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THE HOMILY IN THE EYES OF THE YOUTH: THE PROBLEM OF SYMMETRY. A SOCIOLOGICAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

The article discusses the category of symmetry. As a linguistic category, it is mainly studied in the context of 'linguistic politeness'. In textual studies, symmetry defines the shape of an utterance. In the process of communication, symmetry helps prevent differences between the subjects regarding their professional status, different social position or knowledge levels. The sociological studies (survey data from ca. 1 400 participants) show the urgent need to apply symmetry in homiletics as a response to various shortcomings of the process of exchanging thoughts during liturgy. Symmetry in sermons should be achieved in a twofold manner: 1. by maintaining the dialogical structure of the sermon; 2. by precisely defining the *questio* of the homily.

Keywords: qualitative research, homily, communication, sociology of religion, symmetry, text

HOMILIA W OPINII MŁODZIEŻY. PROBLEM SYMETRYCZNOŚCI WYPOWIEDZI W ANALIZIE SOCJOLOGICZNEJ I TEKSTOLOGICZNEJ

Abstrakt

W artykule opisana jest kategoria tzw. symetryczności. Jako zjawisko o typologii lingwistycznej zagadnienie to pojawia się przede wszystkim w badaniach nad grzecznością językową. W refleksji ściśle tekstologicznej symetryczność odpowiada za określoną konstrukcję wypowiedzi. Dzięki niej w procesie komunikacji można zapobiegać różnicom pomiędzy porozumiewającymi się podmiotami. Rozbieżności te mogą dotyczyć statusu społecznego lub zawodowego rozmówców, ich zróżnicowanej hierarchii społecznej czy zasobów wiedzy, jakimi dysponują. Konieczność aplikowania opisywanego narzędzia w homiletyce wynika przede wszystkim z przeprowadzonych badań socjologicznych (zebranych zostało blisko 1,4 tys. ankiet). Wyniki prezentują bowiem szereg braków w procesie wymiany myśli, jaki powinien dokonywać się w czasie liturgii. W przypadku homilii osiągnięcie

symetryczności zostanie zaprezentowane w następującym porządku: Po pierwsze w odniesieniu do zachowania dialogiczności struktury głoszonego słowa, po drugie w możliwie precyzyjnym określeniu tzw. *questio* homilii.

Słowa kluczowe: badania jakościowe, homilia, komunikacja, socjologia religii, symetryczność, tekst

INTRODUCTION

Reflection symmetry, translational symmetry or actinomorphic symmetry – these are various kinds of symmetry in mathematics and biology. However, the category of symmetry is also used in architecture, urban planning or chemistry. Interestingly, ‘symmetry’ appears also in linguistic studies, including textual linguistics, a field that has been developing since the mid-twentieth century. It is in textology, that is a study of rules of language construction beyond the boundaries of a sentence, that the Greek category of *συμμετρία* may be applied. Accordingly, ‘measure’ and ‘proportional construction’ pose an opportunity to make a proper utterance. Consequently, symmetry may be a useful tool also in homiletics.

Our aim is to give a clear instruction on how to prepare a homily as far as its content is concerned. We assume that preaching during liturgy should be symmetrical: ‘the measure’ of the sermon should respond to the needs of a given audience. The empirical studies, which reveal multiple observations regarding preaching (ca. 1400 completed questionnaires), are the starting point for our analysis. As a response, we propose a specific textual tool for those who write homilies.

The article has the following structure: 1. We discuss the sociological study conducted, its method and designated target audience, and explain the categorization adopted. 2. We show the results of the research and discuss issues that result from the answers given in the questionnaires. The answers will be divided into sets according to the problem they raise (which means grouping them according to a specific semantic key). As a result, it will be possible to suggest a precise tool to be used while preparing a sermon. 3. We will describe the meaning of symmetry in ‘the exchange of thoughts’ between subjects. Then, in the practical section of our study, we will show the homily as a kind of speech which should include symmetry (4). In order to achieve it, the homily should have an adequate dialogical structure (4.1.). Moreover, it should have a precisely defined *questio* (4.2.).

1. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The empirical study presented below was conducted from the 1st to 12th June 2020. It was the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, which influenced the way the study was carried out. Secondary school students were asked to complete the online questionnaire ‘Ksiądz w świadomości polskiej młodzieży 2020 r.’ (The Priest in the Eyes of the Polish Youth in 2020; Adamczyk 2020) which consisted of 25 questions, both open-ended and closed-ended. They mainly concerned

clergymen, the way they run their functions and perform their duties. Additionally, the questions concerned religiousness and morality of the young respondents. It was purposeful sampling. The questionnaire was available at Google and the link to it was sent to students with the approval of their headmasters, teachers and various educational institutions. 1396 completed questionnaires came from 15 voivodeships (except the Lubusz Voivodeship). The average time of filling in the questionnaire was ca. 30 minutes. 746 women (53,4%) and 650 men (46,7%) took part in the study. These were: high school students (47,3%), technical schools students (39,9%) and students of vocational schools of the 1st and 2nd degree (12,8%). Among them, 82,1% attend religion classes and 17,9% do not. Almost half of the respondents live in rural areas (42,3%), almost every third respondent (32,0%) lives in a town with a population up to 100 000 (32,0%), and every fourth respondent (25,6%) lives in a city with a population over 100 000. The study as a whole makes it possible to formulate a number of conclusions. We will focus only on one aspect of the study, i.e. giving sermons.

