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“The First Roads Were Paved by Them”: The Contribution of Preaching to the Foundations of Polish Culture

The jubilee 1,050th anniversary of the baptism of Poland encourages us to look at various aspects of the Christianization of our country. One of them is preaching. It is largely thanks to it that “the Church brought Christ to the Church.”¹ The purpose of the following article is to present the contribution of preaching to the foundations of Polish culture in the first period of the Christianization of Poland. If we accept the division introduced by chronicler Jan Długosz, this era lasted from the baptism of Mieszko I, Poland’s first ruler, in 966 AD up through 1400. Długosz correctly believed that the number of people capable of preaching sermons grew only as a result of the renewal of the Academy of Krakow (now the Jagiellonian University) in 1400.²

¹ John Paul II, *Homilia w czasie Mszy św. odprawionej na placu Zwycięstwa, Warszawa 2 czerwca 1979*, [in:] *ibid.*, *Pielgrzymki do Ojczyzny. Przemówienia, homilie*, Kraków 2005, p. 22.

² Cf. J. Długosz, *Liber beneficiorum dioecesis cracoviensis*, vol. I, Kraków 1863, p. 261–262.

1. Sermons: The Oldest Book in Poland

Few know that the oldest book kept in Poland is a book of homilies originating from the late eighth century (MS 140). It is in the possession of the Capitulary Library in Krakow. This leather-bound parchment code with dimensions of 165 by 228 mm consists of 107 pages. It is written in its entirety with a uniform, pre-Carolingian style with numerous relics of italics and uncial scripts by several hands that were next to each other. Only the inscription on page 3rd, which begins clearly despite the fact that it was painted over with the title ARON EPS is newer; it was written by hand in the eleventh century.³ This inscription has become the basis for the claim that the hand-written sermon book had reached Krakow in the eleventh century, having been brought there by Aron, who was the (arch)bishop of Krakow in 1046–1059. He had come to Poland together with Casimir I the Restorer from the Benedictine abbey in Brauweiller near Cologne.⁴

This book of sermons, the oldest of those stored in Poland, contains twenty-seven anonymous sermons from Advent up through the end of the Easter season⁵. They are typically commentaries on the Gospel According to Matthew, which could mean that the text itself belongs to the Latin-Irish exegetical tradition, in which this Gospel was commented on with predilection. The twenty-seven homily text is written in two columns, each containing twenty-two or twenty-three lines. The collection begins with a title and headline (page 4–4v), which has become the title for the entire manuscript: *Praedicationes que sancti patres tractaverunt secundum evangelium dictante Spiritu Santo per diversa ie(iu)nia compositas*. These sermons were read in the Benedictine community as part

³ B. Kürbis, *Aron episcopus w rękopisie z VIII wieku*, [in:] *Benedyktyni tynieccy w średniowieczu. Materiały z sesji naukowej Wawel-Tyniec 13–15.10.1994*, Kraków 1995, p. 47–58; też, «*Ecclesia Christi*» w egzegezie kazań krakowskich, “*Studia Warmińskie*” 34 (1997), p. 87–109.

⁴ *Źródła kultury duchowej Krakowa*, Kraków 2007, p. 86–89.

⁵ Cf. *Kazania na różne dni postne i inne teksty z kodeksu krakowskiego 140 (43)*, oprac. B. Kürbis, M. Sobieraj, Kraków 2010 (*Monumenta Sacra Polonorum*, 4).

of its preparations for missionary work. All critical and erudite research on texts that bear some textual similarities to those in Krakow lead one to late eight-century Salzburg, into the circle of Vergilius, a monk who belonged to the community of St. Peter and archbishop who died in 784.⁶ The code is decorated with twenty-six plait initials with zoomorphic and plant motifs. Page 100v contains a miniature of a cross containing plait that takes up the entire page. Presentations of the symbols of the four evangelists are situated in the cross's branches. This composition was inscribed in a decorative frame containing a plait ornament.⁷

2. Evangelization through the *Verbo et exemplo* Method

The preachers who had come to Poland above all came from the Holy Roman Empire, Bohemia, France, and Italy. They worked together with Jordan (d. approximately 984 AD), the first bishop of Poland who had come from one of the Romance countries, as well as with his successor Unger, who had come from either Saxony or Thuringia. When the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Gniezno was created in 1000, Radim Gaudentius, St. Adalbert's stepbrother, became the archbishop. The bishops who headed the remaining three Polish dioceses were also of foreign origin: Reinbern in Kolobrzeg, Poppon in Krakow, and Jan in Wroclaw. Their successors, such as Aaron and Lambert III of the Archdiocese of Cologne as well as Baldwin and Maurus from northern France, were often also foreigners. They constituted the intellectual elite of the time.

