

---

## STORYTELLING IN CHRISTIAN SERMONS

**Renata Nováková\*, Katarína Ďurková and Andrea Tománková**

*University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, Nám. J. Herdu 2,  
91701 Trnava, Slovak Republic*

(Received 19 December 2013)

---

### **Abstract**

Stories affect all our life. There are cultures whose existence is based on storytelling. Stories are an inspiration, instruction, bearers of ethical and moral values and a reason for reflection. We increasingly encounter the use of stories in different areas of our daily lives. They affect our material and spiritual worlds as well as our attitudes. This paper highlights the impact and importance of stories, religious stories in particular, as a messenger of moral truth and authority for predicting the effective way of setting certain values for individuals and society as a whole. The survey described in this contribution is of a qualitative nature. Its main objective was to confirm our experience and traditional classification of storytelling.

*Keywords:* storytelling, sermon, quality of life, ethics, morale

---

### **1. Introduction**

Our whole life is influenced by stories. Practically since infancy to senior age, we are affected by various types of stories. The existence of some cultures is built upon storytelling (Mayans, Aborigines, but also believers of different religious persuasions). To people, stories can be an inspiration, lesson, but also a reason for reflection. They affect our attitudes and actions. Parables and storytelling form the fundamentals of the Bible, the holy books of Christianity. In their sermons, priests like to draw a parallel between the stories of history and their significance for the present. The subject of our investigation was focused on two aspects of the above-mentioned topic. We first list the essential characteristics of storytelling and present its classification as used in the available literature resources, and then provide feedback in the form of a qualitative research based on structured interviews with two basic groups of respondents.

The first target group consisted of priests as storytellers, while the other one comprised visitors to churches, i.e. audiences of religious sermons. We focused principally on the Catholics, who were divided into three basic categories regarding their age. We assumed that it is the age structure that will provide different insights into perception and application of the lessons learned

---

\* E-mail: re.novakova@gmail.com

from the stories in religious practice and everyday life. Different age categories profess different values and perceive the facts mediated to them through stories in different ways. Prior to detail investigation, we characterize the subject, pointing out the general background of using storytelling in people's lives.

## 2. Basic assumptions for storytelling

First, let us clearly define what storytelling means in its widest concept. Various authors obviously have various views on the content and mission of storytelling. However, all types of definitions have the common basis: *"Storytelling is essentially a performance in front of the audience with the aim to tell a story in which the narrator interprets his own view and opinion on a particular issue."* Narrator may act either alone or in a group. His role is to evoke a picture of the story in a listener, while augmenting such vision by unusual environment with a variety of the aids enhancing the atmosphere of the story and thus expressing all the circumstances of the story.

It is interesting that storytelling is being increasingly used in different types of environments. It has currently found its application as a proper method for motivating people in business environment. This modern phenomenon, as a sophisticated method in the entrepreneurial sphere, is not widely known yet, although some intuitive ways of applying storytelling in order to rouse a particular work activity had existed in the past. The available economic literature describing the business environment (e. g. the journals such as *Zisk, Profit, Trend, Forbes*, etc.) have recently published various types of stories, targeting their content to specific audiences, bearers of a certain paradigm of business conduct in a competitive environment, predetermining thus specific instructions for dealing with situations which may occur in the related environment. Undoubtedly, stories may significantly affect our way of thinking, feeling and acting. People are eager to hear the stories of famous and successful people, identifying themselves with the latter and taking a lesson from their performance. However, it is not always just about positive examples. This is reflected in the biased preview of the same facts used by some people to justify their behaviour which is not always in accordance with generally accepted principles of ethics and morality [1].

In business environment, there is a belief that successful leaders are able to create the legends which can become a basis for building the whole corporate culture. Within this context, storytelling can be considered an important component of management. Managers of companies use storytelling as a motivational tool intended to increase employees' job performance. Storytelling can be also successfully applied in managing work teams particularly in the following areas: sharing the knowledge important for planning success in strategic management, supporting the team in order to increase productivity, expressing the corporate values and strengthening corporate continuity, describing the experience gained in order to develop best practices of employees, initiating the activities necessary for the development of the

company [*Storytelling, príbehy, ktoré inšpirujú*, online at <http://www.manazerskecentrum.sk/clanok/ezisk-storytelling-pribehy-ktore-inspiruju.htm>].

