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Communicative Competence in Preaching: Principles of Effective Homiletic Communication in Contemporary Culture

Kompetencja komunikacyjna w przepowiadaniu – zasady skutecznej komunikacji homiletycznej we współczesnej kulturze

Abstract

The cognitive aim of this article is to present the principles of the communicative quality of preaching a homily in the context of contemporary cultural and social challenges, based on the theory of communicative competence developed within the field of social sciences, particularly communication and media studies. To achieve this objective, the following methods were applied: content analysis and a review of the relevant literature, including media studies (covering the art of public speaking, self-presentation, and communicative competence), as well as homiletic and theological-communicative approaches. According to the conducted analysis of the research material, the key elements of the communicative quality of a homily include a clear and concise structure, theological depth, language adapted to the audience, references to the experience and daily life of the listeners, and the authenticity of the preacher. A well-prepared homily fulfills not only a formative, evangelizing, or catechetical function, but also a communicative one, responding to the aesthetic and cultural needs of the audience. In this sense, the cognitive value of this article lies in identifying homiletic standards grounded in the main characteristics of communicative competence: effectiveness, flexibility, and appropriateness. These guidelines may serve both the practice of preaching and further research on religious communication, particularly the contemporary art of proclaiming the Gospel.

Keywords
homily, communicative competence, communicative quality of preaching, religious communication, preaching

Streszczenie

Celem poznawczym niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie zasad komunikacyjnej jakości głoszenia homilii w kontekście współczesnych wyzwań kulturowych i społecznych na podstawie teorii kompetencji komunikacyjnej, zgłębianej w obszarze nauk społecznych – nauk o komunikacji społecznej i mediach. Do zrealizowana tak sformułowanego celu zastosowano metody: analizy treści i przeglądu literatury przedmiotu: medioznawczej (ze sztuki wystąpień publicznych, autoprezentacji, kompetencji komunikacyjnej) oraz homiletycznej i teologiczno-komunikacyjnej. Według przeprowadzonej analizy materiału badawczego kluczowe elementy komunikacyjnej jakości homilii to: klarowna, niezbyt długa struktura, język dostoswany do odbiorcy, teologiczna głębia, odwoływanie się do doświadczenia i życia odbiorcy, autentyczność głoszącego. Dobrze przygotowana homilia pełni rolę nie tylko formacyjną, ewangelizacyjną czy katechetyczną, ale także komunikacyjną, odpowiadając na estetyczne i kulturowe potrzeby odbiorcy. W tym znaczeniu wartość poznawcza niniejszego artykułu polega na wykazaniu standardów homiletycznych, przygotowanych na podstawie głównych cech kompetencji komunikacyjnej: skuteczności, elastyczności, stosowności. Wytyczne te mogą posłużyć do praktyki kaznodziejskiej lub dalszych badań nad komunikacją religijną, w tym przede wszystkim współczesną sztuką głoszenia Ewangelii.

Słowa kluczowe
homilia, kompetencja komunikacyjna, komunikacyjna jakość przepowiadania, komunikacja religijna, kaznodziejstwo

Introduction

Without communicative competence, even the most theologically rich homily risks losing its living power. The preaching of the homily occupies an essential communicative role within the life of the Church. It is not merely a minor addition to the Eucharistic celebration but an integral part of the liturgy, through which the Word of God becomes present, proclaimed, and explained in the living context of the faith community. Thus, the homily, as one of the Church's primary genres of evangelization, serves as a communicative bridge between divine revelation and human experience, translating the timeless message of Scripture into the concrete realities of faithful's everyday lives. For many believers, the Sunday homily remains the primary – if not the only – moment of direct and communal engagement with the Word of God within the Church setting (Więź, 2025). As such, the preacher's communicative competence assumes profound pastoral and relational responsibility and significance: it mediates not only the meaning but also encounter, creating a space in which listeners may come to recognize, experience, and meet the living God. Therefore, every homily delivered with communicative competence, theological depth, and pastoral sensitivity contributes meaningfully to the transformative power of the liturgy, shaping both personal faith and the spiritual life of the present community.