⁶ B. Kürbis, *Kazanie na Górze w katechezie najstarszego rękopisu katedry krakowskiej*, [in:] «Benedyktyńska praca». *Studia historyczne ofiarowane o. Pawłowi Szanieckiemu OSB*, Kraków 1997, p. 32.

⁷ M. Sobieraj, *Dekoracja malarska karolińskiego rękopisu w Bibliotece Kapitulnej na Wawelu*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historii Sztuki” 9 (1976) nr 12, p. 9–56; M. Straszewicz, *Homiliarze polskie*, [in:] *Encyklopedia katolicka* vol. 6, Lublin 1993, p. 1180.

No material that could be used for a reconstruction of the text of a medieval Polish sermon has been preserved. What little remains of information scattered among diverse sources indicates that the first sermons preached in the Polish lands were given in wide-open outdoor spaces, usually in sites where many people were concentrated. According to the biographies of St. Adalbert (*Vita prior* and *Vita alterior*),⁸ he spoke at markets, and while travelling he spoke at squares used for meetings. This natural scenery, along with the presence of many different people accompanying the missionary (primarily knights who protected him), created additional impulses for the reception of the living Word. After several weeks' preparation in a given place or region, the missionaries' listeners verbally renounced their former deities and beliefs (*abrenuntiatio diaboli*) and professed the Christian faith (*confessio fidei*), after which they were baptized.⁹ The methods and techniques the first preachers used to convince the first converted pagans are unknown. The *Gniezno Sermons* and others show that the form of addressing commonly used by preachers was the expression: "My dear children." Such a direct form of addressing the listeners served to form a close, warm bond that would make them receptive to the proclaimed Word.

The reception of Christianity in Poland happened on a voluntary basis. In writing about the missionary work of Jordan, the bishop of Gniezno, the German chronicler Thietmar of Merseburg notes that after Mieszko's baptism the bishop succeeded in convincing his collaborators "through word and example to work in the vineyard of the Lord."¹⁰ It is worth emphasizing this expression: "Through word and example" (*verbo et exemplo*), because this indicates that Bishop Jordan's missionary activity was undertaken by teaching and convincing; thus it was the method practiced

⁸ Cf. H. Chłopocka, *O żywotach św. Wojciecha*, [in:] *W kręgu żywotów świętego Wojciecha*, ed. J. A. Spież, Kraków 1997, p. 28.

⁹ K. Ożóg, *966. Chrzest Polski*, Kraków 2016, p. 116.

¹⁰ *Kronika Thietmara*, trans. M. Z. Jedlicki, Poznań 1953, p. 222.

by the first generations of apostles. It was not a method of compulsion (*compelle intrare*¹¹), in which the sword took precedence over the cross.

The pagans' acceptance of Christianity wasn't a mere change of confession, the replacement of one god (or gods) with another, Christian deity, but rather an enormous, revolutionary change of the whole system of beliefs and values that they had professed for generations and that usually corresponded to their needs and expectations. To a large extent, the ability to communicate the Gospel in the vernacular language was a key factor in the success of a Christian mission.

There is evidence that German, Italian, and even Bohemian priests learned the Polish language as part of their preparations for missionary work. According to tradition, Adalbert the Bishop of Prague freely taught in Krakow while travelling to Boleslaus the Brave's court. According to Ebbo's testimony, Otto of Bamberg learned fluent Polish in Władysław I Herman's court. Bruno of Querfurt recalls the linguistic training of the Italian monks Benedict and John, who in 1001 came to Poland, where they were to follow in St. Adalbert's footsteps for missionary purposes.¹² If a preacher could not preach in the people's language, he would make use of interpreters.

