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Expounding the Teachings of Faith in Sermons

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Abstract

Across the range of sermon topics, doctrinal tenets holds a special place and importance due to the fact that Christian life is based on the belief in the true God, the Creator and Provider of the world, Who through his Incarnate Son is also the world's Saviour. The crucial importance of Orthodox doctrine for the Orthodox worship and for Church spirituality account for the exceptional importance of sermons with dogmatic content, which must influence all other types of sermons delivered in the Church. The truths revealed by God and formulated by the Church inform not only the relationship between man and God, but also the relationships among people; each devout Christian must receive, keep and communicate these tenets to his fellow people, in view of acquiring shared spiritual and moral progress. Relating a sermon with doctrinal to the treasury of divine Revelation is not a choice of the preacher, but it constitutes his primordial obligation.

Keywords

dogmatic sermons, communication, doctrinal truths, Revelation, Church preaching

Homiletics research has made significant strides over the last 30 years, and sermon topics have been investigated and analyzed by the field's specialists. The extensive academic investigations conducted by Rev. Prof. Nicușor Beldiman reveal that the proportion of Dogmatic Theology

issues among the other topics in the 20th-century preaching in Wallachia amounted to 34%, ranking second after the Moral Theology topics, which amount to 38%¹. This demonstrates the importance attached by priests to sermons as means for expounding the doctrine, in view of a thorough catechization of the faithful, who must know, confess and defend the Church's teachings of the faith.

The subject-matters addressed by sermons are remarkably diverse, and generally highly topical and relevant to Church life and mission. Preaching has maintained this characteristic throughout the history of the Christian Church, as hierarchs and priests constantly tapped into the Saviour's preaching, His Sermon on the Mount, the parables He told, all centered around the Kingdom of Heaven and the redemption of mankind. In its turn, our Saviour's preaching was anticipated and foreshadowed by the preaching of Old Testament prophets, addressing: "belief in one God and avoiding idolatry and autolatry; observing the Law as foundation for the moral and spiritual life; preparation for the salvation to be brought about by the coming of the Messiah"². Not surprisingly, Father professor Galeriu, cited above, ranked "belief in one God" first among the predilect themes of prophets' preaching, due to the unique importance of the doctrinal truth, or truth of the faith, revealed in the Holy Scripture, from which derive all other dogmatic and moral teachings. To this day, these two types of topics (dogmatic and moral) are predominant in preaching, and their importance and significance are essential to the spiritual life of the faithful.

The principle of thematic diversity is evinced, first and foremost, by the Saviour's speeches, which address all aspects of faith and equally, all dimensions of Christian moral life. Subsequently, the Holy Apostles observed this principle also, calling all people in their addresses or Gospel preaching, to learn the Christian teachings and change their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. Similarly the Holy Fathers, in their writings and sermons, stressed that the entire patrimony of Christian doctrine has to be passed down, relayed without any omissions or distortions, so that it

¹ Rev. Nicușor BELDIMAN, *Predica în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Muntenia în secolul al XX-lea. Analiză și evaluare [Preaching in the Romanian Orthodox Church of 20th-Century Wallachia. Analysis and Assessment]*, second edition, Ed. Universitatii din Bucuresti/Bucharest University Press, 2017, Appendix, p. 527.

² Rev. prof. Constantin GALERIU, "Preoția ca slujire a Cuvântului [Priesthood as Ministry of the Word]", in: *Ortodoxia*, XXI (1979) 2, p. 298.

may bear fruit and have positive consequences on the listeners. Drawing a comparison with medical art, St John Chrysostom stated that the priests do not possess various instruments or medicines as physicians do, but instead

“have only one means, one method of healing: sermon preaching, teaching by means of words. This has to work as medicine, as cauterization, as scalpel. If a priest needs to burn, or cut, he necessarily has to use the sermon (...) By preaching we comfort the souls fallen into despair; by preaching we humble conceited souls; by preaching we cut off what is unbecoming; by preaching we complete what is lacking; by preaching we accomplish what is needed to heal the soul”³.

These guidelines provided by St John Chrysostom were followed by hierarchs and priests in choosing the subject matter of their sermons, taking inspiration from the Holy Scripture or the Holy Fathers’ writings, obviously updating the evangelical message and making it accessible to the audience.