The primary cognitive aim of this article is to expound what it means to preach a homily that is effective, appropriate, and adaptable within the framework of contemporary communicative competence theory. More specifically, the study seeks to conceptualize the principles of communicative quality in preaching considering the dynamic cultural and social transformations shaping the context of religious communication today. By drawing upon the theoretical framework of communicative competence – developed within the social sciences, particularly in media and communication studies – this article situates the act of preaching within an interdisciplinary dialogue between communication theory, rhetoric, and homiletics. The guiding research question may thus be formulated as follows: What constitutes communicative effectiveness, appropriateness, and adaptability in the practice of preaching in response to the challenges of modern society? This question opens a broader inquiry into the nature of preaching as a complex communicative act that demands not only theological insight but also rhetorical awareness, emotional intelligence, and contextual sensitivity.

In pursuit of this objective, the study also addresses several specific research questions designed to operationalize the broader inquiry into communicative competence in homiletic practice. These include: What communicative quality standards can be identified in preaching a homily when examined through the lens of communicative competence paradigm? Which dimensions of public speaking and self-presentation contribute most significantly to the persuasive and pastoral efficacy

of the homily? and in what ways can the conceptual apparatus of communicative competence, as articulated in contemporary media and communication scholarship, be applied to the systematic analysis and evaluation of homiletic quality?

These questions underscore the interdisciplinary nature of the investigation, which seeks to integrate insights from communication science with pastoral reflection. By framing the homily as both a sacred proclamation and a complex communicative event, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how communicative competence paradigm can help to inform and enhance the art of preaching in the twenty-first century. To achieve these research objectives, this study employs content analysis combined with an extensive review of the relevant literature. The analyzed sources include scholarly works in the fields of media and communication studies – particularly those addressing communicative competence and public speaking – as well as publications in homiletics and pastoral theology. The content analysis involves a critical and interpretive examination of selected scholarly texts that articulate or develop the theory of communicative competence, with special attention to its three constitutive characteristics: effectiveness, appropriateness, and adaptability.

It is important to note that, within communication theory, communicative competence encompasses three interrelated dimensions: knowledge, skills, and motivation. It entails a solid understanding of the principles that govern communication in a given context, the practical ability to apply this understanding effectively through specific communicative skills, and the motivation to engage in competent communication in real-life situations. Within these dimensions, communicative competence comprises of several interdependent components – appropriateness, effectiveness, adaptability, contextual awareness, and a diverse communicative repertoire – which are often regarded as *sine qua non* conditions of successful communication. These dimensions and components mutually reinforce one another, shaping the profile of a competent communicator capable of meaningful, context-sensitive interaction across a wide range of social and cultural settings. (Marcyński, 2017, s. 170-181). Within the scope of this study, the analysis focuses specifically on the three key components – effectiveness, appropriateness, and adaptability – as they pertain to the practice of homiletic preaching.

A systematic examination and critical review of the literature made it possible to identify the key determinants of communicative quality within the practice of preaching. This process not only clarified the theoretical dimensions of communicative competence but also enabled a deeper understanding of how these principles manifest in the lived dynamics of liturgical proclamation. The research aims contribute to the ongoing interdisciplinary discourse on homiletic communication, offering theoretical insights and practical implications that may enhance

the communicative competence of preachers and, consequently, the transformative potential of the homily within contemporary ecclesial life.

The Homily as a Form of Religious Communication

The etymological origin of the word *homily* is significant for the purposes of the present study. It derives from the Greek term *homileo*, meaning "to converse," and more precisely, "to converse with affection" or "to speak intimately" (Waznak, 1998, s. 4). This linguistic root offers valuable insight into both the nature and the practice of the homily. From the perspective of communication and media studies, the homily is classified as a form of religious communication – a category that itself has been understood in multiple ways[1]. For the purposes of this article, it is useful to recall one of its definitions: "Religious communication is the transmission of a religious message (for example, a homily, sermon, or religious publication – whether oral or written – containing religious content)" (Marcyński, 2024, s. 216). In this sense, from a social-scientific standpoint, the homily may be regarded as a distinctive type of message in which the preacher acts as an intermediary between the biblical text and the assembled community of believers. Such communication constitutes a process through which the preacher interprets and contemporizes the religious – specifically biblical – message, translating it into language that is comprehensible and meaningful to modern listeners. Owing to its formal character, the homily is marked by an asymmetrical sender–receiver relationship; however, this does not preclude the possibility of building or deepening a sense of community through it. Moreover, the homily is reinforced by its liturgical context and by the sacred space in which it is typically delivered – factors that add a symbolic and sacramental dimension to the communicative act.