¹¹ A second missionary doctrine (in addition to the method of teaching and convincing through word and example) developed in the fourth century, when the Christian religion became the dominant one in the Roman Empire and was supported by the state's "secular branch" (*brachium saeculare*). It refers to the Lord's words of invitation to the feast through His servant: "Go out to the highways and hedgerows and make people come in that my home may be filled" (Luke 14:23). Already St. Augustine considered the use of compulsion to try to bring heretics back to the Church: *compelle intrare*. From that point, both these doctrines appeared in the Church's missionary activity, finding supporters of its practical application, such as by the Teutonic Knights in their mission in Prussia. Cf. H. D. Kahl, *Compelle intrare. Die Wendenpolitik des Bruns von Querfurt im Lichte des hochmittelalterlichen Missions- und Völkerrechts*, [in:] *Heidenmission und Kreuzzugsgedanke in der deutschen Ostpolitik des Mittelalter*, hrsg. von H. Beumann, Darmstadt 1963, p. 177–274; G. Labuda, *Inspiracje misyjne Kościoła magdeburskiego w działalności chrystianizacyjnej św. Wojciecha i św. Brunona z Kwerfurtu*, [in:] *Chrześcijańskie korzenie – misjonarze, święci, rycerze zakonni*, red. S. Sterna-Wachowiak, Poznań 1997, p. 35–50.

¹² T. Michałowska, *Literatura polskiego średniowiecza*, Warszawa 2001, p. 427.

The quality and frequency of the proclaimed sermons depended on several factors. The Piast dynasty's court, which starting with the time of Casimir I the Restorer chose Wawel as its headquarters, played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual milieu. The court attracted educated people who used their knowledge to support future rulers in ruling the country. Educated princes such as Casimir I the Restorer and Casimir II the Just made the Krakow court a leading center of intellectual culture.¹³ This created a need for high quality sermons and, in the case of priests, bolstered the local preaching community with talented individuals. The quality and frequencies of sermons also depended on the rank of the church, i.e., if it was a cathedral, a collegiate church, an urban or rural church, or one headed by a religious order; and its proximity to cities and university milieus. The closer the church was to the bishop's seat, the higher the quality of missionary activity and therefore preaching.¹⁴

Sermons impacted all sectors of society. They were heard by kings and princes, scholars and simpletons, burghers and peasants, the rich and the beggars. For the great majority of Poles, they were the only source of faith and inspiration to lead the Christian life.¹⁵

3. The Beginnings of Polish Literary Language

The first preachers faced numerous obstacles when proclaiming the Word in the Polish lands. One of them was the difficulty in expressing complex truths about the Christian faith in the raw language and simple vocabulary spoken by the people. This was especially painfully felt in the

¹³ Cf. M. Plezia, *Dzieje środowiska umysłowego w Krakowie przed założeniem uniwersytetu*, [in:] tenże, *Od Arystotelesa do «Złotej Legendy»*, Warszawa 1958, p. 408–429; W. Korta, *Rola kulturalna średniowiecznej kancelarii*, [in:] *Studia z dziejów kultury i ideologii*, Wrocław 1968, p. 63–78.

¹⁴ J. Wolny, *Linie rozwojowe kaznodziejstwa w Kościele zachodnim*, [in:] *Dzieje teologii katolickiej w Polsce*, vol. 1, Lublin 1974, p. 296.

¹⁵ J. Pasierb, *Miejsce kaznodziejstwa w kulturze polskiej*, [in:] tenże, *Pionowy wymiar kultury*, Kraków 1983, p. 92.

early phase of the Christianization of Poland, when there was a lack not only of missionaries of Slavic origin, but there was also no terminology that would ease the communication between preachers and catechumens; nor were there ready translations of prayers and Sacred Scripture into the Polish language. The first preachers had to create basic religious concepts with the help of which they opened the horizons of faith to their illiterate listeners. By overcoming enormous difficulties in the field of vocabulary and spelling, they gave rise to the origins of Polish literary language.¹⁶

One of the manuscripts located in the Jagiellonian Library in Krakow attests to the level of difficulty that preachers faced during the first centuries of Christianity in Poland. In it, an anonymous preacher claims that however difficult it is to express one's thought in a Latin sermon, it is even more challenging to do so in the people's language.¹⁷

Rev. Prof. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb (d. 1993) notes that, paradoxically, the Latin, international, and supranational Church became a promoter of Polish culture. It was thanks to the Church that promotion of the Polish language had occurred, transforming from what initially was the spoken language of an illiterate people into a literary language.¹⁸ It was Christianity that presented an enormous, difficult, but extremely stimulating challenge to this simple and raw language: expressing complicated religious matters to the broad masses. Sermons were written in Latin; however, they were pronounced and said in Polish.¹⁹

Thus Prof. Aleksander Brückner is absolutely correct in noting with acknowledgment that “a giant tree of our national literature grew out of this mustard seed; it was here that the first difficulties related to language and spelling presented themselves. Previous foreign resources were used, which created a literary language. This happened rather slowly, and sometimes there was visible regression, but we cannot deny overall progress. The creation of

¹⁶ J. Wolny, *Linie rozwojowe...*, op. cit., p. 275.

