

THE HOMILETICAL DIMENSION OF THE TEACHINGS OF ROMANIAN CONFESSOR PRIESTS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the homiletical dimension of the teachings of Romanian confessor priests of the 20th century, highlighting the fundamental themes and specific methods used in their sermons. The historical context of the oppressive communist regime profoundly influenced the message and homiletical approaches of the servants of the Church, transforming their sermons into acts of spiritual resistance. The study analyses three central themes of the confessor priests' sermons: (1) suffering as a means of sanctification, (2) Christian love and mercy, (3) hope in the resurrection and eternal life. In the midst of the suffering caused by persecution, some priests have capitalized on the social context to strengthen the faith, by offering comfort to believers. The sermons of confessor priests contained theological messages, with practical guidance for an authentic spiritual life. The sermons of confessor priests have the following characteristics: (1) simple and accessible language, (2) personal character, (3) they contain parables and spiritual stories. The servants of the Church have used the art of the word to convey essential values in overcoming life's difficulties: faith in God and the sacrifice of His Son on the cross, love of God and neighbor and hope in eternal life. The homiletical contributions of the confessor priests are relevant to the historical context studied and to contemporary theology.

Keywords: sermon, suffering, love, mercy, hope, resurrection, eternal life, spiritual father, God, simple language.

INTRODUCTION

Homiletics, as a branch of practical theology, explores the art of preaching and transmitting the Gospel message in a way that is accessible, relevant and edifying to the faithful. In the context of 20th-century Romania, a period marked by historical and ideological challenges, Orthodox priests played a crucial role in preserving and transmitting Christian teaching. The spiritual fathers were not only preachers, but also confessors, their lives being a synthesis between the spoken word and personal example.

1. THE HISTORICAL AND SPIRITUAL CONTEXT OF THE 20TH CENTURY IN ROMANIA. SOME EXAMPLES OF CONFESSOR PRIESTS.

The 20th century was a period of great transformation for the Romanian Orthodox Church, facing two oppressive regimes: the legionary dictatorship and the communist regime. During the legionary dictatorship, some Church servants were co-opted or manipulated for ideological purposes, creating internal tensions and moral dilemmas. The communist regime provoked the most intense period of persecution, testing not only

ordinary believers but also Church servants¹. After the establishment of the communist regime, the Romanian Orthodox Church was subjected to a systematic process of marginalization and control. The political police (Securitate) constantly monitored the activity of the clergy, and free preaching became an act of courage. Many servants of the Church were arrested on false charges and imprisoned in dungeons, where they endured unimaginable tortures². Under these conditions, they continued to fulfil their pastoral mission, transforming suffering into a source of spiritual enlightenment for those around them. The list of confessors and priests, who have had a special spiritual ministry in Romania is in the thousands³.

Father Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa⁴ is a confessor, who was jailed for his courage to preach alive to young people, in the 1970s, calling them to a life lived in truth and faith. His sermons, delivered to students at the Theological Seminary in Bucharest, became manifestos of resistance against communist ideological oppression.

Father archimandrite Sofian Boghiu⁵, great confessor of the 20th century, was an emblematic personality of Romanian monasticism. He succeeded in combining a life of prayer with his pastoral mission, bringing the light of faith in the midst of the trials of the age. In the communist prisons, Father Sofian served Holy Liturgy in secret and encouraged the despairing.

Father archimandrite Gherasim Iscu⁶ was a special spiritual guide, in freedom, as abbot of the monasteries of Tismana and Arnota but also in detention.

Father Ilie Lăcătușu⁷, known for his life of holiness, is a martyr of communist persecution. He suffered in silence, but remained steadfast in his faith, an inspiration to all who knew him.

Father Dumitru Stăniloae⁸ was jailed for his firm stand against atheist ideology. He was also an exceptional preacher, with a message deeply rooted in the Orthodox tradition.

The spiritual fathers converted the oppressive historical context into an opportunity to witness to the faith. Their sermons were not just words, but true works of spiritual resistance, full of hope and love. They responded to the concrete needs of believers and also offered an eternal perspective based on the promise of salvation.