2. THE RESULTS OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The subject of our sociological analysis is the question: 'What do you dislike most in the homilies you hear?' (Adamczyk 2020, 164-174). It was an open-end question, i.e. the respondents could answer freely. Thus very rich data for analysis was collected – over 50 pages of diverse opinions about the homily. It is worth emphasizing that the youth did not evaluate it only negatively, but enumerated its positive elements as well. The collected data was grouped into ten thematic categories. The answers given most often are in the following three categories: 'I don't know' or 'It is hard to say' (26,9%); 'the priest's aggressiveness while preaching the homily' or 'lack of tolerance' (17,7%); and '[raising] political issues' (15,3%). Significantly, a number of respondents did not know what the homily was (33 interviewees admitted this explicitly).

The above categories will now be differentiated with independent variables (gender, type of school, place of residence, participation in religion classes). 'Gender' is the independent variable which significantly statistically differentiated four categories of answers. The girls more often than boys pointed to the lack of acceptance, tolerance and aggressiveness in the homilies (21,2% to 13,7%; $p = 0,0001$, Cramér's $V = 0,097$)¹. Also, they emphasized the inappropriate language

¹ For the above statistical analysis the chi-square test was used which helps determine the association between the analyzed variables on the basis of the frequency distribution of responses. Cramér's test was used to show the strength of this association. We describe only these independent variables which, correlated with the dependent variables, had a significant statistical association confirmed by chi square i.e. $p \leq 0,05$. The strength of the association between the independent and the dependent variables, determined by the Cramér's test, can be read individually with the following ranges of values: 0-0,2 – very weak association, 0,2-0,4 – weak association, 0,4-0,6 – moderate association, 0,6-0,8 – strong association, 0,8-1 – very strong association.

used (8,6% to 4,5%; $p = 0,002$, Cramér's $V = 0,082$). The boys more often than the girls spoke positively about the homilies (12,2% to 8,2%; $p = 0,012$, Cramér's $V = 0,067$). However, they also admitted: 'I don't go to church, I don't listen to homilies' (12,2% to 7,4%; $p = 0,002$, Cramér's $V = 0,082$).

The 'type of school' was the variable which most often and substantively differentiated the interviewees. The students of vocational schools spoke positively about the homilies more often than the students of technical schools and high schools (15,6%, 10,8%, 7,9%; $p = 0,006$, Cramér's $V = 0,085$). The latter, on the other hand, more often found the homilies boring (10,5%, 9,7%, 6,2%; $p = 0,027$, Cramér's $V = 0,072$). They also criticized raising political issues (19,7%, 12,2%, 8,4%; $p = 0,0001$, Cramér's $V = 0,122$), deviating from the topic (5,0%, 2,0%, 1,1%; $p = 0,0001$, Cramér's $V = 0,126$) and showing lack of tolerance or aggressiveness (22,0%, 15,4%, 8,9%; $p = 0,0001$, Cramér's $V = 0,117$). The independent variable 'place of residence' did not exert any statistically significant influence on any category, which is also symptomatic. As for the independent variable 'participation in religion classes,' two categories are significantly differentiated: students who attend religion classes, more frequently than those who do not, disapprove of the length of sermons (11,1% to 4,4%; $p = 0,008$, Cramér's $V = 0,071$). The higher rate of the answer 'I don't listen, I don't go to church' refers to students who do not participate in religion classes (20,0% to 7,3%; $p = 0,0001$, Cramér's $V = 0,163$).

We are going to quote verbatim certain remarks of the respondents regarding preaching the word of God. They play a crucial role in our study. Intolerance and aggressiveness are the flaws most often condemned by the youth (17,7%). It is the criticism and exclusion of non-heteronormative people that the young are especially sensitive to: 'Intolerance towards people who are not like the ideal of a Christian (LGBTQ+ and people who «shack up»), the sermons are dull, they do not convey any values. The Church will start functioning, when she starts to adhere to her own guidance: let us be charitable and understanding;)' 'we are told to respect our neighbor while [they] humiliate people of a different faith, skin color and sexual orientation;' 'the fact that immediately after reading the Word of God, there is stigmatizing and referring to homosexuality, abortion and other issues which are irrelevant;' 'I think that those who give sermons should not impose their views on the faithful. I don't like it when other people, because of their sexual orientation, are excluded from the community, or when hatred towards them is publicly expressed. Thus the Church becomes a place where many people don't feel secure - because of the opinions of some clergy/priests who are supposed to lead us toward God, they feel inferior, unloved and rejected by God;' 'I hate it when people who are not heterosexual are spoken ill of. Why do you despise us? Every human being is different. Heterosexual people and those who go to church often sin more. Moreover, they do not have any respect for others. Jealousy, avarice - unfortunately, these are the traits of many people, even heterosexual or pseudo-believers. I also hate it when politics is discussed during sermons. The Church

