

Rev. Henryk Sławiński¹

Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow
henryk.slawinski@upjp2.edu.pl

The Criteria and Ways of Using Humor in Preaching

Jewish humor is well known, as attested by the numerous publications on this topic.² Jewish humor is unique: it relates to Jews and takes into account their sensitivity to topics that are especially important to them, such as social integration, assimilation, cleverness and professional success, avarice and rapacity, and Judaism and those who teach it (the rabbis).³ Christianity, initiated by Jesus of Nazareth, has its beginnings in Jewish culture in which, as we have seen, humor plays an important role. Jesus' first disciples also were formed in Jewish culture. Thus it should come as no surprise that there is room for humor in the Church. The Church is divine and human, and humor is an important element of human life. Thus humor in the Church is not an oxymoron.

Elements of humor are used in the public speeches of preachers, not only in the United States, but in Poland as well. For example, years ago Rev. Józef Tischner (1931–2000) was well known for his humorous homilies.⁴ Today, homilies by the Warsaw retreat master and homilist Rev. Piotr Pawlukiewicz

1 Henryk Sławiński: a priest, habilitated doctor, and professor of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, homilist, and pedagogue. He is a lecturer at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Major Diocesan Seminary in Tarnow, and in the Vincentian Seminary of the Holy Family. Father Sławiński is the editor-in-chief of the quarterly journal *Polonia Sacra*. He is the chairman of the Association of Polish Homilists, a member of the Religious Language Commission of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and coordinator of international cooperation between the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow and universities in France and the Benelux countries.

2 S. Landmann, *Śmiech po żydowsku*, opracowanie i przekład Robert Stiller, Gdynia 1999; J. Telushkin, *Humor żydowski*, tłumaczenie Ewa Westwalewicz-Mogilska, Warszawa 2010.

3 Cf. J. Telushkin, *Humor żydowski*, op. cit., p. 15.

4 Cf. W. Ostafiński, *Księdza Tischnera mocowanie się ze słowem. Wokół Kazań starosądeckich*, „*Polonia Sacra*” 16 (2012) no. 30, p. 242–246, <https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.544>.

(b. 1960) can give rise to laughter. Some of the jokes, anecdotes, and humorous situations in Church life that Father Piotr is known for telling have been released as an audio recording titled: *Czarny humor, czyli o Kościele na wesoło*⁵ (“Holy Humor: A Lighthearted Approach to the Church”).

It is a fact that humor can be heard from the pulpit. However, this gives rise not so much to the question of how humor can be used to preach the Word of God, but rather what criteria should be met for it to be used appropriately and fruitfully. This article tries to answer this question. After explaining the etymology and semantic field of “humor,” I will present the criteria that humor must meet in order to appear in a homily, after which I will describe the means of using humor in a homily.

1. The Etymology and Semantics of “Humor”

The etymology of the word “humor” originates in Latin. Initially, it meant “moisture” and was used to describe bodily fluids. Ancient medics and philosophers believed that there were four types of moisture inside a person: blood, cholera (bile), melancholy (black bile), and phlegm, which determined four types of human personalities. A disturbance of the proportions between them led to diseases of the human body. Meanwhile, a disturbance of the balance between these humors led to unusual behavior. For centuries, emotional lability, or extreme volatility of moods, was known as humors: one could be in a good or bad humor. In Polish and many other languages, someone whose moods were volatile was said to “have humors.”⁶

Currently, the term “humor” means the ability to perceive the amusing aspects of life; a cheerful attitude to the world; and also “a temporary disposition, mood” or “whims, sulkiness.”⁷ Thus in this sense humor can have either a positive or a pejorative meaning. According to Włodzimierz Wołyniec, humor is the disposition of people who without cynicism or ill will know

5 Two priests, Piotr Pawlukiewicz and Bogusław Kowalski, preached a homily filled with humor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21nuyjK5jEg> (18.06.2016); see: <http://www.kazaniaksiedza-piotra.pl/> (18.06.2016).

6 Cf. K. Wieczorek, *Poczucie humoru a filozofia*, [in:] *Świat humoru*, red. S. Gajda, D. Brzozowska, Opole 2000, p. 21–22.