From a communicative standpoint, the homily consists of both verbal and nonverbal layers: language, tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, and bodily movement. In the field of media and communication studies, the homily – understood as a form of religious communication – fulfills several overlapping functions: an informative function (conveying theological and biblical content), a persuasive function (encouraging transformation of attitudes and behavior), a motivational function (inspiring improvement in moral and spiritual life), and a community-building function (strengthening the bonds among listeners through shared reflection on common values) (Anderson, 2001).

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[1] The author collected various definitions of religious communication and subsequently analysed them; the results of this analysis are presented in the chapter entitled: „Komunikacja religijna jako obszar badań w naukach o komunikacji społecznej i mediach" (Marcyński, 2024, pp. 207-234).

From the perspective of communication and media studies, it is particularly significant that the traditional form of homiletic communication has evolved in tandem with the development of modern media and technology. One early and illustrative example of this transformation is the introduction of the microphone into the liturgical space – a change analyzed by the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan. According to McLuhan, in earlier periods, attention during the liturgy was oriented primarily toward the broader *environment* created by the ritual itself: the sounds, colors, scents, objects, and movements that together constituted a multisensory sacred experience. Within that environment, the priest's words functioned merely as one element among many. With the advent of the microphone, however, the communicative dynamics of the liturgy were profoundly altered. The congregation entered into a more direct relationship with the celebrant; his voice became clearer, more intimate, and more dominant within the auditory field. The spoken word thus gained a new prominence, reshaping the liturgical experience in fundamental ways. As McLuhan (observed, this seemingly minor technological device – the microphone – brought about a profound transformation in how participants engage with the liturgy (McLuhan, 1999, s. 107-116).

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A further manifestation of this evolution can be seen in the mediatization of homilies through electronic and digital platforms. Masses are now broadcast via television, radio, and online streaming; homilies are recorded and shared on parish websites and social media channels; and interactive features allow viewers to comment on the content in real time. These developments have introduced a new dimension of religious communication characterized by accessibility, immediacy, and interactivity, but they have also raised numerous theological and communicative dilemmas. The homily is no longer confined to the physical space of the church nor limited to those present at the liturgy. Through processes of mediatization, it has become a message that transcends spatial and temporal boundaries, reaching audiences who participate remotely and often in diverse cultural and social contexts. This expanded communicative environment poses new challenges for preachers, who must now be attentive to both the immediate, physically gathered congregation and the dispersed, virtual audience engaged through media technologies (Szczepaniak, 2012, s. 8-19;

Makuła, 2019, s. 37-49; Szczepaniak, 2013; Bartocha, 2019, s. 55-69; Kindziuk, 2021, s. 44-77; Szczepaniak, 2021, s. 133-154; Leśniczak, 2022, s. 1312-1321).

From a theological perspective, a good homily fulfils five essential conditions: it is existential, kerygmatic, catechetical, mystagogical, and moral (Waznak, 1998, s. 16-27; Przyczyna, 1994, s. 48-66; Adamek, 1992, s. 135). The existential dimension of the homily means that its content arises from the real experiences of human life, addressing the needs, problems, and questions of contemporary people. This understanding is rooted in the very nature of Revelation, according to which God in Christianity is a God present in human existence. Consequently, preaching cannot be confined to the theoretical transmission of the truths of faith; rather, it must continually engage the existential dimension of human life (Sławiński, 2023, s. 70-79). In this way, Christ is presented as *Emmanuel* – "God with us" (Waznak, 1998, s. 4). This underscores the necessity of constructing the homiletic message from human experience as the point of departure and directing it toward God as the ultimate goal – or conversely, illuminating the realities of human existence through the light of the Gospel.