The example provided above explains why the topics most frequently addressed in today’s preaching are the moral and dogmatic theology ones. Statistically, they are followed in order by: missionary topics (11%), biblical topics (9%), historical topics (5%) and liturgical topics (3%)⁴. Within every thematic category, there is a very great number of specific themes which clearly do not cover all possible topics to be addressed in a sermon. Suffice it to look at the innumerable challenges raised by today’s culture, science and civilization – challenges the Church has to manage and overcome, to the benefit of the faithful – and we will appreciate how each thematic area can be extended today, and especially in the future, by those tasked with expounding through preaching the tenets of Christian faith and ethics.

Christian life is centred on belief in the true God, the Creator and Provider of the world, Who through His Incarnate Son became its Saviour. This is why the eminent professor of Homiletics, rev. prof. Grigore Cristescu stated:

³ Rev. prof. Constantin GALERIU, “Preoția ca slujire a Cuvântului”, pp. 307-308.

⁴ Rev. Nicușor BELDIMAN, *Predica în Biserica Ortodoxă Română din Muntenia în secolul al XX-lea*, Appendix, p. 527.

“Christian life is communion with God, belief in Jesus Christ. The believer becomes a new creature by grace. Divine grace helps the faithful believe in God and love Him. Once the faithful believe in God and love God, they will keep His commandments and observe them eagerly (...) Man’s will is in agreement with God’s will. Man becomes God’s fellow worker for his own salvation and the salvation of others”⁵.

In other words, God is permanently present in Christian life, hence the imperative need for man to know the Orthodox faith and lead a righteous, virtuous life based on its commandments. Since the Church’s faith is grounded in supernatural divine Revelation, it is the Church’s duty to expound, permanently and accurately, the unchanged and authentic content of the divine Revelation, which underlies man’s communion or relationship with God. The same author adds:

“The revealed truth is actualized in every believer, or it becomes actualizable, real, present and active in the soul of the one receiving it. However, it remains abstract and inefficient for those who are unresponsive to its light. Sermon preaching is the perpetual actualization of the divine Revelation. Therefore sermon preaching permanently turns to faith and abides by its essential imperatives. The sermon, as expression of the preacher’s personal conviction and religious experience, ought to inspire personal convictions and religious experiences of the listeners”⁶.

The relation between preaching and the divine Revelation is clearly defined and explained in these statements, which aim to incentivize the preacher and raise his awareness of the fact that sermons must convey certitudes of the faith, based on genuine religious experiences, not on mere pieces of information about religious life. The preacher’s spiritual expertise is directly proportional to the listeners’ likeliness to succeed,

⁵ Rev. prof. Grigore CRISTESCU, “Revelație, dogmă și predică [Revelation, Dogma, Sermon]”, in: *Studii Teologice*, VI (1954) 3-4, p. 127.

⁶ Rev. G. CRISTESCU, “Revelație, dogmă și predică”, p. 128.

through faith strengthened by sermon, in gaining some spiritual expertise, enabling them to nurture and deepen their own spiritual-moral experience.

The place which Church's revealed teachings of the faith must hold in the mind and life of the faithful is similar to the place held by light in everyday life: without it, we would be unable to see and comprehend the things around us. Thus,

“just as sunlight enters all dwellings, so must dogmatic gnosis (knowledge) pervade all souls, by means of the three ministries of the Church: catechesis, preaching, and liturgical worship. It must be embodied in the preacher and in every listener. Truth serves man, not itself. It must become an energy of the human spirit, the substance of life, the expression of man's personality and its transfiguration both in spiritual life and in everyday concrete life”⁷.

In a study centered on the ways of presenting in sermons the Orthodox postulates on salvation, rev. prof. Sebastian Chilea enumerates a number of prerequisites. He points out that

“the preacher must first define the Christological horizon. This is the fundamental, central dogma of the Church. The horizon of the faithful can be broadened proportionally with the horizon covered by the sermon. This does not necessarily mean that the sermon must expound particularly complex theological and historical information. The religious horizon, religious insight is not offered by sermons abounding in erudite facts, or data, presented to the listeners (...) This horizon is given by the vivid, attractive quality of the speech, regardless of the topic it dwells on (...) A vast horizon is especially necessary to sermons addressing the dogma of salvation”⁸.

⁷ Rev. G. CRISTESCU, “Revelație, dogmă și predică”, p. 128.

⁸ Rev. Sebastian CHILEA, “Cum poate fi prezentată în predici învățătura ortodoxă despre mântuire [How to Expound in Sermons the Orthodox Doctrine on Salvation]”, in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, LXXVI (1958) 9, p. 878.