7 W. Doroszewski, Warszawa 1997, CD.

how to approach various events or life situations with reserve, with a mild sense of superiority.⁸

According to the *Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, humor is “an intellectual attitude that discerns and reveals rationality in events that are seemingly contradictory or apparent contrasts.”⁹ In other words, humor is the ability to discern a paradox or incongruousness (i.e., a lack of appropriateness). The simplest example of incongruity is the behavior of a clown who stretches and apparently prepares to sprint, but ultimately takes just a tiny step.¹⁰

Deformation, or the disfigurement of form, a certain contradiction or lack of adequacy is the basis of comedy. When something occurs in a different way than we might have expected, we have humor. Humor impacts listeners thanks to an element of surprise.

When we discuss the essence of humor, we should keep its broad and precise meaning. In the former, broader sense, humor means behavior or an approach to life that are revealed in emotional carelessness and gaiety, which in a farce, for example, sometimes have a primitive form. Meanwhile, in the strict sense humor is an important and emotionally complex phenomenon. It does not always have to lead to a spontaneous reaction of laughter.¹¹ Instead, sometimes it inclines one to a general reflection and evaluation accompanied by gravity, melancholy, or even tragedy. The object of such tragedy is a realistic, and thus free of extreme optimism or extreme pessimism, yet at the same time indulgent evaluation of absurdity and human troubles.

Humor is conditioned by events of both an objective nature and by the subjective ability of participants of objectively comic events, their attitude, and the unique way of perceiving reality and sense of humor. “Phenomena that diverge from postulated social norms, visions of normality in the field of historically volatile customs, forms, and social conventions, and even every novelty that infringe upon habits and views, or a contradiction between the

8 W. Wołyniec, *Humor*, [in:] *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*, red. M. Chmielewski, Lublin–Kraków 2002, p. 324.

9 S. Janeczka, K. Popielski, *Humor*, [in:] *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii*, vol. 4, red. A. Maryniarczyk i in., Lublin 2003, p. 669–670.

10 Humor using incongruousness is a typical feature of jokes. For example: Q: A certain unpopular politician's head was X-rayed and it turned out that his brain was the size of a walnut. Do you know why? A: Because it swelled. The incongruousness consists of the fact that a walnut is much smaller than a brain, yet we say that a brain became the size of a walnut as a result of swelling, or because it became larger. There is a certain contradiction here that causes comedy.

11 Cf. S. Janeczka, K. Popielski, *Humor*, op. cit., p. 669.

true nature of phenomena and the form of their expression”¹² are considered to be objectively comic. Human flaws and weaknesses can also be the basis for humor.

In the subjective sense, humor is a stably formed attitude that can be maintained throughout one’s life and is dependent on the degree of the person’s maturity and on the entirety of the positive approach to life. The affirmation of the world that is shaped within the person allows him or her to discern the meaning of the existence of the world, the relationships between phenomena, and especially the contrasts, disproportions, and contradictions that occur in the world, which is characteristic of the humor of wise men in a reflexive and intellectually deep way, at the same time in a serene mood. People with a sense of humor harmoniously tie together realism with immunity to frustration, at the same time maintaining their capacity for genial criticism of oneself and one’s milieu.¹³

The semantic field of the word “humor” also contains such terms as:

comedy, or a series of traits in which a series of traits of a person or situation are amusing;

irony, or aggressive and intellectually deep mockery, malice found in a statement that is seemingly affirmative;

and sarcasm, or spiteful irony, derision.¹⁴

Humor is different than satire, which is moralistic and has a whistle-blowing function; is ironic and derisive, reflexive-philosophical and an assertive reference to reality. Humor is frequently linked to joking, which is a distinct intellectual capacity. Meanwhile, jokes are one technique of creating and expressing humorous situations.¹⁵

As the Polish linguist Jerzy Bralczyk (b. 1947) has noted, humor is related to playing tricks. In many languages, the term for a trick derives from the Latin *vigiliae*, as in antiquity one common trick consisted of noisily walking around houses and churches during vigils. Another Polish term related to humor is *dowcip* (“joke”), a word of Czech origin that indicates speculation, but a joker (*dowcipniś*) was never an intellectual; he or she always simply told jokes. Meanwhile, the Polish term *kawał* (literally, “a piece”) is a crude joke. This term comes from the German *Stuckchen*, which means “a piece.”