should not be allowed to refer to it;’ ‘supporting PiS [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, ‘Law and Justice’ party]², siege mentality which is unwarranted in the case of the Polish reality; dehumanizing other people e.g. homosexuals (I understand that homosexuality is thought to be a sin. However, [the Church] should reach out to them, and not call them *pest*);’ ‘discussing homosexuality, in-vitro fertilization, politics, contraception, abortion and other ideological issues during sermons. Using this for little coaxing. The argumentation leaves no choice: either you stand by the Church or you are out while your eternal salvation is at stake.’

The youth who took part in the study also pointed to the language full of hatred and aggressive attitude toward people who think differently or certain groups. This was evaluated as improper in the Church - a potential source of social conflicts and divisions: ‘The faithful may mistake and misinterpret it (which may sometimes be the intention), which may give rise to socio-political conflicts;’ ‘Interfering in political matters and expressing one’s private opinions on controversial and divisive issues (such as faith, sexual orientation etc.);’ ‘sharing one’s political views which are thus imposed (and not every Christian belongs to the same political party). Preaching that we are equal and then humiliating people of, for example, different orientation. They are God’s children as well, and as such they deserve to be respected. Instead, we can hear words which encourage intolerance or stigmatize people because they are «different».’

The young have spoken in a similar vein about the hate speech and perpetuation of stereotypes: ‘Absurdities like: feminists are Satan (from experience);’ ‘talking politics and (latent) hate speech against people who have nothing to do with the Church;’ ‘they contain negative overtones as far as a certain group of people is concerned;’ ‘when difficult terminology is used, when the homilies insult people; talking politics, money and complaining about the decline of faith in the parish, about lack of money for construction, for paying for the energy etc. If the sermon is read, you can sense boredom and lack of enthusiasm;’ ‘long sermons ‘about nothing’, talking politics, ridiculing and pouncing on people who think or dress in a different way; saying things which are inconsistent with the Church’s teaching;’ ‘bringing up political, ideological etc. threads thus going too far afield; stereotypes, judging and tagging people.’

The young respondents have also found lack of empathy and oppressive, purely negative teaching to be aggressive: ‘threatening instead of positive message;’ ‘preaching only negative vision of our life on earth;’ ‘emphasizing only the sins that people commit; little focus on charity and tolerance of one’s neighbor;’ ‘voicing grievances against people for everything.’ The youth also seem repulsed by the lack of considerateness and empathy: ‘The priest gives as an example people he knows and their issues. However, they would not like to reveal these issues;’ ‘during a homily the priest tells the parishioners that they do not go to church, or divides them: «those in the vestibule have apparently come to stand by». In my opinion,

² Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] is the right-wing ruling party in Poland.

if someone came to church, then, even if they stand outside, they must have had some inspiration or good intentions;’ ‘public pouncing on people, emphasizing their faults and mocking them;’ ‘lack of understanding for certain people. Their behavior may result from difficult situations of e.g. personal character of which priests haven’t got a clue.’

The preacher’s self-exaltation and superiority is yet another trait that has been badly received: ‘Setting oneself as a noble example (I experienced this rarely, though this helps you to see quite swiftly whether this is his vocation or ‘profession’);’ ‘putting oneself as a role model;’ ‘showing superiority over the people;’ ‘I don’t like it when they repeat the same thing over and over again, and when they talk to people: «you are not allowed» etc. The fact that he’s a priest doesn’t mean he’s better. He should identify with the believers as he’s a human being who commits sins just like we do.’

Imposing personal opinions (of non-religious character in particular) has also met with criticism. According to the youth, using the pulpit to state one’s own opinions e.g. political ones (over 15% of respondents disapprove of talking politics during sermons) has nothing to do with the mission of the Church and, as such, is not legitimate. ‘They [sermons] don’t concern religious issues but political and ideological ones. The priests use the sermon as an opportunity to impose their backward, intolerant views instead of preaching the Gospel;’ ‘among others: discriminating against people, judging and imposing their own opinions e.g. by forbidding us to give money to WOŚP;³’ ‘[the homily] is based on subjective views of the priest;’ ‘talking about one’s personal opinions or imposing them, suggesting that one’s own approach is the only legitimate one;’ ‘statements that, to a large degree, are inconsistent with the Church’s teaching;’ ‘very often these are his personal, pseudo-motivational opinions.’