¹⁷ Biblioteka Jagiellońska rkps 188, f. CCI: “Difficilius tamen est concepta exprimere per sermonem, sed difficilimum est aliquid dicere in vulgari sermone.”

¹⁸ J. Pasierb, *Miejsce kaznodziejstwa w kulturze polskiej*, op. cit., p. 95–96.

¹⁹ A. Brückner, *Literatura religijna w Polsce średniowiecznej*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1902, p. 5–9.

the Polish vernacular language was not the accomplishment of Mikołaj Rej or Jan Kochanowski, but that of those humble, usually nameless preachers and confessors, masters and pupils. It was they who built the first roads.”²⁰

4. The Contents of the First Sermons

Christianization began with the memorization and profession of two main prayers: *The Apostles' Creed* and *The Our Father*. These two texts, considered to be *fundamenta fidei christianae*, contained the minimum of Christian doctrine that each Christian was required to know and have memorized.²¹ When teaching and explaining the *Credo*, missionaries spoke of God the Creator, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the immortality of the soul, resurrection, and eternal life. However, during their lectures on the *Pater noster* the missionaries explained what the catechumens should ask of God. In addition to memorizing these prayers, catechumens were also taught the Ten Commandments and the prayer to the Virgin Mary, the *Hail Mary*. Thus was realized the model of evangelization reaching back to the Carolingian age.²²

Gallus Anonymous (d. after 1116), the author of *The Polish Chronicle*, recalls that the lives of the saints and the martyrology were also read in churches. Religious songs, which strengthened oral catechesis and were easily remembered by the listeners, were a great help in transmitting the faith. The most famous of these, *Bogurodzica* (“Mother of God”), which was once incorrectly ascribed to St. Adalbert, was written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century and played an enormous role in catechesis.

²⁰ Tenże, *Literatura religijna w Polsce średniowiecznej*, vol. 3: *Legends i modlitewniki*, Warszawa 1904, p. 185.

²¹ K. Panuś, *Historia kaznodziejstwa*, Kraków 2007, p. 101.

²² J. Wolny, *Tematy z nauczania religijnego w pierwszym okresie chrystianizacji Polski*, “Częstochowskie Studia Teologiczne” 1973, p. 193; S. Bylina, *Kazania w Polsce średniowiecznej*, “Kieleckie Studia Historyczne” 10 (1992), p. 23–27; K. Ożóg, 966. *Chrzest Polski*, op. cit., p. 116.

Jakub Wujek calls it the “old Polish catechism,” while Długosz refers to it as the fatherland hymn (*carmen patrium*).

With regards to lecturing on Christian morality, it mostly focused on virtues that Christians should practice and flaws that they should avoid. A big emphasis was placed on works of mercy and following the Ten Commandments. The fact that in the ancient Polish language the word *kaznodzieja* (“preacher”) meant: “priest who preaches the commandments.”²³ Along with the everyday prayers, the Ten Commandments were likely among the first texts translated into the Polish language. Thus it is difficult to imagine any preaching or catechetical activity without it.

Enumeration of the works of the flesh as well as the fruits of the Holy Spirit and virtues took place in accordance with the Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians (Galatians 5: 19–24). The seven deadly sins that should be avoided and the corporal works of mercy that should be practiced also became important topics of preaching. In order to fight with pagan customs, preachers tried to eliminate from the lives of the baptized polygamy, infanticide, pagan funeral rituals, and other social customs considered to be barbaric and opposed to Christianity.²⁴

These topics of religious teaching in the first period of the Christianization of Poland changed very slowly. In the thirteenth century, there was still usually the proclamation of the basic prayers in Polish instead of a sermon; the synods encouraged only the most talented preachers to pontificate on the Gospels and the resulting moral implications.²⁵ In practice, preachers usually used collections of Latin sermons brought from the West, especially from France.²⁶ These collections were: *sermones de tempore*, (*sermones dominicales*) (for Sundays and holy days of obligation),

²³ A. Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Warszawa 1957, p. 224; F. Sławski, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, vol. 2, Kraków 1952, p. 112–113.

²⁴ K. Ożóg, 966. *Chrzest Polski*, op. cit. p. 116.

²⁵ T. Lewandowski, *W poszukiwaniu tożsamości polskiego kaznodziejstwa*, [in:] *Szkice o teologii polskiej*, ed. S. C. Napiórkowskiego, Poznań 1988, p. 79.