12 S. Janeczek, K. Popielski, *Humor*, op. cit., p. 670.

13 Cf. S. Janeczek, K. Popielski, *Humor*, op. cit., p. 670.

14 W. Doroszewski, *Słownik języka polskiego*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN 1997, CD.

15 S. Janeczek, K. Popielski, *Humor*, op. cit., p. 670.

Specifically, it means a large piece. The Polish term *żart* (“joke”) is also of German origin (*Scherz*) and usually attests to intelligence.¹⁶

In Polish literature, short stories with a humorous punch line are called *facecje*. They include humorous statements by well-known persons as well as comic stories with a minor narrative culminating in a punch line containing some hidden moral or philosophical reflection.¹⁷

Humor is closely tied to joy. This is because joy is the reaction to humor. The Old Testament Book of Proverbs speaks of the joy of the heart. According to it: “A joyful heart is the health of the body, but a depressed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17 : 22). Sometimes, such a “joyful heart” is accompanied by a smile or laughter; sincere, honest, loud “Homeric laughter,” a term that originates in the laughter of the protagonists of *The Iliad*.¹⁸ The meaning of laughter related to a sense of humor was accurately described by Jerzy Surdykowski: “Laughter allows us to get out of a seemingly hopeless situation; laughter topples tyrants; humbles conceited fools; laughter is the tool of the philosopher [...]. Everyone can laugh, especially guffaw... But a sense of humor is a sign of intelligence, aloofness, self-mockery, heart, and reason [...]. To laugh during enslavement or another misfortune means to not give up. Such laughter is the ‘power of the powerless,’ as Vaclav Havel nicely put it in the times when he was still writing anti-socialist essays, and not yet signing presidential decrees. [...] Only sadness, and thus boredom, is a sign of political subordination.”¹⁹ We should note here that laughter is not a necessary expression of humor. Laughter is a psychological reaction that can, but does not necessarily have to indicate that one has a sense of humor.²⁰

2. The Criteria for Using Humor in a Homily

Just as Jewish humor, which I referred to earlier, must meet certain criteria, humor used in a homily must also meet at least six criteria in order to come

16 *Humor, czyli wilgoć*, http://www.braczyk.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=71 (1.07.2016).

17 Cf. W. Przyczyna, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Humor z ambony*, oprac. W. Przyczyna, Kraków 2011, p. 5–6.

18 J. Surdykowski, *Wołanie o sens*, Warszawa 2006, p. 155.

19 J. Surdykowski, *Wołanie o sens*, op. cit., p. 153–154.

20 Cf. G. A. Arbuckle, *Laughing with God. Humor, Culture, and Transformation*, Collegeville, MN 2008, p. 6.

from the mouth of a preacher of the Word of God. First, such humor should serve the topic of the homily and be in harmony with the content of the homily; second, it cannot be based on a perverse interpretation of Sacred Scripture; third, it should be fresh; fourth, it cannot be vulgar; fifth, it cannot be directed against anyone, especially against an ethnic group; and sixth, it should be used rather sparsely. I will now discuss each of these criteria.

1. The best humor harmonizes with the message of the homily. In such a case, it is an integral part of the structure of the message that is preached. It does not become an independent statement that can be isolated from the whole. Humor serves the subject matter of the homily when it refers to the essential message of a given day in the liturgical calendar or to the cultural or historical context of a certain day or to the situation of the listeners. It can introduce a topic or illustrate it or at least create an atmosphere that is conducive to accepting it.

2. In a homily, humor cannot be based on a perverse interpretation of Sacred Scripture. We are dealing with such a situation for example in the case of verbal accommodation that is nothing more than a play on words. An example is the following riddle: Q: What was Jesus' preferred mode of transportation? A: An airplane, because Luke wrote "Then the whole assembly of them arose and brought Him before Pilate" (Luke 23 : 1). It should be said that humor that uses verbal accommodation should not be used in preaching the Word of God. It is tangential and expresses a lack of respect for the holy text. The decree *De editione et usu Sacrorum Librorum*, adopted during the fourth session of the Council of Trent on April 4, 1546, banned such a use of the Bible, seeing this as a blasphemous crime. Thus we should avoid purely verbal accommodation.²¹ It poses a danger to those who have