This is a warning to the preachers preparing sermons centered on Church dogmas: a sermon should not be turned into a scholarly, academic discourse strewn with countless facts or doctrinal formulations that cannot be easily grasped and understood by lay listeners. On the contrary, a dogmatic sermon should first create a horizon of expectation, the horizon of the history of salvation, so that the teachings of the faith do not stand alone and remain virtually inaccessible to the audience, but are anchored in the Person of the Incarnate Son of God, One Person of the Trinity, Who brought people's salvation through His sacrifice on the Cross.

Although only the Logos of God the Father, obeying the Father and out of love for the mankind, became incarnate in order to save us, the Christological dogma cannot be separated from the Trinitarian dogma, because "as the Church teaches, salvation is the joint work of the Three Trinitarian Persons"⁹. Therefore a sermon on a Christological topic should be integrated in a broader theological horizon provided not only by the revealed history of salvation, but also by the dogma of the Holy Trinity, which explains to the audience the defining trait of Christian religion: the doctrine of the Triune Godhead – of one essence, but in three Persons. The Trinitarian character of God reveals Godhead as the source of infinite love and goodness, imparted to and bestowed upon the creatures made in God's image.

To complete the Christological content communicated in a sermon, the same author recommends that the preacher make balanced use of a number of absolutely necessary sources: the Holy Scripture, the Holy Fathers, dogmatic formulations, liturgical texts, as well as writings of religious authors¹⁰. Only by tapping into all these Church sources, can the preacher provide a dogmatic sermon able to enlighten the mind and warm the hearts of the faithful. Regarding the importance and significance of sermons with dogmatic content to the Church members, rev. prof. Grigore Cristescu calls priests to be completely faithful to the revealed text of the Scripture, based on which the Ecumenical Councils have formulated the dogmas of our faith. He states:

⁹ Rev. Sebastian CHILEA, "Cum poate fi prezentată în predici învățătura ortodoxă despre mântuire", p. 880.

¹⁰ Rev. S. CHILEA, "Cum poate fi prezentată în predici învățătura ortodoxă despre mântuire", pp. 880-884.

“It is the right of the faithful to listen to the teachings of the Holy Gospel as they were defined, essentialized and rendered in the vivid formulations of its dogmas by the Church, whose children we are. We are not entitled to preach otherwise, but only proclaim the Church’s belief and confession of the faith”¹¹.

The crucial importance of Orthodox doctrine for the Orthodox worship and for Church spirituality account for the exceptional importance of sermons with dogmatic content, which must influence all other types of sermons delivered in the Church. The truths revealed by God and formulated by the Church inform not only the relationship between man and God, but also the relationships among people; each devout Christian must receive, keep and communicate these tenets to his fellow people, in view of achieving shared spiritual and moral progress.

Relating a sermon with doctrinal to the treasury of divine Revelation is not a free choice of the preacher, but it constitutes his primordial obligation, as demonstrates the author quoted above:

“A sermon must integrate, in its very substance, the divine Revelation as fundamental tenet of the Church. Preaching is an instrument of divine Revelation. The Old Testament prophets, St John the Baptist, our Saviour Jesus Christ did preach. Moreover, sermons contain the revelation itself – as content and essence, and in the form in which it is believed, affirmed, confessed and experienced in the Church”¹².

This quote shows that it is mandatory that any sermon reflect accurately and fully the gist of our revealed faith, and sermons having a dogmatic subject matter should reflect to a higher degree the revealed foundation of all tenets in the Orthodox Church’s doctrine. The commandment given by Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples, before His ascension to Heaven, “Go therefore, and teach all nations...” (Matthew 28,19), highlights the primordial imperative to expound to all those who believe and are baptized, the contents of the Revelation, centered around the Trinitarian dogma.

A reputable professor of Catechetics, rev. Sorin Cosma, states:

¹¹ Rev. prof. Grigore CRISTESCU, “Revelație, dogmă și predică”, p. 128.

¹² Rev. G. CRISTESCU, “Revelație, dogmă și predică”, p. 129.

“This commandment of the Lord to the Apostles and their disciples, as well as the entire Christian Church throughout the centuries, has instituted a principle of the faith and spiritual life. The Holy Apostle Peter showed in his speech on the Pentecost day that «God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear» (Acts 2, 32-33). Similar statements regarding the Holy Trinity are made by the Apostle John: «For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit: and these three are one»» (I John 5, 4)”¹³.