¹ Cristina Păiușan, Radu Ciuceanu, *Biserica Ortodoxă Română sub regimul comunist (1945-1958)*, vol. I, Institutul Național pentru studiul totalitarismului, București, 2001. This volume, printed under the aegis of the Romanian Academy, contains transcripts of the Securitate's informative notes on the Romanian Orthodox Church. The wealth of details, concerning the Church's ministers, from all levels of ministry, demonstrates how much the communist political regime wanted to control and subordinate the Church, by collecting and manipulating all available information.

² Marin Matei, *Fericiți cei prizonieri. Martiri ai temnițelor românești*, Editura Bonifaciu, Bacău, 2008.

³ The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church on 11-12 July 2024 approved the canonisation of 16 Romanian saints.

⁴ For political reasons, Father Gheorghe Calciu-Dumitreasa (1925-2006) was not canonised as a saint.

⁵ Father archimandrite Sofian Boghiu (1912-2002), resident at Antim Monastery, in Bucharest, was also a Church painter. He was a member of *Rugul Aprins* and a political prisoner between 1958-1964. He is canonised with the title: Saint venerable confessor Sofian of Antim. Its feast date is 16 September.

⁶ Father archimandrite Gherasim Iscu (1912-1951) was a political prisoner between 1948-1951. He is canonised with the title: Saint venerable martyr Gherasim of Tismana. His feast day is 26 December.

⁷ Father Ilie Lăcătușu (1909-1983) has an incorrupt body and has been canonised as a saint with the title: The saint priest confessor Ilie Lăcătușu, with a feast day on 22 July.

⁸ Father Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993) was a Romanian university professor, dogmatic scholar, translator, writer and journalist. He is considered one of the leading authorities on European theology in the 20th century and the greatest Romanian theologian of that century. He was canonised as a saint with the title: The saint priest confessor Dumitru Stăniloae, with a feast day on 4 October.

2. CENTRAL THEMES OF THE SERMONS OF CONFESSOR PRIESTS

"During the totalitarian regime, the Church's preaching was the breath of air that prevented our nation from suffocating in the miasma of dialectical materialism, atheism and proletarian egalitarianism"⁹.

2.1. *Suffering as a means of sanctification*

One of the frequent topics in the sermons of the confessor priests was suffering. They emphasized that the acceptance of suffering, in the name of Jesus Christ, leads to the purification of the soul and the acquisition of holiness. Father Arsenie Papacioc said: "Suffering brings a great deal of humility. Only this: it must be done for the great Truth. For Christ", or: "the joy of our sufferings in prisons and in chains was precisely this, that we were given the opportunity to suffer for Christ! We were not the defeated ones, who were receiving the blows. It was those who struck us who were defeated"¹⁰.

Suffering was not understood as an end in itself, but as a means to spiritual fulfilment. It is a process of spiritual growth, a cleansing fire, that purifies the soul from sin and pride. "Suffering is ordained from above for our salvation, for the forgiveness of sins and for spiritual growth, only if we receive it with gratitude, as from the hand of God"¹¹.

Another aspect of suffering, as a means of sanctification, is its association with the virtue of patience. "The endurance of the various afflictions that come upon us are designed above all to weaken the passions of anger (sorrow and grief), although they also contribute to a fuller quieting of the movements of lust"¹². Through patience, suffering is transformed into an act of free will and self-giving. By enduring with humility and trust in divine mercy, human becomes more open to God's grace. Thus, suffering loses its destructive character and becomes a constructive force.

Another significant dimension is that of solidarity in suffering. Suffering together creates a strong bond between people, enabling them to help each other and experience a deeper communion. In this way, suffering acquires a social dimension, becoming a means through which love grows and manifests itself in concrete ways.

Suffering, taken on with manhood and without resignation, contributes to a deep self-knowledge. "Nothing has helped me more in life than suffering. Suffering alone is the supreme theological theology ... This state of extraordinary tension gave you the opportunity to really know yourself"¹³.

2.2. *Christian love and mercy*

The sermons of the spiritual fathers focused on the importance of love of God and neighbor, without which the Christian life becomes sterile.

Christian love is more than a feeling, it is a conscious choice to put the good of the other person above self-interest. This love manifests itself in concrete acts of mercy, empathy and the ability to forgive.

⁹ Pr. prof. univ. dr. Dănuț Popovici, "Rezistența prin cuvânt. Predica Bisericii în timpul regimului comunist", in *Predicatori și cateheți români, mărturisitori în timpul regimului comunist*, Editura Universitaria Craiova, Timișoara, 2017, p. 52.