Regarding the above-mentioned, we can then use the following types of stories: stories of ‘who I am’, stories of ‘why am I here’, instructive stories, visionary stories, stories about values, stories like ‘I know what you think’ [*Storytelling, príbehy, ktoré inšpirujú*]. The following other types of classification may be generated:

- a) Stories and their veracity: true and false (fictitious);
- b) Stories and their relation to the subject: stories to ponder on life stories, love stories, stories about relationships, about people’s fates, stories with religious topics;
- c) Stories according to their interpretation: stories narrated, feature stories, combined, stories shared on some of the new forms of dissemination such as social networks, use of audio-visual tools and so on;
- d) Stories classified regarding the temporal aspect: stories related to history of events taking place in the past, stories related to the current situation, stories predicting events in the future;
- e) Others: instructive stories, reflective stories, motivational stories etc.

More types of classification could be easily generated depending on the depth of disaggregation. However, it is important to choose the topic of the story to be shared, and even more important to find a story which would trigger the desired response. A well-chosen story must realistically retell the facts corresponding to the indicated situation, so that to evoke an emotional response in listeners. What must not be neglected is the respect of the moral, ethical and other principles, which is a prerequisite for success.

To tell a successful story applicable in a wider range of situations, the following steps should be observed: The story must be based on a real experience - it is not recommended that the narrator invents unreal things at any cost. Storyteller must create an impression of authenticity - true professional storytellers do not try to play the emotions that they do not feel. If the audience senses insincerity, success cannot be expected. Long tedious stories do not work - human attention has certain capacity and if time of the story is exceeded, the listeners may be bored, and the whole message may be lost. The storytelling must be prepared in advance. There are worldwide contests organized in storytelling. Competitors, on the basis of their own experience, recommend that speakers prepare well in advance before they appear in front of the audience: first, tell the story in front of the mirror, and then in front the close audiences (best friends, relatives) who are critical enough to any presentation techniques, both verbal and non-verbal, enhancing or limiting the impact of the narrator's effort. An important assumption for successful storytelling is sharing the experience. Emotional engagement in the situation presented in the story helps us gain experience that can be applied in other situations. It is not enough just to pass the idea. Listeners will appreciate if they can gain the experience they do not have to check themselves, just in the sense of the saying: ‘The wise man

learns from the mistakes of others, the fool has to learn from his own'. It is also recommended to involve as many senses as possible.

Besides being successfully deployed in the working environment of companies in order to increase the labour commitment and improve the performance of employees, storytelling is being increasingly used even in the marketing environment with the aim to attract and retain customers. For illustration, let us describe how story lines can be made up in advertising. Advertising is one of the tools of communication mix, used primarily in the area of integration in planning the company communication strategy. Daniel Alvarado, the author of structuring storyline in advertising, in his blog 'The Web Marketing Service' generates the following story lines affecting the customer buying behaviour [D. Alvarado, *StoryTelling rule #10: Time and Space*, online at <http://www.thewebmarketingservice.com/node/44>]:

- **'I have a problem'** - the customer is restless, almost nervous and needs someone to appease him. It is used primarily to promote the sale of health products, food, medicines and so on.
- **'I feel fear'** - the customer feels fear and seeks comfort. This motif is frequently used in commercials for insurance of real estate and individuals, personal savings, ensuring personal protection products etc.
- **'No one loves me'** - the customer feels depressed and isolated, and it is therefore necessary to please him and make him happy. Such advertisement is used to increase sales, create a personal relationship with the customer when offering products to a wide range of customers.
- **'Winner and loser'** - the customer is frustrated and sad, needs proper motivation. The use in training programmes, exercise equipment, nutritional products.
- **'I am not exceptional'** - the customer is dissatisfied, he wants to feel happy and fully satisfied, or distinguished from the average. It is used mainly for fashion brands.
- **'I deserve it'** - the customer misses something. This method is ideal for cosmetic products, luxury products, for products intended for rejuvenation and beauty, offering wellness products etc.
- **'The world is against me'** - the customer feels threatened, he wants to be free. It is used for the usually certified products which require knowledge; the sale is supported by various analyses.
- **'God is with me'** - the customer feels guilty and looks for the sense of life, wants to have a feeling of relief and peace. Used in religious products, meditation, gifts, books about self-fulfilment and the sense of life.

The aspect described above could be called rational, i.e. one that is exclusively of so called secular nature. It can be therefore concluded that besides affecting people in their family life, stories are an important factor influencing people's professional lives, purchasing choices, material security and achievement of certain economic independence.

The main objective of this paper is however to provide an insight in to another dimension of human existence, spiritual one. The spiritual dimension can forward people in their efforts to increase the well-established standards and simultaneously significantly influence quality of their life (quality of life means the standard of living, integrity, adherence to moral and ethical principles, qualities such as empathy, compassion and willingness to help etc.) The spiritual dimension is associated with faith. Faith is a part of various types of religion reflected in spreading certain types of ideas, involving the use of parables and experience hidden in religious stories. Messengers of these ideas are priests, and the tool is mostly a religious sermon.