The preacher must know the life situation of the listeners. This awareness allows him to address real human experiences and daily challenges within the existential dimension of the homily. The homily, by its very nature, relates the Word to life and life to the Word, enabling a genuine encounter between the Gospel and the lived realities of the faithful. Above all, the preacher is called to act as a witness – to communicate a personal testimony of faith. This dimension is frequently regarded as a foundational condition of homiletic effectiveness and as the starting point from which all other elements of the homily flow (Franciszek, 2013, nr 179).

When this existential grounding is lacking, listeners may perceive the homily as disconnected from their daily reality, irrelevant to life, and therefore unconvincing. Devoid of this life-oriented dimension, the homily may even lead hearers to conclude that God Himself is detached from human existence. Such an existential approach to preaching is intrinsically linked to the mystery of the Incarnation and expresses the deepest meaning of proclaiming the Word: by becoming human, God entered into human existence to transform it from within. Every authentically Christian homily, therefore, must be *incarnational* – it should imitate this "style of God" by entering into human life and leading it toward salvation. In its very essence, the homily must be existential from beginning to end. This perspective also finds confirmation in communication theory: an effective homily requires not only the transmission of theological content but also genuine dialogue with the listener's lived experience. It involves sharing common human experiences, allowing listeners to find themselves within the communicative act of the preacher through accessible language, emotional resonance, and reference to everyday struggles. Only in this way can

the message of the Gospel truly be heard, understood, and embraced (Marcyński, 2016, s. 95-100).

The kerygmatic element of the homily refers to the faithful proclamation of what God has done and revealed in Sacred Scripture. The biblical pericope constitutes the central and leading aspect of the homily, yet it requires the preacher's exegetical work so that the Word of God may be presented in its full context and proper meaning (Waznak, 1998, s. 4).

The preacher does not perform exegesis in the strict academic sense from the pulpit; rather, enriched by its insights, he translates the discovered depth of the text into the language of faith and life, proclaiming the message of Jesus in a way that is intelligible, relevant, and spiritually inspiring. This is the catechetical dimension of the homily that involves explaining what is contained in the kerygma, both in its historical-biblical aspect and in its contemporary application. This explanation helps listeners better understand the events of salvation history and, above all, to translate and apply them in their daily lives (Przyczyna, 1994, s. 48-66).

The moral dimension means that the homily should not only communicate truth but also lead the faithful to accept and embody it in their lives. To this end, examples, concrete illustrations, and personal witness are especially effective, as they appeal directly to the imagination and convictions of the listeners (Paweł VI, 1975, nr 47). Narrative techniques – such as storytelling – enable the message of the Gospel to penetrate deeply, like music reaching the innermost layers of the soul, drawing the listener into the story so that they can experience it emotionally, identify with its protagonists, and in this way they can easier make concrete life decisions based on the Gospel (Langer, 2009; Przyczyna, 2000, s. 28-49; Mistewicz, 2011, s. 37-54).

The mystagogical dimension of the homily aims to lead the faithful into a living and authentic encounter with Christ present in the Eucharist. In this sense, the homily should awaken awareness of God's presence and open the listener to the action of the Holy Spirit (Waznak, 1998, s. 16-27; Broński, 1999, s. 77-80; Franciszek, 2013, nr 179). Saint Augustine described the homily as a *sacramentum audibile* – an "audible sacrament" – through which the power of God's Word itself operates (Augustyn, s. 529; Marcyński, 2024, s. 52-63). Yet the extent to which it becomes an instrument of grace also depends, within the framework of communicative competence, on the preacher's spiritual and communicative disposition – his sensitivity to God's presence in the Word and his mystagogical attitude arising from personal intimacy with Christ. It is precisely this closeness to Jesus that enables the preacher, alongside the power of the sacrament itself, to lead the faithful during the Eucharist into an experience of faith and toward an encounter with the living God (Franciszek, 2013, nr 179).