21 J. Kudaszewicz, *Wstęp ogólny do Pisma Świętego. Proforystyka pastoralna. Pismo św. jako księga ludu Bożego*, [in:] *Wstęp ogólny do Pisma Świętego*, red. J. Szlaga, Poznań–Warszawa 1986, p. 243–244. An analogous example in the English language: Q: Why did Mary go with haste into the hill country of Judah? A: Because she had given her Fiat to the angel. In order to understand this humorous statement, one must know the fragment about Mary's travel to Elizabeth's house (Luke 1 : 39) and the double meaning of the word *fiat*, which in Mary's case meant *Let it be to me according to thy word*, but is also the name of an Italian automobile company. In order to understand humor, one must be familiar with the culture in which it is spoken. In this example, one must know the Bible and the automobile industry – G. A. Arbuckle, *Laughing with God. Humor, Culture, and Transformation*, Collegeville, MN 2008, p. 3. One should add, however, that in addition to verbal accommodation there is also genuine accommodation. It takes advantage of the genuine similarity of Biblical words and people, things, or situations that are different from those that the inspired author noted. There are many examples of such accommodation in Sacred Scripture.

for good become familiar with the Bible but have forgotten that it is Sacred Scripture for Christians.

3. Humor should be original. Thus we should avoid stories that are widely known and have been told on many occasions. If there is a lack of such originality, the story does not play as much of a role in relaxing the audience and does not attract the listeners' attention. According to B. M. Berchmans, one should not introduce a humorous anecdote using the words: "This reminds me of a certain story." The speaker should use humor without first saying he will use this, because it is this moment of surprise that makes humor especially effective.²²

4. Humor cannot be vulgar and it cannot scandalize anyone. Instead, it should shape the listeners' sensitivity to beauty. It's true that throughout the centuries preachers provoked laughter in the churches. Sometimes they told humorous stories to achieve this end. Some of them were even filled with ambiguous words that referred to intimate relations between spouses and even contained obscene elements.²³ But this is an abuse. Vulgar words should never be spoken from the pulpit. What's more, preachers of the Word of God should never use them. The best way of preventing such a situation is to avoid using vulgar words and telling indecent stories in everyday encounters and conversations with people.

5. Humor cannot be directed against anyone. Preaching the Word of God is bringing the good news to everyone. Thus offensive jokes that are insulting to someone because of his or her sex, nationality, or ethnic background – in other words, all racist or nationalistic jokes – should never be told from the pulpit. Aristotle noted that humor can be an expression of aggression and can be used as a tool to destroy one's opponents. This happens when we laugh at

For example, there are the words that the prophet Hosea placed in the heathen inhabitants of Samaria: "Cover us! 'Fall upon us!'" (Hosea 10 : 8). Jesus used them to refer to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Luke 23 : 30). Likewise, St. Paul often used accommodation. For example, St. Paul used the words of the Psalm about the heavens singing God's glory: "A report goes forth through all the earth, their messages, to the ends of the world." to refer to the apostles preaching the Gospel across the world (see: Romans 10 : 6–8 and Deuteronomy 30 : 12–14; 2 Corinthians 8 : 15 and Exodus 16 : 18) – J. Kudasiewicz, *Wstęp ogólny do Pisma Świętego. Proforystyka pastoralna. Pismo św. jako księga ludu Bożego*, [in:] *Wstęp ogólny do Pisma Świętego*, red. J. Szlaga, Poznań–Warszawa 1986, p. 243.

22 B. M. Berchmans, *Umorismo*, [in:] *Dizionario di Omiletica*, a cura di M. Sodi, A. M. Triacca, Torino–Bergamo 1998, p. 1642.