### **3. Storytelling in Christian sermons and its influence on quality of people's lives**

Christianity is seen as a religion of salvation. Based on the belief in a single, transcendent, personal and invisible God, it was founded in late Antiquity. As the Son of God, Jesus resurrected reconciling the world with God and redeeming people from death and damnation. The Bible, a collection of sacred books of Christianity, comprises many stories in its two parts: the Old and the New Testaments. The stories are divided into historical, prophetic and morale ones. Even today, they reveal symbiosis with the everyday life situations. R.B. Braithwaite, an English philosopher, who specialized in philosophy of science, ethics and religion, in his publication 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief' wrote that religious stories affect our perception of what is and what is not good, while placing on this decision-making certain type of authority, motivating us in our determination and implementation of what is good, and, finally, keeping together our collective lives and the whole culture, creating thus a feeling of identity and continuity. Building on the Braithwaite's philosophy, we found that religious stories tell us what is right. The Gospel and Jesus' parables are the best examples. We can even say that the parables laid the foundations of moral truths and laws that significantly affect quality of people's lives [2]. In practice, however, there are also views of critics who say that such an understanding may also have destructive consequences, particularly if taking into account that individuals evade their own responsibility, are not able to decide according to their consciousness and do not wish to take full responsibility for their own decisions and deeds. On the other hand, the adoption of clearly defined moral principles and rules leads to simplifying the life. If there is a narrator who tells us what is right and what is wrong, we do not have to bother with our own reasoning and decision making. This, however, raises the need for further decision-making: which of the hundreds of stories (religions) shall we listen to, and how will it subsequently influence our lives?

We found that telling religious stories is a very effective way of picturing certain values to individuals and the whole society. Religious stories undoubtedly add authority and weight to moral truths. On the one hand, religious stories may help us identify the correct values, but on the other hand, they bear

the risk of persecution, which has ultimately been confirmed by history. However, this was not priority of our research, and therefore it will not be discussed in more detail.

#### 4. Impact of storytelling in Christian sermons on the attitudes of the Catholics – qualitative survey

The sources identify two main directions of Christianity, namely: traditional Christian and non-traditional Christian. Traditional Christian directions are Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Eastern Apostolic Church. Non-traditional Christian directions are Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Church Calvinist Reformation, and Radical reformation of the Church, Pietism, Methodism and others. In Slovakia, the Roman Catholic Church has the biggest representation; of 18 registered churches and religious societies in Slovakia, 14 are Christian [*Registrované cirkvi a náboženské spoločnosti v SR*, online at <http://www.culture.gov.sk/registrovane-cirkvi-a-nabozenske-spolocnosti-f9.html>].

**Table 1.** Population of the Slovak Republic by religious confession  
(Source: Statistics Office of the SR).

Religious confession	Year 2011	
	Number of inhabitants	in %
Roman Catholic Church	3 347 277	62.0
Greek Catholic Church	206 871	3.8
Orthodox church	49 133	0.9
Lutheran Church	316 250	5.9
Reformed Church	98 797	1.8
Religious Society of Jehovah's Witnesses	17 222	0.3
United Methodist Church	10 328	0.2
Christian Churches	7 720	0.1
Apostolic Church	5 831	0.1
Baptist Church	3 486	0.1
Seventh-Day Adventists	2 915	0.1
Brethren Church	3 396	0.1
The Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities	1 999	0.1
Old Catholic Church	1 687	0.0
Czechoslovak Hussite Church	1 782	0.0
The New Apostolic Church	166	0.0
Baha'i Community	1 065	0.0
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	972	0.0
Others	23 340	0.5
without confession	725 362	13.4
Undetected	571 437	10.6

Table 1 is based on the census carried out by the Statistics Office of the Slovak Republic in May 2011. It contains 18 Churches and religious communities, including three and a half million of the Roman Catholic Church believers representing 62 per cent of all. The lowest number of believers, only 166, belonged to the New Apostolic Church. The number of believers in almost all churches generally keeps decreasing. While up to 84 per cent of the population declared their belonging to church in the previous census of 2001, it was only about 77 per cent in 2011. The biggest decline was recorded in the Roman Catholic Church; while 11 years ago it was nearly 69 per cent of the population; there were just 62 per cent of believers last year, representing more than 3.7 million. On the other hand, the number of those without confession increased.