According to the respondents, lack of sufficient knowledge about the topics referred to, or alluding to false authorities is yet another weak point of the homily. ‘What I hate most is when the person who delivers a sermon refers to verdicts, assumptions or views of people of higher rank though they have no relevant knowledge or background;’ ‘dragging in unsubstantiated theses (e.g. denying evolution), engaging in politics, attacking other faiths or non-believers;’ ‘assigning specific gender roles;’ ‘sometimes they discuss stereotypes about which they don’t know much.’

The study revealed that 15% of respondents did not have any opinion on the homily, or did not listen to it and stayed uninterested (‘It is not that I don’t like them. They don’t bother me, but I rarely listen.’). However, the majority of students gave specific, often comprehensive answers, which means they are both insightful

³ WOŚP, Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy [the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity] is the biggest, non-governmental charity organization in Poland which raises money for e.g. pediatric and elderly care. However, due to certain controversial remarks of its founder, Jerzy Owsiak, it is not approved by some leaders of the Catholic Church in Poland.

and critical audience. Some of them considered lack of commitment a weak point of the sermons. 'I think the homilies should be inspired, they should be surprising and give us examples, like those given by Rev. Piotr Glas, Rev. Piotr Pawlukiewicz or Rev. Grzegorz Ryś. [The priests] should talk to people so that they understand and can identify with what is said. That's why I don't like stereotypical «droning on», discussing something that is virtually irrelevant or presenting important issues tediously;' 'when the priest preaches as if he wanted simply to rattle through it unthinkingly and go home;' 'when they are not spoken from the heart;' 'no commitment, talking as if to oneself, not to the people;' 'treating the homily as an obligation, not a means to teach and understand the faith and the Bible;' 'I don't know, I guess when I was taking part in religious practices (just like every person in Poland until they're around 12 years old), it was the complete lack of an effort to attract people's interest. Or, perhaps, this is how I saw it when I was a snot.'

The above thread is related to yet another objection: lack of preparation and background or reading 'ready-made texts.' When a priest reads his sermon from a sheet of paper, it does not engage the audience: 'It gets on my nerves when the sermon is read out mechanically. The priest should speak for himself on the basis of his own feelings – it's more natural, it reduces the distance between the priest and the penitent, one listens to it more eagerly as it touches you more than a dry text. Sermons should not be long, they should be to the point, otherwise you tune out after a few minutes, especially when the sermon is read out from a piece of paper.'

When the priest has not thought over the content of the sermon, he speaks chaotically and deviates from the main topic, which distracts the listeners: 'Some give the sermon sloppily, with no preparation;' 'the fact that [homilies] are not prepared (at least a little bit), which makes them hard to listen to;' 'having no background and speaking chaotically;' 'no specific content, just a million pointless case studies;' 'deviating from the topic and padding out the sermon which becomes boring. There are often dozens of threads, and it is difficult to draw conclusions;' 'Too many stories are woven [into the homily], so that you get bored and after leaving the church you don't even remember what the homily was about;' 'when they deviate from the main track. I mean, stories and midrashes are interesting, on condition that there are not too many of them.'

According to some respondents, lack of specific message or a keynote is a similar drawback of homilies they hear: 'Cliches, no specifics, no fluidity;' 'talking nonsense,' 'humdrum, preaching nice slogans, no explanations. They don't familiarize us with the Catholic teaching, instead [we hear] unclear wording, no substance or specifics;' '[the homilies] are often abstract; the priest does not talk about an issue of which he is certain. Instead, he falters, which makes it difficult to grasp the sermon and remember it;' 'vague or nonsensical sermons (once I heard a homily in which the faithful are compared to a dishwasher).'

The study reveals that students do not accept focusing on trivial issues that are irrelevant to the spiritual growth of the faithful: 'Focus on unimportant elements

of faith, sometimes even beyond its scope. Thus spreading intolerance and hatred, stupidity and faith which is not rooted in charity or kindness;’ ‘tackling themes like politics, LGBT, anything apart from history and the Gospel;’ ‘when priests deviate from the topic of faith to political, material etc. issues.’

Another objection regarded the monotony and repetitiveness of the sermon which is often thought to be too long. The respondents have put it laconically: ‘a yawn.’ Obviously, these traits do not help absorb the message of the sermon. On the contrary, the attention of the audience begins to wander: ‘They are often so protracted that you want to go to sleep;’ ‘sometimes they last too long (even 45 minutes), so that the faithful stop listening and do not learn much from a given homily;’ ‘they are too long, they should be to the point and thought-provoking;’ ‘repetitiveness and discussing various situations with the same words;’ ‘speaking schematically, using the same, old cliches instead of the truth about God or faith, which often results from the lack of knowledge;’ ‘superficial rambling on about the same thing for a long time, without delving into the matter or trying to show the issue in a creative manner;’ ‘chuntering, too long;’ ‘the homilies are too verbose – their content could be conveyed in a short statement. Thus you easily get distracted, you wander and start thinking about something else;’ ‘inaccessible, boring, fictional learning;’ ‘no ability to hold the listeners’ attention;’ ‘the statements are typical – you have already heard them; moreover, they are too long and send you to sleep;’ ‘style over substance sometimes: the priest may talk long but not necessarily about relevant issues; or he repeats what he has already said. It is only a general impression, I do not mean any specific clergyman.’