In this context, Pope Francis has emphasized the contemporary role of the preacher as a guide who not only teaches but also accompanies people on

their journey, showing them the authentic path to Jesus (Franciszek, 2013, nr 179). According to him, the homily should be simple, close to life, and filled with mercy, understanding, and hope. He warns against homilies that fail to reach the human heart (Franciszek, 2013, nr 179). As Józef Kudasiewicz observed, a good homily can be recognized by the way the preacher makes the Word of God speak to the listeners: "One must speak in such a way that after the homily people can say, 'This is the Word of God that the Lord addresses to you'" (Dyk, 2001-2002, s. 96-97).

The central purpose of the homily, therefore, is to explain biblical content in relation to the daily life of the faithful and to actualize the message of the Gospel in a way that corresponds to the contemporary context. Even this simple understanding of the homily reveals that its effectiveness depends not only on the preacher's theological knowledge and spiritual preparation but also on his communicative competence (Marcyński, 2015, s. 81-93; Marcyński, 2009, s. 95-102). Jesus of Nazareth was proclaiming divine truths in a manner that was accessible, engaging, and suited to the listener's life situation (Marcyński, 2020, s. 95-108). His successors – the great orators of the Church, preachers, and masters of sacred eloquence – also embodied this awareness (Marcyński, 2011, s. 469-478).

Communicative Competence and the Homily

The Word of God requires from the preacher a particular communicative care, precision, and preparation – most of all, a continual deepening of one's communicative competence. This competence can be understood as an integrated combination of knowledge, skills, and motivation related to the process of communication. It includes knowledge about communication itself – such as awareness of appropriate behavior in specific situations, understanding of group language and cultural codes, and sensitivity to relationships and emotions – together with the ability to use this knowledge effectively in concrete communicative contexts.

Communicative competence also encompasses active listening, empathy, and the capacity to adapt one's behaviour to the unique demands of each communicative situation. Scholars such as Brian H. Spitzberg have expanded this understanding by introducing motivation as a key dimension – defined as the degree to which an individual strives to communicate competently in a given situation. Models of communicative competence proposed by Michael Canale and Carol M. Swain, as well as Lyle F. Bachman, include components such as grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence, emphasizing the individual's ability to establish and maintain effective interpersonal relationships (Marcyński, 2017, s. 108-112).

A preacher with a high level of communicative competence is able to communicate effectively during the homily, demonstrating appropriateness to both the topic and the audience. Such a preacher flexibly adapts the content and form of the message to the situation, remains aware of the listeners' cultural and social contexts, and

employs a rich and continually developed repertoire of communicative tools. "Pastoral competence, in the case of a priest, constitutes a set of skills that express his proficiency in the performance of his ministerial duties. Each pastoral responsibility can be associated with specific, necessary competencies. For tasks related to the delivery of homilies, these include vocal skills, voice modulation, narrative ability, the capacity to construct clear and comprehensible messages adapted to the listener, logical coherence in speech, analytical thinking, and the ability to draw conclusions" (Marcyński, 2024, s. 64-66)[2].

Effectiveness in the Homily

For a homily to reach its listeners effectively, it must fulfil several essential conditions that make it both communicative and authentic. Its purpose is not limited to the accurate transmission of theological content but rather it involves the ability to truly reach people and to foster within them an openness to the Gospel and a genuine desire to know God more deeply. As Pope John Paul II repeatedly emphasized, the homily must be "a living word that moves the human heart and becomes a source of transformation in people's lives" (Jan Paweł II, 1985; Sławiński, 2023, s. 43-62). His own homilies exemplified this principle: they combined linguistic simplicity with profound meaning, adapted to the needs of contemporary audiences, which greatly enhanced their communicative power and transformative potential (Weigel, New York 1999). Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI underscored the need to integrate deep theology with communicative clarity and authenticity so that the homily might serve as a witness to living faith: "General and abstract homilies that obscure the simplicity of the Word of God should be avoided, as should useless digressions that draw attention more to the preacher than to the core of the Gospel message"