¹⁰ *Ne vorbește părintele Arsenie Papacioc*, vol I, Mănăstirea Sihăstria, ²2010, pp. 86-87.

¹¹ Arhimandrit Cleopa Ilie, *Lumina și faptele credinței*, Mitropolia Moldovei și Bucovinei, Iași, 1994, p. 112.

¹² Preot profesor Dumitru Stăniloae, *Ascetica și mistică Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, p. 186.

¹³ Părintele Arsenie Papacioc, *Mici îndemnuri spre mântuire*, Editura Sofia, București, 2009, p. 67.

Another central aspect of Christian love is mercy, a profound expression of active love. Mercy involves not only offering material help, but also supporting those in spiritual or emotional distress. It is an act of compassion, which shares divine love and offers hope.

Love of God and neighbor is also a call to unity and harmony. Love, in Jesus Christ, removes all barriers between people and creates a deep communion. This love transcends ethnic, cultural or social boundaries, becoming the foundation of a more just and peaceful world.

A concrete example of Christian love and mercy is forgiveness. He who forgives is like God, Who showed mercy to us through the cross. By forgiving, the Christian frees himself from the burden of resentment and comes closer to fulfilment.

Christian love and mercy are inseparable from the prayer life. Through prayer, human learns to love and to be merciful, for he enters communion with God, the source of love¹⁴. In this way, Christian love and mercy do not remain abstract principles, but become realities lived every day.

2.3. Hope in the resurrection and eternal life.

In a world marked by suffering, uncertainty and fears about human's destiny, the message of hope and the Resurrection has been a red thread running through the sermons of the spiritual fathers, a banner of faith, that has accompanied Christian life since ancient times. For many people, the question of the meaning of suffering becomes a constant preoccupation. A constant in the preaching of the communist period was also the idea that life on earth is not everything¹⁵. Eternal life, prepared in the Kingdom of heaven, represents the end of suffering, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ fulfils the promise of a new life, without pain, without tears and without death.

The sermons of the spiritual fathers frequently emphasized that hope in the resurrection and eternal life is the foundation of a meaningful existence, even in the midst of the greatest trials¹⁶. The resurrection of Jesus Christ changes the meaning of history from nothingness to the source of Life, to God, it removes the barrier between human and Creator. The spiritual fathers urged believers to understand the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the way to live God's unconditional love every day¹⁷.

The spiritual fathers often emphasized that eternal life is not simply an endless existence, but a permanent renewal. *"We all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, do in the same manner transform ourselves from glory to glory, as from the Spirit of the Lord."* (2 Corinthians 3,18). The resurrection brings not only a life without death, but also a state of harmony with other people and with all creation, a state in which there is no more separation, conflict or suffering.

The essence of eternal life is communion with God and all humanity. From this perspective, human suffering does not disappear completely but is transformed into an opportunity to attain eternal life through purification and deification.

The spiritual fathers urged their faithful not to fear death, but to accept it with confidence, knowing that it is only part of the divine plan. In this sense, death is, paradoxically, a moment of consolation, because it is the beginning of a new life, one without end, in which there is no more pain or tears. This is why, hope in eternal life

¹⁴ Ioan Ianolide, *Întoarcerea la Hristos*, Editura Bonifaciu, București, 2012, pp. 441-444.

¹⁵ Lucian D. Popescu, *Introducere în omiletica părintelui Gheorghe Calciu*, Editura Christiana, București, 2010, pp. 82-88.

¹⁶ Părintele Gheorghe Calciu, *Cuvinte vii*, Editura Bonifaciu, Bacău, 2009, pp. 224-234.

¹⁷ Părintele Gheorghe Calciu, *Mărturisitorul prigonit*, Editura Crigarux, Piatra Neamț, 2007, pp. 129-137.

becomes the foundation of consolation in the face of death, a source of consolation, that gives meaning to the most difficult moments of human life¹⁸.

3. HOMILETIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CONFESSOR PRIESTS

3.1. *Simple and accessible language*

One of the fundamental features of the sermons of the spiritual fathers is the simple and profound language, in which they conveyed the essential teachings of faith. Although we live in an age of information and complexity, in which words can often become an obstacle to understanding the fundamental truths of the faith, the spiritual fathers succeeded in conveying the teaching of the Orthodox faith in a way that is accessible to all, in clear and simple language. Preaching, in this context, was not just an act of transmitting a teaching, but a living dialogue between the speaker and the listener, a dialogue in which words become a means of communion and understanding¹⁹.

To make religious teaching more accessible and understandable, spiritual fathers used a rich background of biblical images and examples from everyday life. They often used biblical parables and stories or drew examples from everyday life to explain more clearly the teaching of the Church. In this way, they succeeded in transforming a deeply spiritual theme into a clear and applicable lesson for every listener.

Another important aspect of the vocabulary used by the spiritual fathers was the avoidance of technical theological terms, which can create barriers in communication. Many of the Church's teachings can seem difficult to understand, for those who have not had access to higher theological studies. The spiritual fathers did not aim to present the Church's teaching of faith in a sophisticated academic manner, but as a concrete and tangible life experience.

Simple and profound language makes the Church's teaching more accessible. When a person clearly understands what a particular religious principle means, he or she is more likely to apply that teaching in everyday life. This language also creates a sense of closeness between preacher and listeners, encouraging greater involvement and active participation in services.

3.2. *Personal character*

One of the most important aspects of the preaching of Church servants is personal experience. The personal example of the servant is not only a means of transmitting religious teachings, but also a form of authenticating them, showing that what is preached is also what is lived. Therefore, the life of a spiritual father becomes a living model to follow, and his words take on greater force, being not just "words of teaching", but a practical example of authentic faith.

In the Orthodox tradition, especially in the inter-war and post-war period, the spiritual priests, who had a particular impact on religious communities, were not just theorists or teachers of Holy Scripture, but people who lived the Gospel. This kind of living teaching was particularly important in the spiritual formation of the faithful, especially at a time when the Orthodox Church was under great political and social trials and pressures.

Another important aspect of personal experience of the spiritual fathers' preaching is that it was a form of spiritual education. Instead of the sermon being just a theoretical

¹⁸ Arhimandrit Sofian Boghiu, *Smerenia și dragostea, însușirile trăirii ortodoxe*, Fundația Tradiția românească, București, 2001, pp. 13-20.

¹⁹ Pr. Vasile Gordon (coord), *Omiletica*, Editura Basilica, București, 2015, p. 365.

discourse, a lesson about faith, spiritual fathers "educated" their parishioners through their own lives. Personal example became a more powerful form of teaching than any sermon, because it was directly visible and tangible. Thus, the faithful not only listened to sermons on love, prayer, repentance, but they also saw these teachings lived out in the daily life of the spiritual father.

In this context, the personal example of a spiritual father becomes a "vehicle" of religious teaching, a means by which parishioners can understand how to live out spiritual truths in everyday life. Every act of the spiritual father, of love, of mercy, of sacrifice, became a way of teaching about divine love and the Christian's call to live a holy life. The life of a spiritual father became a living model of faith, for all those who wanted to follow the way of Jesus Christ²⁰.

3.3. The use of parables and spiritual stories

One of the oldest and most effective methods of conveying the teaching of the Church is the use of parables and spiritual stories. In the Orthodox tradition, servants of the Church have realized the importance of parables and stories, aware of their power to convey complex messages in an accessible and memorable way. Parables are not mere stories, but pedagogical tools designed to help listeners discover profound truths about spiritual life.

By using parables, servants of the Church can convey profound lessons about divine love, salvation, forgiveness, repentance and solidarity, in a way that goes beyond the limits of formal theological discourse. The parable provides a more accessible and understandable framework, and through it, the listener can ask questions and come to their own conclusions.

Another important aspect of the use of parables and spiritual stories is the close connection between religious teachings and everyday realities. The servants of the Church have realized that, in order to reach the souls of their listeners, they have to give them examples, that are close to their daily lives, which will be able to help them to apply the teachings to their own experience. In this sense, the parable becomes a powerful instrument of spiritual education, that transcends the boundaries of theory, bringing divine truth to the concrete level of human existence.

The use of parables and spiritual stories has a particular impact on the formation of a healthy moral conscience among believers. The parable is capable of touching the human heart and mind in a profound way, opening the eyes to the deeper meanings of Christian teaching. Thus, through spiritual stories and parables, the servants of the Church can help parishioners to understand not only the abstract principles of the faith, but also how they can be applied practically and effectively in everyday life.