The qualitative research was conducted in two lines, using a structured questionnaire. Its main objective was to confirm or refute the following hypotheses:

- No.1** The priests and storytellers of religious stories frequently use the stories from the life of Jesus, apostles and saints.
- No.2** Priests deliberately prepare for telling religious stories, using all possibilities that may enhance the emotional perception of the story.
- No.3** Listeners of religious stories narrated during sermons prefer the stories from everyday life, so they can better take lessons in solving their own problems.
- No.4** Listeners of religious stories narrated during sermons use the message learned and their own experience in dealing with their daily problems.

The survey was conducted in Trnava, located in the West Region of Slovakia. Bearing a nickname of a 'Little Rome', Trnava can be considered a representative environment in the analysed area. The qualitative research does not require a wider research sample; to verify the hypotheses, a smaller sample of respondents is sufficient. Certain specifications and definitions of target groups were carried out anyway. Regarding the nature of the survey, we generated two basic groups of respondents. Group 1 was the priests - the narrators of religious stories. Group 2 were the believers - visitors and listeners of the sermons. Group 2 was divided into two sub-groups based on the age of believers, since different ages differently perceive values and understand the moral, ethical and experiential message of sermons in different ways. The classification of believers in Group 2 was as follows, children and youth (6-20 years old) and adults (several categories 21-35 years old, 36-50 years old, 51-65 years old, and 66 years old and older). We realize that the age range is still quite wide which may cause certain discrepancies in the perception of storytelling in sermons; however, it is satisfactory for the verification of our hypotheses. Just to amuse the reader of this article, there is another interesting and humorous classification of the target groups elaborated by Max Kašparů, the Czech psychiatrist, a permanent deacon and a Premonstratensian tertiary, who splits so called 'Church people' into the following groups [*Kostolný ľud*, online at <http://www.poznanie.sk/nabozenstvo/kostolny-lud.php>]: walkers, who come by

foot; fillers, who fill the church; one-year visitors; chorus members; wheelers, who come by cars; occasional visitors; live in faith; righteous women; fanatics; trying ones, who come just to try.

The results of the qualitative survey are based on structured interviews where open questions were tailored to the research target and posed to both specific groups.

Questions in the structured interview for the priests–storytellers:

- 1) Do you use stories in your sermons? What is the reason why you decide so?
- 2) What stories do you use most often: the stories from the life of Jesus, the Apostles, saints, or life stories of ordinary people?
- 3) Where do you look for the stories?
- 4) How do you prepare yourself for the sermon (do you e.g. prepare a story in advance, look for parallels between the past and present, use various tools to enhance perception of sermons?)
- 5) Have you received feedback from believers regarding the stories narrated? Have the believers told you that the story you narrated strongly influenced their deeds and decisions in some important life situations?
- 6) What types of stories appeal to people most?
- 7) Are there any recommendations or rules regarding the structure of sermon? Who passed them to you?

Questions in the structured interview addressed to believers:

- 1) How often do priests in sermons tell different stories? What are the stories about?
- 2) What kind of stories are you most interested in?
- 3) Are those stories interesting? Are they easy to remember?
- 4) If you liked a particular story told in sermon, would you tell the priest?
- 5) Have you ever taken a lesson from a Bible story?
- 6) Which of the stories you heard in sermons has appealed to you most?

Additional questions for respondents from among the laity related to the age and frequency of attending holy mass (there were the following options: 3 and more times a week, only on Sundays and holy days, 2-3 times a month, occasionally - as I want, only at Christmas and Easter). The reason for monitoring these criteria was our experience with the content of sermons within several past years.

## **5. Overall evaluation and outcomes of the survey**

### ***5.1. Evaluation of the priests' responses***

The priests claimed that they usually include stories in approximately 50% of their sermons. They also confirmed nearly one hundred per cent of stories used in the holy masses for children. The stories of saints and ordinary people can convey variety of virtues, lessons and advice to children. When choosing a particular story, priests are conducted by the consistency with the topical gospel or other liturgical texts of the day.



Answers to the question of what types of stories are the most frequently used by priests in their sermons, differed. Some priests prefer the stories of the saints, Jesus and the apostles; others prefer the stories such as the ones by Bruno Ferreira and examples from the life of ordinary people. Diverse were also the attitudes of respondents to this question, as will be shown below.

Priests look for the ideas for stories in different sources, depending on the story type they need. Those who prefer the life stories of ordinary people are often inspired by the life of the people they met in other religious communities (of course, without identification), news articles from the media, or heroes of various books, not necessarily just religious ones. They also use different reflections of well-known and lesser-known theologians. The most important component of preparation is their own meditation and contemplation on various theological topics.