23 B. Nadolski, *Risus paschalis – śmiech wielkanocny*, [in:] *Świat humoru*, red. S. Gajda, D. Brzozowska, Opole 2000, p. 363.

someone else's expense.²⁴ A preacher of the Word of God should never use such humor. True humor is born out of the benevolent observation of incongruous events and is far removed from scoffing at people. If it lacks kindness, it becomes destructive.²⁵ An example of using humor against another person is the following fragment of a homily by a young priest: "If you are indifferent to questions of the faith, then you haven't encountered Jesus! He who does not encounter Him cannot love Him. Jesus is not your fourth floor neighbor that make you eager for All Saints' Day when you see her Art Nouveau face, baroque shape, and Gothic stare!"²⁶ We should be very cautious with regards to humor that deals with differences between ethnic groups. One should be very careful in order to not cross the blurry line between observation and "so-called jokes that are but a pretext to express hostility and prejudice."²⁷ Joseph Telushkin presents four guidelines with regards to the appropriateness of ethnic jokes. He humorously notes that "they will help those telling them to avoid having their noses broken and losing friends":²⁸ "1. Would you like to tell the joke to members of the group that you are laughing at? If not, then why not? 2. If the members of the group that is the butt of the joke do not consider it to be as amusing as members from outside that group, it is probably tainted with hostility and should not be told. 3. The more scathing the joke's punch line, the more cautious people from outside a given group should be before telling it. Many years ago, the African-American comedian Dick Gregory said that his son told him that he no longer believed in Santa Claus: 'I never believed in Santa Claus because I knew no white dude would come into my neighborhood after dark.' If a white comedian told this joke with respect to an African-American neighborhood, doing so would probably be in poor taste. 4. And, finally, when the joke treats members of a certain ethnic group not as individuals, but as a stereotype [...], it becomes offensive."²⁹

6. The last criterion for using humor is succinctness. Humor should be used sparingly so that homilies do not turn into a comedy show during which the listeners' attention is not focused on the Word of God but on the comedic

24 W. H. Willimon, *Humor*, [in:] *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. by W. H. Willimon, R. Lisher, Louisville, KY 1995, p. 263.

25 B. M. Berchmans, *Umorismo*, op. cit., p. 1641.

26 W. Węgrzyniak, *Listy z niebieskiej Ameryki. Kazania i refleksje ruczajowskiego czasu*, Kraków 2001, p. 146.

27 Cf. J. Telushkin, *Humor żydowski*, Warszawa 2010, p. 24.

28 Cf. *ibidem*, p. 25.

29 Cf. *ibidem*.

aspect. In his 1322 tract *De forma praedicandi*, addressed to the Welsh abbot of Basingwerk, Lord William, Robert de Basevorn wrote that the use of humor in preaching is acceptable. However, he believed that this valuable ornament of preaching is a form of expression that should be used sparingly, at most three times in one homily. This means was only listed as nineteenth in order among twenty-two means of expression (*ornamenti*) that should be found in carefully prepared homilies.³⁰

When it fulfills the six above-mentioned criteria, humor can be used in preaching. Its place in the structure of the unit can be variable and depend on the speaker's creativity.

3. The Ways of Using Humor in a Homily

Humor can be used in a homily in several ways and at different moments. It could appear in the first phrase addressing the audience or in the part of the homily that deals with people's problems or some existential questions; next, it could appear in the main part of the homily when the problem under discussion is interpreted in light of the sacred texts and finally in the parenetic part, when moral conclusions are drawn from the message of the homily. Naturally, the time and way of using humor should be thought-out and integrated into the structure of the statement. It is best if it is carefully selected and used in accordance with the psychological rule: "less is more."

The way of addressing the listeners at the very beginning of the homily can be humorous. Thus, for example, when speaking in a seminary, Bishop Józef Zawitowski addressed his listeners with: "Greetings, young'uns." In this way, he made the mood less tense and gained his listeners' attention. Incongruousness, a feature typical of humor, in this case consisted of the contrast between the seriousness of the retreat and the informal language with which the bishop addressed his listeners.

Meanwhile, Rev. Piotr Pawlukiewicz, known for his homilies directed towards young people, once began a homily with the following words: "My dear brothers and sisters, those of you who are in love and those of you who want to be in love; those of you who are taking efforts to fall out of love and

30 E. Kucharska, W. Przyczyna, *Czy podczas kazania jest miejsce na (u)śmiech*, „Współczesna Ambona” 28 (2000) no. 2, p. 189.

are vowing to not fall in love in the near future...” Such an introduction is very original. It directly introduces the listeners to the topic of discussion, and the form of addressing the listeners perfectly describes that which unites the auditorium and that which does not, just as the Aristotelean definition in which the *genus proximum et differentia specifica* is used.