Another flaw of the sermon is the wrong language used: too much specialized vocabulary, incomprehensible terminology, unnatural tone of voice, tortuous statements and the language not adapted to a specific group of listeners. Therefore, the respondents wrote: ‘Evading difficult issues, beating about the bush, no profound thoughts, convoluted and unclear speaking;’ ‘incomprehensible and recondite preaching;’ ‘terminology is too academic/theological;’ ‘the language is ponderous;’ ‘turgidity;’ ‘affectation;’ ‘The priest shouts while preaching;’ ‘waxing philosophically;’ ‘stupid comparisons;’ ‘sometimes they are inadequate for a given audience;’ ‘lack of suitable vocabulary in a given message;’ ‘sentimentality, speaking as if to children and women; theological errors, conniving at sins;’ ‘too long homilies with infantile anecdotes.’

The respondents also pointed to the way a priest communicates with young people. He is thought to have narrow views, use old-fashioned and artificial language, not keep up with modern times and have no charisma to work with the young: ‘Some priests cannot approach young people;’ ‘they shut themselves off from what is new;’ ‘backward’ ‘narrow-minded;’ ‘young people find them difficult to understand;’ ‘the fact that [sermons] are dedicated typically to the elderly, to match their viewpoints so that they will agree with what is said;’ ‘They are old fashioned and dull, so that I forget them quickly;’ ‘they are inconsistent and

outdated;’ ‘the comparisons are out of the ark, there are political and financial questions woven into.’

It turns out that young people expect the homilies to be about the Gospel and the principles of faith. Therefore, many objections concern deviations from this expectation: ‘they not always refer to the reading;’ ‘when the priest instead of discussing the Gospel or the reading, refers to what he has seen on the Internet, Facebook or Twitter. He often alludes to politics;’ ‘for me a sermon should explain the Gospel, I do not like it when there is no such reference whatsoever;’ ‘superficiality and deviating from the Gospel and reading of the day;’ ‘there should be even more emphasis on the significance of the Holy Scripture;’ ‘adding themes that are not related to a given excerpt from the Bible;’ ‘the fact that they do not refer to the Holy Scripture;’ ‘weaving other, unrelated topics into the sermon;’ ‘the priest harps on issues unrelated to the reading, adds topics he should not discuss;’ ‘alluding to situations from the priest’s life but who cares whom he met and talked to?’

Some respondents would like the homilies to refer to everyday life and contain specific guidelines which could be used on a daily basis: ‘poor reference to present issues;’ ‘they are sometimes boring and you can get nothing from them for yourself;’ ‘a priest gives a sermon that hardly relates to my life;’ ‘no reference to current matters which could be discussed in an interesting way. Being often detached from the situation in Poland/in the world. Not addressing the issues of religion/faith;’ ‘References to politics, money; giving advice that you cannot put into practice.’

It is worth noting that 10% of respondents do not have any objections and evaluate the homilies positively. Their opinion may be helpful to those who would like to communicate with the youth effectively: ‘The priest never alludes to political issues, which I like a lot. A huge advantage is that he talks quite colloquially and humorously so that everyone understands him. My experience is very positive;’ ‘Hard to say... I think the homily is very good when Jesus is in its center.’

3. SYMMETRY AS A TRAIT OF A SPEECH

When we try to address – within the framework of textual studies – the above postulates and observations, we face the risk of repeating trite solutions. In works on formal homiletics, they clues focus on e.g. the need to use specific language and avoid theological jargon. Moreover, they stress the necessity to apply a style which should guarantee that the content of the homily is well received. However, our aim is to suggest a systemic solution which should trigger off the process of changing one’s way of thinking already at the stage of preparing a sermon. We will apply the linguistic criterion of symmetry which occurs in linguistic studies (though it is not often analyzed). The Latin *symmetria* and Greek *συμμετρία* may help explain the etymology of ‘symmetry’. The words consist of two parts: prefix *sym* is understood as ‘together’, ‘collectively’, and *metron* means ‘measure’, ‘weight’, ‘rule’ (Jurewicz 2001, 334).

As yet, the issue of symmetry of the text has not gained much attention. In studies of communication we may find an interpretation according to which symmetry is related to the so-called 'linguistic politeness' which defines the relation of the subjects who dialogue. Closeness between interlocutors is the essence of the so-called solidarity politeness system which makes it possible for the symmetrical exchange of thoughts to be achieved and maintained.⁴ This may occur when the two parties are highly engaged in the dialogue as it happens in the exchange of thoughts between friends (Żurek 2008, 38).