²⁶ S. Bylina, *Kazania w Polsce średniowiecznej*, op. cit., p. 13–14.

and *sermones de sanctis* (*sermones festuales*, sermons about the saints venerated in the liturgical calendar).²⁷

Thanks to the decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which contained a momentous program for massive Christianization through sermons and confession, recitation of *Confiteor* was added to the memorized texts. In Poland, this was introduced by the Synod of Leczyca in 1287. The incipit of the *Confiteor*, *Kaję się Bogu* (“I express my regret to God”), is one of the oldest and most beautiful sentences written in the Polish language. If we agree that the first Polish sentence is *Daj, ac ja pobruszę, a ty poczujaj* (“Give it to me to mill, and you will rest”) inscribed in the *Book of Henryków* in 1270, then *Kaję się Bogu* was placed in the *Diplomatic Code of Greater Poland* only fifteen years later.²⁸

5. Latin Vestment, Polish Core

Each travelling preacher tried to possess his own collection of Latin sermons he could use just in case. The first written Polish words were comments placed in the margins or between the verses of the Latin text. In this way, preachers tried to improve the form that they either did not understand or were afraid of forgetting. There are not many such comments.²⁹

The writing of original Polish-language sermons in Poland stretches back to the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Although inclusion of the collection of sermons by the Dominican Martin of Opava (d. 1279 is questionable, as it was composed outside Poland and did not

²⁷ A detailed list of them cf. J. B. Schneyer, *Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters für die Zeit von 1150–1350*, Münster 1971 (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, 43).

²⁸ L. Bednarczuk, *Najstarsze polskie słowa. Słownik chronologiczny języka polskiego do końca XIII wieku*, [in:] *Amoenitates vel lepores philologiae*, ed. R. Laskowski, R. Mazurkiewicz, Kraków 2007, p. 17.

²⁹ Leszek Bednarczuk's inventory of individual Polish words recorded up through the thirteenth century takes up a mere three pages. Cf. *ibid.*, *Najstarsze polskie słowa...*, op. cit., p. 27–29.

function there, it is strictly linked with the activity of Peregrine of Opole (d. after 1333). Between 1297 and 1304, this Silesian Dominican edited a Latin-language collection of sermons encompassing two cycles of the calendar: *de tempore* and *de sanctis*. This was probably a response to the encouragement by Archbishop Jakub Świnka. He asked the better-educated priests to not only preach, but also write down sermons that could later serve to help other preachers. Peregrine’s collection *de sanctis* contains the first known sermons about Polish saints: Stanislaus, Adalbert, and Hedwig of Silesia.³⁰ Peregrine’s Latin sermons are distinguished not only for their proper theological context and accurate examples for preachers, but for their beautiful literary form as well. One can refer to Prof. Aleksander Brückner (1856–1939), who in a vivid way wrote that “the Latin vestment of these sermons is only the hard shell containing the delicious Polish core.”³¹

6. Sermons As the First Polish Literary Texts

Sermons were the first literary texts in Polish. The oldest of them, the *Holy Cross Sermons*, originate from the fourteenth century and are of fundamental significance to the history of Polish language and literacy. They were discovered on March 25, 1890, by the aforementioned Aleksander Brückner in the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg in the form of bits of parchment used by the bookbinder to bolster the binding of the Latin code Lat. I Q.281 with New Testament texts.³² Scholars were able to reconstruct entire sermons about St. Catherine (II) as well fragments of five other sermons of differing sizes: *For the Feast Day of St. Michael* (I), *For the Feast Day of St. Nicholas* (III), *For Christmas* (IV) *For the Epiphany* (V), and *For the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (VI). Brückner

³⁰ K. Panuś, *Wielcy mówcy Kościoła w Polsce*, Kraków 2005, p. 14–15.

³¹ See: A. Borowski, *Aleksander Brückner*, [in:] *Nieśmiertelni: Krypta Zasłużonych na Skalce*, ed. F. Ziejki, Kraków 2010, p. 421.