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2   A detailed catalogue of the elements of knowledge, skills, and motivation that constitute the preacher's communicative competence was presented by the author in his book (2024). These elements include, among others: Knowledge: possesses an understanding of the nature and structure of the homily; knows and comprehends its integral components (existential, kerygmatic, catechetical, mystagogical, and practical); is familiar with the principles of crafting a good and communicative homily; understands the dynamics of empathetic communication; has knowledge of the art of narration and storytelling; and is aware of the need to address people with diverse communicative needs and abilities. Skills: is able to prepare a homily in accordance with its integral components; can identify the core message of the homily based on the scriptural texts or on the fixed and variable parts of the Holy Mass; demonstrates proficiency in competent speaking and public address; can speak about God in a language and emotional tone accessible to the audience; and is capable of adjusting the length of the homily to the situation, context, and listeners. Motivation: is willing and determined to deliver a homily that is clear and meaningful to the audience; chooses to engage personally with the congregation during preaching; desires and decides to speak on behalf of God; and is motivated to ensure that his message is both seen and heard effectively.

(Benedykt XVI, 2010, nr 59). Benedict himself exemplified this approach: he valued clarity and precision of expression, avoided excessive and complex explanations during homilies, and thereby enabled diverse audiences to grasp his message with ease and depth.

From a communication perspective, the effectiveness of a homily depends first and foremost on the use of clear and comprehensible language – free from exaggerated emotionalism, abstract terminology, definitional overload, or empty clichés, all of which hinder proper understanding (Osborne, 2006; Coe, 2022). Historical traditions also reflect this concern for clarity. In the East Slavic tradition as early as the fifteenth century, preachers emphasized the use of simple and accessible language, often through local dialects, to facilitate comprehension among the faithful (Belyakova, 2019, s. 59-71). In Anglo-Saxon homilies (ninth–eleventh centuries), simplicity was expressed through direct address to the audience, repetition, and parallel structures that reinforced meaning and built rapport with listeners (Buniyatova, Horodilova, 2023, s. 34-47). Moreover, the language of the homily should be vivid and illustrative, helping the listener visualize the truth being proclaimed (Chrzanowski, 2024, s. 97-112). This does not necessarily mean the use of physical props – though such aids may be appropriate in children's homilies – but rather the creative selection of words that enable listeners to "see" the scene or reality described. A striking historical example is St. Augustine, whose homilies frequently employed antithetical parallelisms, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, repetition, and the use of anaphora and epiphora all of which greatly enhanced the persuasive and mnemonic effectiveness of his preaching (Andoková, Horka, 2023, s. 209-226).

Another vital factor of homiletic effectiveness is the preacher's nonverbal communication – his body language and direct eye contact with the congregation. The preacher should therefore avoid reading directly from a manuscript, even though notes or a full written version of the homily may serve as a valuable aid. Many accomplished speakers, including popes, make use of written texts while maintaining natural and dynamic contact with their listeners. Maintaining eye contact, using gestures that convey warmth, openness, and joy in proclaiming the Gospel, as well as demonstrating genuine engagement with the congregation, significantly increases the impact of the homily (Allen, 2016). Furthermore, the creation of a joyful and welcoming atmosphere supports positive reception of the message. Appropriate use of humor, a friendly smile, and kindness can strengthen communal bonds and foster receptivity. The tone of voice, modulation, and use of pauses also play a crucial role, helping to sustain attention and evoke emotion among listeners (Gu, 2023, s. 1460).

In addition, the use of rhetorical strategies enhances communicative effectiveness. One particularly effective technique is the frequent use of the pronoun "we", which reinforces the sense of community and shared experience between preacher and listeners, encompassing both joys and struggles (Long, 2013). Also, authenticity

is essential condition for effective preaching. Listeners respond best to those who are genuine, natural, and unpretentious – who avoid theatrical exaggeration or excessive formality while maintaining reverence for the sacredness of the moment and respect for the congregation.