Preparation procedures for the sermons vary. Some priests prepare a sermon in writing; some prepare just a plan with several points, while the others need just meditation before preparing the liturgy. Preparation depends on their rhetorical skills. No one claimed 'practicing' in front of the mirror or other special training of sermon before the liturgy. They simply rely on God. Many of them, however, use a variety of tools to enhance the impact of the message in a holy mass for children (e.g. a grass trimmer within the context of reconciliation: 'Reconciliation is as trimmer that facilitates walking down the road').

Believers' feedback from the homily is still very rare in Slovakia, as confirmed by the interviews with both priests and believers. Only 10% of the questioned believers answered positively to the question whether they give the priest feedback regarding the message of the sermon and how it helped them solve their own problem. Scarce response to sermons was confirmed also by the priests. It was however interesting to find that ordinary people prefer expressing their negative criticism to giving positive feedback. Different was the experience of the priests working with people in difficult life situations, for example with parents of drug addicts, people with long-term illnesses and so on. Such people often provide positive feedback, which might be due to more personal and intimate relationship with priests.

When evaluating the responses of people to homily, priests claimed the warmest response if the story is close to real life, with characters the people can identify with. Believers provide feedback very rarely, mostly in a personal or casual conversation. However, as confirmed by several priests, more and more people responded via email and social networks. Certain degree of anonymity and elimination of personal contact fill them with more courage to respond.

Future priests receive general recommendations for the preparation of homilies during their study within the subject of Homiletics. Similarly to other occupations, practice is of major importance here along with further study, meditation and personal relationship with God.

## **5.2. Evaluation of the believers' responses**

According to the respondents, priests frequently tell stories of the lives of the apostles and saints. When asked which stories interest them most, the responses varied significantly, depending on the age of the respondents. Children aged 6-10 identified the stories from the life of Jesus and the apostles as the most interesting. At this age, they begin identify these stories with their own knowledge and actions. Youths aged 11 to 15 are quite resilient in responding - in contact with peers they feel ashamed to admit a serious interest in God and holiness. Generally, this period of transition from the faith typical for children to the adult faith is full of rejection and indifference on the one hand and the growing interest on the other hand. This was reflected also in the responses to our questions regarding the perception of sermons. This group of respondents is mostly interested in the stories from the life of ordinary people; they cannot imagine the sacrifices of the saints who seem strange to them. Difficult to say to what extent the responses were influenced by the 'urban' sample of children, who have much more latent relationship with a priest and a wide choice of churches and liturgy. However, it must have been influenced by the fact that sermons are targeted either to children or adults, while the group of teenagers is usually ignored. Adults also prefer stories from real life; life stories of the saints must be 'planted' in the contemporary world to pass the message.

When asked whether the stories narrated during sermons are interesting and memorable, respondents denoted the stories related to their current situation. Besides, they admit to remember in average two other stories. It seems to be really difficult to appeal to different ages during homily.

As mentioned above, people only minimally provide feedback to the priest on the perception of the message told in the sermon. The priests themselves do not ask for people's feedback. However, people sometimes have a need to respond. The most open are the children aged 6-10 who tend to share their ideas regarding the message of homily in friendly discussions with the priest.

When examining the implementation of any message from homily into real life, we received many different answers. Typical was again the resilient attitude of teenagers. The adult respondents admitted they are appealed by both biblical and real life stories.

## **6. Conclusion**

Storytelling in sermons is a practical tool to bring together different themes and explanation of certain behaviour. As confirmed by our survey, both priests and the believers attending religious services claim that storytelling is used in about 50% of sermons (Hypothesis No.1). The priests also confirmed that 50% of all the sermon stories are devoted to the life of Jesus and the saints; the other half is devoted to stories of different nature. The survey confirmed that priests prepare for the sermons and use all means available to reinforce the message of the story; they use teaching aids, however, just in the sermons for

children (Hypothesis No. 2). Interviews with some of the believers confirmed that both children aged 6-10 and adults look for the parallels between the sermon and their own lives, trying to adopt the message to tackle with their own problems (Hypotheses No. 3 and 4). Responses of young people aged 11-15 are more or less reluctant, which might be due to their specific age when looking for something special, as well as due to the fact that the sermons are generally designed either for small children or the adult population.

## **References**

- [1] M. Solík, *Communication Today*, **1(2)** (2010) 41-57.
- [2] R.B. Braithwaite, *An empiricist's view of the nature of religious belief*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1955.