³² W. Wydra, *Wokół fenomenu „Kazań świętokrzyskich”*, [in:] *Kazania świętokrzyskie. Nowa edycja. Nowe propozycje badawcze*, ed. P. Stępnia, Warszawa 2009, p. 45.

called these the Holy Cross sermons because the code from which these fragments were removed originated in the library of the Benedictine monastery of the Holy Cross on Bald Mountain the Kielce region; thus they were stolen by Poland's Russian rulers.³³ These sermons were part of a larger collection of sermons about the saints, which is unknown to this day. In all likelihood, we will never learn how many sermons it contained. What's more, the *Holy Cross Sermons* are undoubtedly a copy of an earlier manuscript dating back to the thirteenth century.³⁴

So far, researchers of the *Holy Cross Sermons* have focused their attention above all on the Polish fragments. In many publications, the presence of Latin portions was completely ignored or marginalized. Only recent research has dealt with them. They prove that the Polish and Latin texts in the *Holy Cross Sermons* permeate and complement each other.³⁵ This does not contradict the uniqueness of these sermons. It is worth remembering that in the early thirteenth century, when the original collection was probably composed, even popular sermons for the faithful were written down solely in Latin. The Polish language appeared only in the speech acts. Meanwhile, both the selection of materials for preaching and the intellectualism of its presentation as well as the abstract and erudite course of the lecture in the *Holy Cross Sermons*, in which the narrative-graphic element was limited, suggestively demonstrate that their author consciously created an elite work addressed to an educated audience with great artistic sensitivity.³⁶

The presently available level of knowledge concerning the development of Polish prose allows us to situate ten Polish sermons – the *Gniezno Sermons* – named after the Cathedral Library in Gniezno, second in chronological order next to the *Holy Cross Sermons*. They were written in the early fifteenth century, probably shortly after 1409. In addition to

³³ I. Winiarska-Górska, *Z dziejów badań nad „Kazaniami świętokrzyskimi”*, [in:] *Kazania świętokrzyskie. Nowa edycja*, op. cit. 16.

³⁴ W. Wydra, *Wokół fenomenu „Kazań świętokrzyskich”*, op. cit., p. 46.

³⁵ T. Mika, *„Kazania świętokrzyskie” – od rękopisu do zrozumienia tekstu*, Poznań 2012, p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27–33.

the aforementioned ten Polish-language sermons, this manuscript contained ninety-five sermons in Latin as well as some excerpts from Blessed Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea*.³⁷

Four of the sermons are for Christmas, while two deal with St. John the Evangelist and one each is devoted to each of the following saints: John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, Lawrence, and St. Bartholomew the Apostle. These sermons represent a popular current of Church jargon adapted to the intellectual capacities and spiritual needs of uneducated listeners. The defining features of these sermons preached to ordinary people are: a concern for simplicity of content, avoiding theological complexities, and a flowery rhetorical style. Only the *Sermon on St. Bartholomew* was composed with the rigors of *artis praedicandi* in mind, although it also is free of the scholarly overabundance of quotes that frequently made up a large part of medieval sermons.³⁸

A third valuable monument of medieval Polish preaching worth noting is the *All Saints Day Sermon*. It was written down on pages 220v–226v of the code of the Capitulary Library of Prague, which was formed around the middle of the fifteenth century and contained Latin sermons and theological treatises. The Polish sermons is an extensive lecture written for the occasion of the Solemnity of All Saints dealing with the reading of the Gospel of St. Matthew (5: 1–12) for that day that deals with the Beatitudes.³⁹

7. The Impact of Sermons on Polish Devotion to the Passion, Mary, and the Saints

Ever since the adoption of Christianity in Poland, preaching has had an enormous impact on the development of Polish religiousness.

³⁷ *Kazania gnieźnieńskie. Podobizna, transliteracja, transkrypcja*, S. Vrtel-Wierczyński, Poznań 1953.

³⁸ S. Bylina, *Kazania w Polsce średniowiecznej*, op. cit., p. 16–17.

³⁹ R. Mazurkiewicz, P. Stępień, *Źródła i konteksty „Kazania praskiego”*, [in:] *Amoenitates vel lepores philologiae*, op. cit., p. 202–221.

A Christological current with a dominant theme of the Passion is clearly present in it. The famous scholar of modern philosophy and thought Józef Maria Bocheński, OP (d. 1995) wrote that he was so fascinated with the spiritual and intellectual achievements of the Church in France he didn't recognize the existence of a unique Polish Catholicism. "In my youth," he writes, "I wanted to supplant 'primitive Polish superstition' with the religious civilization of the Gauls. I understood that I was wrong thanks to my accidental discovery that figures of the so-called Pensive Christ existed only in Poland and nowhere else."⁴⁰

Father Bocheński's "accidental discovery" was not so much related to the Pensive Christ as a phenomenon in religious art history but to the devotion to the Passion encompassed in it. In its center there is the figure of the crucified Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 1 : 23) manifesting His humanity by suffering and thus being especially close to man.⁴¹ This devotion to the Passion was preached in sermons from the dawn of Christianity. It is also quite telling that the oldest Polish shrine – erected long before Jasna Góra – was the Holy Cross in the Holy Cross Mountains to which members of the Piast and Jagiellonian dynasties went on pilgrimage. Preaching on the Passion, which brought the crucified Christ closer and contemplated His Suffering undertaken for our sake and for our salvation, dealt with topics that were closest to humanity, such as: life, pain, suffering, death, and the perspective of a happy eternal life. Thus it was very momentous.