In linguistics, symmetry in a dialogue boils down to specifying the linguistic behavior of the interlocutors and their social roles. This concept can be contrasted with 'asymmetry' which is also linguistically studied. In the latter, we deal with the differences of the social and professional status of interlocutors (1), differences in the social hierarchy (2) as well as various knowledge levels of the interlocutors when they exchange information (3). This typology may be semantically rendered in a different way. However, the fact remains that many factors such as: gender, age, institutional norms and social roles may influence asymmetry of the communication process (Baranowski 2016, 45-48).⁵

Apart from the above situation of 'linguistic politeness,' the concept of symmetry also refers to the semantic or syntactic forms of a given message. In this case certain lexical units are repeated, primarily in adjacent sentences and paragraphs (Gajda 2014, 10). The issue of semantics is also present in a different approach to symmetry. It concerns expectations of a given content: the recipient has the right to expect that the 'sender' will share all the knowledge that he/she has (Prokop 2010, 15). Thus, there is no place for leaving something unsaid, hinting at something or excessive presuppositions which listeners may interpret as semantic gaps.

It seems that the concept of symmetry may be crucial for the exchange of thoughts as it engages effective transmission of information. It may also help succeed in achieving our objective: listeners may be willing to take up verbal directives they hear.

⁴ We do not mean a rank in society (the so-called *deference politeness system*) or a strictly hierarchical system in the case of subordinates and superiors (*hierarchical politeness system*) (Żurek 2008, 38).

⁵ We shall give examples to illustrate the division. Different knowledge levels usually occur in the communication between a pupil and a teacher, a student and a professor (3). A different status of interlocutors: employer – employee, parent – child, doctor – patient (1). Generally, this range of asymmetry is present in all institutions (organizations or groups) which are based on formalized rules of membership (e.g. lieutenant – sergeant; abbot – monk). Defining asymmetry in communication between subjects of various social background may be problematic (2). Social norms in totalitarian systems may serve as an example: certain members are discriminated against because of their nationality, social class, religion, worldview or beliefs. This can give rise to lack of symmetry in communication. In the past, it was the monarchy where one could experience lack of symmetry in communication. The dependency of vassal on the lord is a characteristic example of social differentiation. Nowadays the relationship between an elderly person and a child may be considered socially asymmetrical.

4. SYMMETRY IN THE HOMILY

While analyzing the issue of symmetry, we need to emphasize that it is not a fixed property: in speech it is a variable category (Prokop 2010, 17). This shows in the liturgical proclamation of the Word which consists of what is written down (which is not a homily yet) and the living transmission of the Word. It inherits its processual character from the text. According to Anna Duszak, 'here the text is not a product, but a process which is dynamic. It is controlled by those who take part in the act of communication' (Duszak 1998, 18). In the case of spreading the Word of God in the liturgy, it is the 'sender' who primarily impacts processuality of the sermon. However, the listeners may show (lack of) interest in what he says, which impacts the course of speech and thus the process of conveying meanings. Naturally, their interest relates to the engagement and commitment of the preacher. As such, it directly implies the criteria of linguistic symmetry.

4.1. The dialogical character of speech (structural symmetry)

In the textual reflection on the homily, we should once again emphasize the dialogical tradition. Accordingly, the method of shaping one's speech results from the genre of preaching during liturgy, which is related to the tradition of the Greek diatribe. The diatribe directly involved exchanging thoughts and conversing (Dyk, Klementowicz, and Wprostkiewicz 2019, 20-22). In the homily, therefore, theological issues should be transferred between the subjects in the so-called 'dialogical paradigm' which is not obvious in the case of preaching. What may contribute to a dialogue if one silent interlocutor passively receives what is said? It is worth underlying that preaching during the liturgy, while remaining in the convention of a dialogue, is asymmetrical (Warchala 1991, 19). Firstly, because it is a form of institutional communication, even though an exchange of thoughts may occur. The homilist is the only one entitled to transfer meaning to the recipient. Secondly, asymmetry increases due to the fact that interaction on the part of the listener is limited. Apart from Masses for children, dialogue during the homily is only apparent. Also, what highly contributes to asymmetry is the fact that partners in this dialogue are unequal because of their various backgrounds and knowledge of the subject – only the homilist has sufficient substantive competence in the topic he raises (Prokop 2010, 16-18).

However, there is an opportunity in attempting to achieve symmetry in a speech. In line with the precept of 'linguistic politeness,' one ought to address the interlocutor with respect. In practice, this rule boils down to the following: 'try to minimize the costs of others, and maximize their benefits, where 'cost' is understood as an effort put to realize the objective of the message' (Jabłońska-Bonca, and Zeidler 2016, 122). This approach is not only about showing respect to the listeners. It is also related to constructing an adequate argumentation of the homily which is to make the content plausible. However, the ultimate decision (resolution) in terms of faith (the mystery) is in the hands of the recipient. The accusations of being 'aggressive',

‘excluding’ or ‘ruling on matters overbearingly’ bring to mind the traits of eristic.⁶ This is related to perceiving the homilist as someone who ‘exalts himself and puts himself above the community’ (an excerpt from one of the answers), which directly implies asymmetrical speech. Dariusz Baranowski sees this situation as a manifestation of power in which one party wants to achieve their communication objectives by means of coercion or pressure (Baranowski 2016, 45). However, the eristic victory is only seeming, for, as a result, we get ostentatious airing one’s rationale and defeating ‘the opponents.’ Consequently, they distance themselves from the preacher, which their answers prove.