Appropriateness in the Homily

The message of the homily should be both inspiring and profound, grounded in sound biblical exegesis and theological reflection, yet communicated in an accessible way that demonstrates the practical relevance of God's Word to contemporary human experience. Homilies often address complex issues of life – its dilemmas, challenges, and moral tensions. These may include ethical, social, or cultural questions that are controversial or polarizing, and thus particularly demanding for the preacher (Lovry, 2000). When a preacher undertakes to interpret such topics, a highly developed communicative competence is essential. One of its crucial characteristics is appropriateness, a key component of communicative competence. In other words, a person who is communicatively competent demonstrates the ability to act appropriately in diverse communicative situations. This involves three dimensions (Marcyński, 2024, s. 64-67): 1. knowledge – understanding what constitutes appropriate behavior in specific contexts, knowing what can and cannot be said or done; 2. skills – the practical ability to apply this knowledge, to speak about difficult issues without crossing boundaries of privacy, confidentiality, or emotional sensitivity; 3. motivation – the willingness to communicate appropriately and to continually develop in this area.

In the context of homiletics, communicative appropriateness is both important and challenging. The homily is a public act of communication directed to a group – sometimes small, sometimes very large – whose members possess diverse life experiences and worldviews. This complexity requires from the preacher a deep sensitivity to the communicative diversity present among listeners.

On the one hand, the preacher must respect the audience and avoid exceeding certain limits from the pulpit; on the other hand, he must not evade difficult or uncomfortable subjects when pastoral circumstances demand it. This tension between respect and courage lies at the very heart of appropriateness in preaching. From both a communicative and theological perspective, appropriateness also requires that the preacher avoid stigmatizing listeners or viewing them merely as "sinners." Rather, the faithful should be presented as children of God, called to live in closeness with Him. The pulpit – like the confessional – should become above all a space of mercy and hope. Viewing the congregation through the lens of divine mercy guides the preacher toward appropriate pastoral communication. It helps prevent judgmental attitudes, emotional harshness, or tones of criticism, condescension, and neglect.

Therefore, the quality of homiletic communication depends not only on content but also on the preacher's disposition and attitude. The congregation perceives both the preacher's intellectual preparation and his relational stance toward them – how he thinks and feels about his listeners. This connection is closely tied to appropriateness. A preacher who is arrogant, distant, or overly critical of human frailty quickly loses credibility and, eventually, the attention of the faithful.

Conversely, a preacher who demonstrates respect, compassion, and hope while addressing moral or spiritual challenges fosters trust and receptivity. Such a pastoral style makes the message memorable – not necessarily because of the specific theological details of the homily, but because of the preacher's attitude, engagement, gentleness, and appropriateness toward the lived realities of his listeners.

Flexibility in the Homily

Another essential component of communicative competence is flexibility – the ability to adapt to varying circumstances and transcend rigid, predetermined patterns of interaction. Being flexible in communication requires three interrelated elements: 1. knowledge of the social rules that apply within a specific context, 2. the practical ability to implement them, and 3. willingness to engage in adaptive modes of communication. "A competent communicator, when acting inappropriately in a communicative situation, almost always learns from the experience. As a result, they become a better communicator than most people. A communicatively aware preacher is sensitive to communicative contexts and perspectives and is capable of adapting to new communicative situations." (Marcyński, 2017, s. 192).

Flexibility in the homily entails openness of mind and readiness to adjust language, communication style, and content to the audience and circumstances. The preacher should be able to quickly discern – or, if possible, determine beforehand – the composition of the congregation: whether it consists primarily of children, adolescents, adults, the elderly, or a mixed assembly. Depending on this, the preacher ought to modify not only vocabulary but also the length, tone, and theological or spiritual depth of the message.

Communicative flexibility also implies the preacher's ability to respond to the specific situation of the community. A funeral homily, for example, requires a markedly different communicative style than one delivered at a wedding or First Communion. Flexibility presupposes a continual attentiveness to the surrounding context – an awareness of what is shaping the life of the world and, more immediately, the lives of the listeners. This attentiveness allows the preacher to incorporate current experiences and events – both joyful and painful – into the homily, without losing sight of the enduring message of the Gospel.

