, will be the centre of attention.” John the Baptist can be a model for preachers with his sincere declaration: “He must increase; I must decrease” (Jn 3:30). The preacher should not take Jesus’ place. He has the privilege and mission of speaking on his behalf and bring his words to life³⁷.

Conclusion

Pope Francis is very much concerned about the quality of homilies. During a pastoral visit to Slovakia (September 12–15, 2021), in the Cathedral of St. Martin in Bratislava, he spoke these words: “Priests and bishops, please think carefully about how to prepare a homily, how to make it so that you can be in touch with the people and be inspired by the biblical text”³⁸. Since the time of Benedict XV, who in 1917 published the encyc-

³⁷ M. Šuráb, *Homiliae gaudium*, Nitra 2018, p. 86–88.

³⁸ Francis, *Prihovory Svätého Otca Františka počas návštevy Slovenska*, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cisloclanku=20210916107> (19.10.2021).

lical *Humanis generis redemptionem* on the proclamation of God's word, no pope has devoted as much attention in an official document to the preaching service as Pope Francis has.

The aim of rhetoric within the homily is to help listeners get qualified explanations of specific topics, which the speaker himself considers to be relevant. Every homily should be an attempt to motivate listeners to listen—to attract their attention; to present them with valid content and its explanation; to offer impulses for action and for attitudes that correlate with God's word. Helpful in this matter are also the rhetorical recommendations of Pope Francis.

References

- Anderson K., *Half as Much is Twice as Good*, <http://www.preaching.org/halfasmuchistwiceasgood/> (15.05.2017).
- Augustin, *O kresťanskej náuke. O milosti a slobodnej vôli*, Prešov 2004.
- Braun R., *Umění rétoriky*, Praha 2009.
- Cavanaugh B., *Malé příběhy*, Kostelní Vydří 2001.
- Dragula A., *Kościół na rynku. Eseje pastoralne*, Warszawa 2020.
- Ehrenborg J., Mattock J., *Přesvědčivé vystupování*, Praha 1995.
- Engemann W., *Einführung in die Homiletik*, Tübingen–Basel 2002.
- Finley J. F., *Wake Up and Preach!*, New York 1986.
- Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*.
- Francis, *Lumen fidei*.
- Francis, *Príhovory Svätého Otca Františka počas návštevy Slovenska*, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cislocianku=20210916107> (19.10.2021).
- Gallo C., *Hovor ako TED. 9 tajomstiev verejnej prezentácie od najlepších ročníkov z TEDx konferencií*, Brne 2016.
- Health C., Health D., *Jak zaujmout hned napoprvé*, Praha 2009.
- Müller K., *Homiletik: ein Handbuch für kritische Zeiten*, Regensburg 1994.
- Panus K., *Zarys historii kaznodziejstwa w Kościele katolickim*, Kraków 1999.
- Radcliff T., *Prečo chodiť do kostola?*, Zvolen 2013.
- Ryczek W., „*De rhetorica christiana*” św. Augustyna: między filologią a filozofią, in: *Studia Rhetorica*, red. M. Choptiany, W. Ryczek, Kraków 2011, s. 211–225.
- Schwarz A., *Jak pracować nad kazaniem*, Warszawa 1993.

- Siwek G., *Blaski i cienie współczesnego przepowiadania*, Kraków 1997.
- Šuráb M., *Aby nás radi počúvali*, Nitra 2004.
- Šuráb M., *Homiliae gaudium*, Nitra 2018.
- Szymik J., *Dogmatyka na ambonie*, in: *Integralne kształcenie kaznodziei*, red. W. Broński, Lublin 2006, s. 189–209.
- Vinco R., *Papst Franziskus und die sprache Peripherien*, in: *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe. Das theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus*, Hrsg. K. Appel, K. Deibl, J. Helmut, Freiburg im Breisgau 2016.
- Vopřada D., *Svatý Augustin — Vánoční promluvy*, Praha 2015.
- Wenz H., *Körpersprache im Gottesdienst*, Leipzig 1998.
- Wiedenmann R. D., Schwinkendorf H., Herzler H., *Der Rhetorik-Trainer. Reden lernen für Gemeinde und Beruf*, Wuppertal 1999.