Therefore, by addressing the revealed tenets of the faith in their sermons, priests follow Christ’s commandment and expound the Orthodox teachings on God - the Holy Trinity, which underlie and are at the core of all Christian teachings and of the entire ecclesiastical life.

By communicating the Revelation through sermons with dogmatic content, the priest becomes an apostle of Christ – the Incarnate Word of God, and an instrument of the Holy Spirit, Who inspired the prophets and evangelists, because the Holy Spirit helps the listeners comprehend and assimilate the content of the Revelation. Therefore we must acknowledge that

“the sermon itself must be a revelation of the revealed truth. The elements of doctrine should not be presented in an anorganic, impersonal, abstract, rigid, purely scholastic, academic manner, but should be transfigured by a faith fervently embraced by the preacher. The sermon’s role is to make dogmatic truth accessible and comprehensible, to dilute its density – so to say, to attenuate its strictly geometric character. It must achieve the psychological connection between faith and its doctrinal substance, the objective truth of the Revelation”¹⁴.

¹³ Rev. prof. Sorin COSMA, “Sfânta Treime [The Holy Trinity]”, in: *Glasul Bisericii*, L (1991) 4-6, p. 38.

¹⁴ Rev. prof. Grigore CRISTESCU, “Revelație, dogmă și predică”, p. 129.

The paramount importance attached by rev. prof. Grigore Cristescu, quoted above, to the personalist or experimental mode of expounding doctrinal elements through sermon sheds light on the aim pursued by sermons with dogmatic content: creating a direct, personal relationship between the faithful and the One preached about in the Gospels and sermons – Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Father prof. Constantin Galeriu describes this unique relation achieved through knowledge and experience in the following terms:

“The sermon’s role is to explain all the acts in the Saviour’s life, culminating with His Sacrifice and Resurrection. As the Lord did, the Holy Evangelists also point out that the Lord constantly revealed Himself through words, for instance: as Son of God incarnate, Son of God and Son of Man; as the Messiah, who fulfilled all Old Testament prophecies; as Redeemer; as Saviour through His Crucifixion and Resurrection, etc. (...) Word and mystery are thus identified in Christ. This is why the Lord stated that His life is equally imparted through His words and His body: «He that hears My word and believes on Him that sent Me, has everlasting life...» (John 5, 24). And, «Whosoever eat My flesh and drinks My blood, has eternal life...» (John 6, 54)”¹⁵.

The equivalence between the power of Saviour’s divine word, and the power of His crucified and resurrected Body, identified by the aforementioned author, indicates the value of His preaching which has a soteriological character and lays the groundwork for Church preaching by means of sermons and catecheses, among which those with dogmatic content hold an essential place in expounding the tenets of the faith. This is the only way to achieve, in the life of the faithful who are regularly nurtured by the sermons, a genuine and lasting moral-spiritual transformation – when the preaching is accompanied, on major feasts, by communion with the Holy Eucharist. Father Galeriu very pertinently defines the dynamics of personal salvation as relation between Word and Mystery, both stemming from the Person of Saviour Jesus Christ, Who imparts to the faithful, through the priest’s ministry,

¹⁵ Rev. prof. Constantin GALERIU, “Preoția ca slujire a Cuvântului”, p. 310.

“a holy, ineffable symbiosis between Word and Mystery in the pursuit of salvation - «the washing of water by the word», as the Holy Apostle Paul says (Ephesians 5, 26), so that the vessel thus cleansed can receive Christ in the Eucharist, so that «Christ be formed in you» (Galatians 4,19)”¹⁶.

The importance of the dogmatic content of the sermon makes it necessary for sermons on different topics (moral, missionary, liturgical, etc.) to include a dogmatic component, which is fundamental to Church spirituality, worship and mission, and also firmly, indubitably grounds these sermons in the Revelation.

According to Father prof. Constantin Galeriu, the relevance of sermons with dogmatic content also derives from their ultimate goal, namely union with Lord Jesus Christ through His words “full of grace and truth” (John 1, 14), and explained by the priest. And the words of the Gospel are the edifying words of the Saviour, which He brings from the Father and through which He imparts divine grace and everlasting life, revealing as Son the words of the Father (John 7, 16) Who is in Him.

“These words pour forth from their genuine source, from His divine-human life, in order to provide answers to the questions raised by our lives, like living water which becomes in those receiving it «a well of water springing up into everlasting life» (John 4, 14). Consequently the receivers become, in the Holy Spirit, not mere communicating vessels, or mere ducts, but each of them becomes a source, a life carrying «grace upon grace», and engendering lives in its turn”¹⁷.