In addition to Jesus Christ, the only Intercessor between God and man, devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, is a particular characteristic of Polish religiousness. It is extolled in the *carmen patrium*, the oldest Polish Marian hymn *Bogurodzica* ("Mother of God") as well as countless Marian sermons. They explained in various ways "both the dogmatic truths officially professed by the Church (*Bogurodzica* – Divine motherhood, the Immaculate Conception, and the Assumption) as well as theological truths grounded in tradition (intercession, role in redemption, and

⁴⁰ J. M. Bocheński, *Co to znaczy być Polakiem?*, [in:] tenże, *Sens życia i inne eseje*, Kraków 1993, p. 105–106.

⁴¹ W. Pawlak, *Bł. Stanisław Papczyński wśród barokowych kaznodziejów*, [in:] *Błogosławiony Stanisław Papczyński, Pisma pasyjne*, Warszawa 2008, p. 15.

spiritual motherhood); her increasingly diversified distinctions, titles, and functions (such as: Mother of Mercy, Mother of Divine Grace, Queen of Heaven and Earth, Mother of the Church, Mother of Consolation, patroness of various congregations and brotherhoods, patroness of a happy death, Queen of Poland); devotion intended to “imitate” her virtues and attributes (sanctity, innocence, chastity, meekness, kindness, and beauty); and, finally, all sorts of religious practices and devotions (prayers, hymns, antiphonies, litanies, the rosary, the scapular, and the Intercession of the Theotokos).⁴² “The set and hierarchy of theological motifs in Polish Marian sermons in the present day do not deviate in a significant way from the model developed in medieval preaching.”⁴³ Motherhood, virginity, intercession, sanctity, and Mary’s role in salvation continue to hold key positions in the “reasons for devotion” to the Holy Virgin Mary.

Not only the Mother of God, “blessed among women” (Luke 1:42), but also St. John the Baptist (“among those born of women... no one is greater than John,” Luke 1:42), was considered to be the greatest champion of sinful humanity. Along with Christ, they constitute the triad of the most important figures in salvation history, the so-called *déesis*.⁴⁴

Polish preaching also popularized devotion to many other saints, which was so important to Polish religiousness. The *sermones de sanctis* preached in Polish instructed the faithful about the details of persons who were the subject of institutional devotion. They developed the collective imagination, saturating it with *miracula*, or miraculous elements, explaining the religious meaning of poverty and the ascetic life as well as martyrdom for the faith. Material on the lives of the saints came to Poland along with the hagiographic collections that were popular in all of Western Christendom.⁴⁵ Starting in the late thirteenth century, among

⁴² R. Mazurkiewicz, K. Panuś, *Wprowadzenie*, [in:] *Kazania maryjne*, ed. R. Mazurkiewicz, K. Panuś, Kraków 2014, p. 12 (Kazania w Kulturze Polskiej. Edycje Kolekcji Tematycznych, 1).

⁴³ J. Wojtkowski, *Kult Matki Boskiej w polskim piśmiennictwie do końca XV wieku*, “Studia Warmińskie” 3 (1966), p. 293–297.

⁴⁴ R. Mazurkiewicz, *Deesis. Idea wstawiennictwa Bogarodzicy i św. Jana Chrzciciela w kulturze średniowiecznej*, Kraków 2012, p. 285.

⁴⁵ T. Michałowska, *Średniowiecza*, Warszawa 1997, p. 631.

the most famous and wildly popular were Blessed Jacobus of Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, to which the lives of national patron saints – above all Adalbert, Florian, Stanislaus, Wenceslaus, and Hedwig – were added.⁴⁶

8. The Role of Preaching in the Development of Christian Consciousness and Customs in Poland

Another trait of Polish religiousness is its practical and social inclination. As the already-mentioned historian and scholar of culture Rev. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb notes, this is seen even in the case of the sacrament of reconciliation, when penitents frequently were asked to take part in the building of roads, hospitals, and bridges as part of their penance.⁴⁷ Polish preaching is equally practical. The seed of the Word of God sowed in the sermon was supposed to give a good harvest in everyday life. The undeniable originality of Polish preaching thus was in its connection between the Biblical message and local problems, with a particular emphasis on the life of the nation.