Proper justification of one’s points should be based on a dialogue with listeners. Only then can the latter be motivated to transform their attitudes and convictions. When the priest invites the listeners to join him in his thinking and search for solutions together, he lends credence to his rationale. However, it is up to the recipient whether he is convinced by the homilist’s justification of his thesis. Imposing solutions means violating the rule of symmetry. Similarly, projecting ‘ready-made’ or ‘universal’ ideas may backfire because the spiritual life is an extremely sensitive sphere, in young people in particular.⁷ Their answers in the questionnaire reflect standardized or formulaic form of communication in the Church.

As for the conflict between the message of the Revelation and the views of young people, their answers seem, paradoxically, positive.

The Latin word *conflictus* means ‘clash,’ ‘incompatibility,’ ‘collision,’ ‘fight.’ Interestingly, these meanings help open oneself to a dialogue which, in the form of symmetrical exchange of thoughts, is an opportunity to eliminate what is ‘conflicting’ or what is the subject of ‘a clash.’ We may once again return to the idea of processual presentation of ideas when the preacher is in dialogue with the listener. The first should invite the latter in a conversational mode to recognize various ideas (potential solutions). Strategically planned order of thinking is pivotal for the dialogue. If, in line with the idea of symmetry, the priest wants to show listeners respect, he should reveal potential proposals which cannot be imposed but presented in the form of argumentation. Thus the sermon may be symmetrical, as his thinking will no longer have strong overtones of institutional communication. Furthermore, it will reduce substantive disproportion between listeners and a preacher – the first are not as competent in the field of theology as the latter.

⁶ We may assume that certain elements of homilies which the respondents evaluated as aggressive or intolerant are *ad rem* statements (i.e. they refer to issues, problems) rather than *contra personam* (against a person or a social group). This is our assumption. However, the answers clearly indicate that certain statements violate the norms of linguistic politeness.

⁷ This approach directly affects the chances that the listeners apply recommendations that result from the Revelation (the so-called directive speech acts). The homilist’s imperatives will be put into practice only if the recipient agrees to do this (argumentation that makes the issues raised plausible increases the chances that he will). Aggressiveness, exclusion or hatred should, therefore, be seen as serious flaws of preaching as they directly affect the possibility of realizing the objectives of the preacher’s message.

4.2. Defining *questio* of the speech (substantive symmetry)

Symmetry may be also achieved by paying attention to real problems of the listeners. Theologically speaking, it is 'updating the kerygma,' *aggiornamento* of the message of Revelation. However, this condition is not sufficient. Presenting Biblical issues rationally should go hand in hand with showing them in such a way that they relate to the lives of the listeners. Then the 'text' has an adequate substantive measure. If, on the other hand, the faithful find the issue or *casus* of the preacher's speech irrelevant, then they may disregard the message. On the linguistic level, in such circumstances there is no chance that 'discursive community' appears (Klementowicz 2022, 56-60). And it is not about the semiotics of expressions or terms used. What matters is the relationship of dialogue partners. On the way to mutual understanding, there should be compatibility between them as regards the issue discussed by the preacher together with a case that is close to the listener. This directly results in the symmetry (substantive measure) of the speech.

The questionnaire reveals that the young often find the homilies 'tedious.' They have also admitted that issues raised by the preacher 'have nothing to do with me.' This is obviously a flaw of the preacher's *actio*. The respondents wrote that '[the homilies] are often abstract; the priest does not talk about an issue of which he is certain. Instead, he falters, which makes it difficult to grasp the sermon and remember it.' Moreover, the respondents complained that it is 'humdrum, preaching nice slogans, no explanations. They do not familiarize us with the Catholic teaching, instead [we hear] unclear wording, no substance or specifics.' There were also remarks that 'sermons are vague, nonsensical,' or '[show] lack of preparation or [are full of] chaotic statements.' These answers point to the problem of competently raising issues that the listeners would find noteworthy, essential in their lives.

Ancient Greek rhetoricians may give us food for thought here. The subject of their speeches was called 'status of the case' (*status causae*). Accordingly, the topics discussed by a rhetorician should not be 'abstract,' but consonant with *status causae* of the listener (Arduini, and Damiani 2010, 169). Ryszard Hajduk remarks that the above observations may be summed up in the phrase *mea res agitur* [my affairs are at issue]. Thus the listener is/becomes convinced that the preacher is addressing an important (crucial) issue of his. In other words, that the preacher reacts to what is relevant to the listener (Hajduk 2019, 61).