In other words, when priests preach the revealed dogmas of the Church, they are not merely relaying certain notions, but like the Apostles, they present to their listeners the veridical image of the Person of Incarnate Son of God, certifying through their theological knowledge and their moral life that they are disciples of Christ and witnesses to His Resurrection. Along

¹⁶ Rev. C. GALERIU, “Preoția ca slujire a Cuvântului”, p. 311.

¹⁷ Rev. prof. Constantin GALERIU, “Mântuitorul Iisus Hristos – Învățătorul nostru suprem [Saviour Jesus Christ – Our Supreme Teacher]”, in: *Ortodoxia* journal, XXXV (1983) 1, p. 34.

this line of thought, Father Galeriu deems that the spiritual-moral power and authority of a sermon's words is derived from the power and authority of Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Logos of God the Father, therefore the dogmatic content of a sermon must be received and accepted without reservations, without doubts. "In this capacity as Son and Word of the Father, as bearer and conveyor of the full «grace and truth», as creator of apostles and disciples who are «living stones» in the edifice of the Church, He is also the One Teacher: «you have One Teacher» (Matthew 23, 8)"¹⁸

Another characteristic trait of sermons with doctrinal content, which can certainly be appropriated and employed by sermons on different topics, is the revealed truth by which we know that the Person of Lord Jesus Christ and His entire redeeming ministry are always related to the Person of the Father and the Person of the Holy Spirit, that is the Most Holy Trinity – the source of life for the world and mankind.

The Incarnate Son of God reveals the Trinity, fulfills the will of the Father and imparts the Holy Spirit to the people; consequently, any teaching conveyed through sermon, regardless of the latter's genre or topic, must be grounded in the Trinitarian dogma and demonstrate that the Heavenly Kingdom we strive for is the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity.

"Jesus Christ, Father Galeriu states, is sent into the world precisely in order to reveal and make known, from its very source, the life and salvific love of the Most Holy Trinity. He declares clearly: «I speak that which I have seen with my Father» (John 8, 38). He brings the model, the archetype of unity, the divine mode in which the Trinity is also Oneness; consequently at human level, plurality must at the same time be unity and harmony (...) By uniting everything in Himself – Godhead and humanity, Christ unites but does not limit; instead He opens up and embraces. His mission is to bestow, to introduce a divine-human life into our lives, to re-center our lives around the life of the Holy Trinity"¹⁹.

Father Galeriu's statements emphasize the permanent topicality and relevance of expounding the tenets of the faith through sermon, starting from its core tenet: the Holy Trinity dogma, with the missionary purpose

¹⁸ Rev. C. GALERIU, "Mântuitorul Iisus Hristos – Învățătorul nostru suprem", p. 34.

¹⁹ Rev. C. GALERIU, "Mântuitorul Iisus Hristos – Învățătorul nostru suprem", pp. 39-40.

of strengthening the unity of the faithful and the Church according to the model of Trinitarian communion.

The unifying effect the Trinitarian doctrine on the life of local communities as well as the Church as a whole, are reiterated by the same author in the following terms:

“The Triune God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveal in Christ’s preaching the ineffable divine communion, by which, originally and eternally, the Trinity is unity and institutes the ultimate model of harmony between the uniqueness of every human person and the unity of all, by partaking of the spirit of Trinitarian life, with shared origin and purpose, which essentially means: existence in life-giving life. For love, creation and goodness define our human vocation”²⁰.

The above considerations clearly demonstrate the advantage of including in sermons – beside the central topic which is presented at length and researched extensively - , other secondary topics which have their own importance and role: to support the argumentation of the main topic, to illustrate it and explain it in a more attractive and persuasive way. Such presentation will successfully avoid a unilateral view on the issue under discussion, provide a broader theological and pastoral-missionary framework in which the message conveyed becomes more accesible, more attractive and more convincing to the audience, and the moral-spiritual conclusions have a more profound impact on their souls. We should keep in mind that the Saviour Himself, while preaching, would not only quote the prophets and the Old Law, but also the history of the chosen people, and various parables borrowed from the Judaic culture, in order to explain truths He revealed and centered around the Kingdom of Heaven. Subsequently, the Holy Fathers employed their extensive philosophical knowledge and the entire culture of the Antiquity in order to render the Gospel message in a comprehensible manner, accessible to the churchgoers of all walks of life.

²⁰ Rev. C. GALERIU, “Mântuitorul Iisus Hristos – Învățătorul nostru suprem”, p. 60.