Polish preaching in the Middle Ages built up Christian awareness, which fought against all forms of paganism, deploring pagan deities and their worship, and strongly opposing dances, spectacles, and superstitions.⁴⁸ What's more, these zealous polemics often saved what they were fighting from being completely forgotten. Thus in addition to archaeological digs preaching is often a valuable source for learning about Poland's pre-Christian past.⁴⁹ The medieval pulpit, which shaped the spiritual face of its times, did not avoid criticizing all sectors of society, including the clergy.

⁴⁶ M. Plezia, *Wstęp*, [in:] Jakub de Voragine, *Złota legenda*, trans. J. Pleziowa, Warszawa 1955, p. L–LI.

⁴⁷ J. Pasierb, *Miejsce kaznodziejstwa w kulturze polskiej*, op. cit., p. 97.

⁴⁸ M. Kowalczykówna, *Tańce i zabawy w świetle rękopisów średniowiecznych Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej*, "Biuletyn Biblioteki Jagiellońskiej" 34–35 (1984–1985), p. 71–89.

⁴⁹ J. Pasierb, *Miejsce kaznodziejstwa w kulturze polskiej*, op. cit., p. 94.

9. “This Old [Native] Oak Grew So Tall...”

In conclusion, we must say that the role of Polish preaching played an enormous role in the Christianization of Poland. The first preachers in Poland created new concepts in order to transmit the complicated message of the Christian religion in a comprehensible way to the broad masses in a simple and raw language. The Latin and supranational Church became the perfect promoter of Polish culture. It was thanks to the Church that promotion of the Polish language had occurred, transforming from what initially was the spoken language of an illiterate people into a literary language. The oldest handwritten book stored in Poland contained sermons. What's more, the oldest artistic relics of Polish literature were the *Holy Cross Sermons*, *Gniezno Sermons*, and *All Saints' Day Sermon*.

“The Church brought Christ – that is, the key to understanding the great and basic reality of what is man – to Poland,” said St. John Paul II. This changed the face of this land. Polish preaching, including the oldest sermons, is a reflection of religious and national life, a dynamic testimony showing a civilizing change in society. This preaching is thoroughly practical and moralizing. Its lasting legacy is also its sensuality, impact on the imagination, and enormous human warmth related to devotion to Christ's humanity, His Mother, and the saints. These traits continue to be present in Polish religiousness and still shape it. The seed sown by the first generations of preachers gave and continue to give plentiful fruits, as in the words of Rev. Piotr Skarga, SJ: “This old [native] oak grew so tall, and no wind blew it over, because its roots are Christ and His priests as well as Catholic devotion to God.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ P. Skarga, *Kazania czwarte: O trzeciej chorobie Rzeczypospolitej, która jest naruszenie religiej katolickiej przez zarazę heretycką*, [in:] tenże, „*Kazania sejmowe*” i „*Wzywanie do pokuty obywatelów Korony Polskiej i Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego*”, wstęp, oprac. tekstu i przypisy M. Korolko, Warszawa 1999, p. 94–95.

Abstract

“The First Roads Were Paved by Them”: The Contribution of Preaching to the Foundations of Polish Culture

The impact of preaching on Polish religiousness and national culture is enormous. Sermons reached all the social classes. They were listened to by the king, by scholars and by the unlearned, by burghers and by peasants, and by the rich and by beggars. For the vast majority of Poles, sermons were the only source of faith and inspiration to live the Christian life. The first preachers limited themselves in their messages to reciting and simple lecturing: the *Credo*, the Ten Commandments, the *Pater noster* and the *Ave Maria*. They made an invaluable mark in forming Polish religious and literary language. The quality and frequency of the sermons depended on a church's rank (i.e., if it was a cathedral, a collegiate church, a town church, a village church, a monastic church, etc.), the distance from cities and the educational environment. Hagiography and martyrology were read. Religious songs (a significant role was given to *carmen patrum – Bogurodzica*) played a great role to help with the transfer of faith as they strengthened the oral catechesis and were remembered by the listeners. The Christian moral lectures concentrated on virtues to be sought and vices to be avoided; emphasis was placed on the practice of merciful work and keeping the commandments, while devotion to Christ's humanity, His Mother and the saints was cultivated.

Keywords

Preaching; Polish culture; Christianization of Poland; first preachers; first sermons in Polish

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