Interestingly, the precept of 'the measure of the text,' that is its symmetry, applies to the topic of the speech as well. A proportionate text should focus on matters that are pivotal to the recipient. This concept is developed by Małgorzata Marcjanik who writes about two key principles regarding symmetry. The first says that we should generally show respect to our partner in a dialogue while belittling ourselves. The second principle concerns being interested in matters that are important to my dialogue partner (Marcjanik 2001, 85). The above observations may be applied while preparing a homily. In order for the homily to be useful, it must raise issues which are crucial to the listener. As a result, there will be symmetry

of both parties during the exchange of information. This action may be called ‘coherent (global) proportionality.’ In this case, proportionally to the preacher’s effort (spotting the problem, constructing the message properly, ordering meanings in a comprehensible way), the chances of attracting the listeners’ interest increase. It is also an opportunity to improve the reception of the content. Thus not only a dialogue is initiated but, as a manifestation of linguistic politeness, the criterion of proportion i.e. symmetry between partners, is achieved.

The very construction of *questio* allows for yet another observation. Even though the topic raised will respond to the listeners’ dilemmas, not every theological ‘solution’ will be clear. Therefore, the so-called application of theology (i.e. the answer) should be as precise as it is possible in order to maintain symmetry. This also applies to directive speech acts.

Searching for symmetry in such cases aims to address the respondents’ complaints, for example: ‘I couldn’t understand the preacher’s message;’ ‘the justification was vague;’ or even ‘[he was] evading precise explanation of an issue.’ Thus, highly desirable features of a message are: clarity, conciseness and comprehensibility.

Ordering a comprehensible speech requires multiple creative steps. For example, the preacher must be ‘imaginatively engaged.’ His ingenuity and looking for ways to reach out to the listener is in the system of linguistic politeness compared to a dialogue of friends (Żurek 2008, 38). Their closeness makes them do their best to ‘reach’ out to each other. In the case of the homily, it is the preacher’s task to spare no effort to reach out to the listeners so that they feel he wants mutual understanding. However, his focus should not be on the style solely. His creativity should involve, for example, intertextuality: in order to make the issues of the kerygma or Revelation more approachable, he can make use of texts with theological content. In practice, this would mean employing threads from literature, film or broadly understood fine arts (Klementowicz 2019, 58-61).

CONCLUSION

The above systematization combines conclusions from various academic fields. Different methodologies of sociology and textual linguistics (and, as far as conclusions are concerned, also theology) allow, however, to draw coherent conclusions. According to Wiesław Przychyna and Gerard Siwek these inferences can help practice homiletics in an interdisciplinary way, especially when it comes to applying specific empirical data (Przychyna, and Siwek 2007, 294).

The study of young people’s religiosity has revealed shortcomings in their education – a number of the interviewees could not tell what ‘a homily’ means. This may imply a flaw in teaching religion at school separately from the life of a given parish or Church liturgy (which is confirmed by other sociological research). At the same time, the interviewees who listen to homilies have spoken of their spiritual longings which

they would like to deepen with the help of preachers' explanations of source texts and the Holy Scripture. They have suggested that Church sermons should give more food for thought and personal quest, not impose ready-made solutions. Young interviewees appear to need a dialogue that relates to their lives, helps interpret reality in the context of faith, support them in difficult situations and improve their spiritual and religious formation. Their answers to the questionnaire reveal that they appreciate empathy and openness towards other people, including those whose take on life is different than the one advocated by the Church. They expect a dialogue and considerateness, not critique or arbitrary exclusion from the Church.

The above sociological studies also show that young people do not accept aggressive forms of communication, insults and remarks of political or economic character in the Church. In their eyes, they go against her mission and the message of the Gospel. The young, therefore, expect preachers to focus on religious matters. They do not, however, accept passively what they hear, even when it is officially proclaimed in the Church – they are critical listeners who raise objections not only to the form of preaching but to the content as well. Hence, improving forms of preaching, adapting them to various audiences is a true challenge to the homilists.

It is worth noting that the above reflections refer to the studies of negative elements of homilies, which paints a gloomy picture. It would be worth conducting sociological studies that could complement this one-sided point of view with positive aspects of homilies. In this respect, sociological analysis needs to be supplemented.

The criteria of symmetry presented above do not exhaust the topic – there may be other answers given to the remarks made in response to the questionnaire. We have, however, suggested an operational tool which draws our attention to the ontology of the homily and helps control its delivery.

Linguistic symmetry, presented above as seeing to the dialogical character of communication and to its precisely defined *questio*, is part of a certain strategy. Our study may be complemented with other proposals that result from language politeness or other concepts from the fields of linguistics or rhetoric, which may give rise to a certain organizational culture of a speech. As a result, not only the message of the Bible may be more clearly conveyed. Also, the effects of preaching may improve. If listeners adhere to the directive speech acts (in theology the so-called moral imperatives), it will prove that preaching has been successful. This impacts relevancy, which is still an issue to be discussed as far as logical consistency of preaching is concerned.

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