4. ACTUALITY OF THE HOMILETICAL TEACHINGS OF THE SPIRITUAL FATHERS

The servants of the Church in the 20th century, though living in a historical and cultural context very different from today's, left a spiritual legacy, that remains relevant today. Faced with the contemporary challenges of a world marked by individualism, polarization and growing distance between people, their teachings are a necessary balm for souls searching for meaning and a reconnection to the fundamental values of the Orthodox Christian faith. One of the most topical aspects of the teachings of the spiritual fathers is the

²⁰ Pr. asist univ. dr. Anton Savelovici, "Predica prin fapte în regimul concentraționar comunist", in *Predicatori și cateheți români, mărturisitori în timpul regimului comunist*, Editura Universitaria Craiova, Timișoara, 2017, pp. 222-227.

message of unconditional love, patience and hope. In an age when individualism and the desire for self-assertion dominate society and inter-human relationships are often fragmented, their words offer a powerful antidote. Love, not just as a feeling, but as a daily choice and action, was a constant theme in their sermons. They emphasized, that true love is not limited to words or gestures that are easy to see but involves dedication and continual sacrifice for the good of others.

Hope is also another pillar of the teachings of spiritual fathers, that continues to resonate today. In an age when economic, political and social uncertainty and crises cause unrest and fear, the servants of the Church in the 20th century offered a clear message: despite all the difficulties of earthly life, there is a greater light, hope in the resurrection and eternal life. Hope is not just a passive emotion, but an active act of faith that urges us to move forward, to fight for justice and to trust that God is present in the midst of our sufferings²¹. In a world tired of conflict and division, this message of profound hope is more relevant than ever.

Another important aspect, which makes the teachings of spiritual fathers still valid today, is the way in which they managed to combine tradition with adaptability to the context of their time. In spite of troubled times, the spiritual fathers were able to respond to the spiritual needs of their faithful by adapting their homiletical methods, without sacrificing the Church's teaching of faith. They understood that the message of the Gospel cannot change, but the ways of conveying it must be flexible and take account of social and cultural developments. Thus, some of these spiritual fathers used simple and accessible language, teaching through parables and stories, and talking about the everyday problems faced by their faithful. This approach makes their message relevant and close to real life.

In the multi-challenging digital age of effective communication and penetration of the spiritual message among the younger generation, the homiletical methods of the spiritual fathers can be a source of inspiration for contemporary preachers. Even though the world has changed a lot, human nature remains the same: people seek meaning, comfort and answers to their troubles. The spiritual fathers, of the 20th century, knew how to speak to people's hearts, and this ability to create a deep connection with listeners is a valuable lesson for today's preachers.

CONCLUSION

The preaching activity, of the servants of the Romanian Orthodox Church, confessors of the 20th century, has an important influence on homiletical research. Also, for the previous century, Holy Tradition, with its dual aspect, was viable. Through sermons, priests transmitted the Church's teaching of faith, unaltered (the staunch aspect), but in a form, which was adapted to contemporary spiritual needs (the dynamic aspect). Through their sermons, rooted in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, the Church's servants were true "keepers of the living fire of faith", passing on a message that was pure and unaltered, but also alive and relevant.

Their homiletical methods, characterized by simplicity, profundity and authenticity, are a source of constant inspiration. They demonstrate that the essential truths of faith need not be presented in complicated or inaccessible language but can be expressed in simple words and clear images, that penetrate the soul of the listener. Moreover, they remain a

²¹ Fr. Prof. Ph.D. Anton Savelovici, "Confessing faith beyond the communist bars", in *Icoana credinței*, No. 15, Year 8/2022, p. 15.

valuable source of teaching and a model for contemporary preachers, who wish to remain faithful to their mission despite the changes in today's society.

Through their messages of hope, love and spiritual courage, the servants of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the confessors of the 20th century, continue to enlighten the path of today's believers. In a world increasingly marked by uncertainty and division, their teachings remind us that, whatever the times, love, patience and hope remain fundamental values, that can transform the world and bring us closer to God. Thus, even in today's context, the power of the Gospel transcends time and historical context and continues to be a source of comfort and guidance for the whole Church and for all humanity.

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