Understood in this way, flexibility as a component of communicative competence in preaching demands not only knowledge of Scripture and theology but also

the ability to speak about spiritual realities in the everyday language of the faithful. Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized that a homily should not resemble an academic lecture, but rather a brief, concrete message – rooted in life, centered on a single idea or image – that "the listener can take home" (Franciszek, 2023).

Conclusions and Summary

The communicative competence or quality of preaching constitutes one of the fundamental conditions for the effectiveness and appropriateness of the homily. The cognitive aim of this article was to identify and describe the principles of communicative quality in the preaching of a homily in light of contemporary cultural and social challenges, drawing upon the theory of communicative competence developed within the field of social sciences – specifically, communication and media studies. The three primary characteristics of communicative competence – effectiveness, appropriateness, and flexibility – served as the theoretical framework for defining communicative standards that determine the quality of homiletic proclamation.

The communicative competence of the preacher, understood as a synthesis of knowledge, skills, and motivation required for delivering meaningful and effective homilies, is as essential as theological or spiritual preparation. The present social and cultural context demands that the priest possess not only proficiency in biblical and theological disciplines, but also concrete communication knowledge, skills and motivation manifested in the effectiveness, appropriateness, and flexibility of his preaching. A homily characterized by high communicative quality thus becomes not only an instrument of evangelization and formation, but also a space of genuine encounter between the human person, God, and the ecclesial community.

The present social and cultural context demands that the priest possess not only proficiency in biblical and theological disciplines, but also concrete communication knowledge, skills and motivation manifested in the effectiveness, appropriateness, and flexibility of his preaching.

The first component of communicative competence discussed in this article is effectiveness. In the homiletic context, effectiveness refers to the use of clear, intelligible, and accessible language free from abstract concepts and overly complex terminology. A communicatively effective preacher employs a rich repertoire of verbal and nonverbal means – such as vivid imagery, appropriate voice modulation, pauses, eye contact, and natural delivery. Effectiveness in the homily also entails connecting with

the real-life experiences of listeners, avoiding artificial theatricality, and maintaining a tone of kindness and warmth while preserving the solemnity proper to the liturgy.

The second component, appropriateness, involves the preacher's ability to address difficult and sometimes demanding issues of life that emerge from the Gospel and the Church's teaching, while always maintaining respect for the dignity and sensitivity of the listeners. A preacher who demonstrates appropriateness can discuss challenging moral or social matters in the spirit of Gospel mercy, avoiding moralistic preaching or a judgmental tone.

The third component, flexibility, denotes the preacher's openness of mind and readiness to adapt language, style, and content to the specific audience and circumstances. A flexible preacher can discern the nature of the liturgical assembly and its participants, adjusting vocabulary, length, and theological depth accordingly. Flexibility also entails the ability to respond to the current events and experiences of the listeners without losing a constant reference to the message of the Gospel. Such flexibility requires not only solid theological knowledge but also the ability to speak about faith in the language of contemporary people.

Finally, it is worth recalling the ten "demons of preaching" identified by Kenneth Untener (1999, pp. 143–152), which undermine the communicative quality of the homily – its effectiveness, appropriateness, and flexibility. The ten "demons of preaching" are:

1. merely repeating the Gospel in one's own words;
2. adopting a "preachy" tone;
3. recycling old homilies;
4. repeating the same idea unnecessarily (unless as a legitimate rhetorical device);
5. assembling content not personally internalized by the preacher;
6. excessive or lengthy quotations;
7. neglecting certain groups within the congregation;
8. selecting only those biblical readings that "fit" one's message;
9. poor microphone use leading to lack of intelligibility;
10. employing linguistic clichés and trite expressions.

Avoiding these pitfalls – and consciously cultivating communicative competence – enables the preacher to become not merely a more effective speaker, but above all a credible witness to the Gospel. Effectiveness, appropriateness, and flexibility – understood as key characteristics of communicative competence – allow the homily to serve as a true bridge between the Word of God and the everyday life of the faithful, and ultimately, as a living bridge between God and the believers.

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