A reference to people’s questions at the beginning of the homily can be marked by humor. One example is the homily for All Saints’ Day titled. *We Are All Called to Sanctity*, whose author emphasized that sanctity is not reserved for the few but is instead God’s gift and the vocation of all the baptized. When responding to the question of who can be a saint at the beginning of the homily, its author said: “To be a saint seems to be out of the reach of the average person. When we think about ourselves, we can say that our lives are mundane and cannot have much to do with sanctity. One time, an interesting prayer was placed in the calendar: ‘God, so far I’ve been doing fairly well. I did not lose control over myself and I did not get angry. I did not complain and I did not eat chocolate. I did not exceed my credit limit. But in a moment I will get out of bed, and then I will really need your help.’ We have a saying that a person who sleeps does not sin. Is sanctity really so difficult to attain? What does it mean to be a saint? Saints are not only martyrs who have received the grace of persisting in their faith up to the point of a cruel death. Alongside them are saintly priests who zealously serve the people; there are saintly scholars who bring the truths of the Christian faith closer to others; there are saintly educators, spouses that bear witness to mutual love, saintly children, saintly youths and saintly older people. It is not the person who attains sainthood. It is God who makes a person who fulfills His will a saint. We are all called to sanctity. There are as many different forms of sanctity as there are people. Each person has his or her own path to God, but nobody walks this path alone. He who believes is never alone.”³¹

Humor can refer to a humorous event that is a challenge for the servant of the word to interpret it in the light of the Gospel. For example, a homily about friendship directed towards children or youths could begin with the following story: “A boy was sent to the new school counselor by his teacher. When asked what he did wrong, he said that he didn’t do anything especially wrong, just threw a nut (*Orzech* in Polish) into the pond. A second boy followed him and also declared: I threw a nut (*Orzech*) into the pond. When the third

31 H. Sławiński, *Słowo na niedzielę. Rok liturgiczny C*, Kraków 2015, p. 286.

boy came, the teacher asked: ‘Did you also throw a nut (*Orzech*) into the pond?’ ‘No,’ the boy replied. ‘I am Orzech [in Polish, Orzech can be a last name or nickname].’³² Next, we can refer to the genuine friendship between Jonathan and David, noting that one finds a true friend in difficult times. A friend does not have indecent fun at the expense of another person, but can stand in his or her defense, just as Jonathan did when David’s life was in danger. “Saul discussed his intention of killing David with his son Jonathan and with all his servants. But Saul’s son Jonathan [...] was very fond of David” (1 Samuel 19 : 1). Potentially drawing the ire of his father, Jonathan stood at his friend’s defense. He told him: “‘Should it please my father to bring any injury upon you, may the Lord do thus and so to Jonathan if I do not apprise you of it and send you on your way in peace. May the Lord be with you even as he was with my father. Only this: if I am still alive, may you show me the kindness of the Lord. But if I die, never withdraw your kindness from my house. And when the LORD exterminates all the enemies of David from the surface of the earth, the name of Jonathan must never be allowed by the family of David to die out from among you, or the Lord will make you answer for it.’ And in his love for David, Jonathan renewed his oath to him, because he loved him as his very self” (1 Samuel 20 : 13–17).

One way of using humor in a homily can consist of telling a Biblical story with the aid of contemporary imagery and present-day language. One example is a fragment of Walter J. Burghardt’s homily for the third Sunday in ordinary time of year B titled: *Each One of You is Jonah*. Explaining that the story of Jonah is very short, consisting of just 1,300 words, Burghardt jokingly said: “Those of you who are skeptical and have doubts about the living conditions inside a fish – such as the lack of oxygen and a bathroom or a dietary meal consisting of sea creatures – I want to recall that this is just a story. This is fiction, but fiction with a purpose, so it’s fiction with a message.”³³

32 H. Sławiński, *Głosimy Chrystusa ukrzyżowanego. Homilie na rok B*, Kraków 2008, p. 17.

33 Next, Burghardt tells the story of Jonah, emphasizing its conclusion, in which Jonah expressed his indignation that the pagans have become the beneficiaries of God’s forgiveness. He asked God: “And now, Lord, please take my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4 : 3). Next, he repeated his request for death, because the worm sent from God destroyed the plant in which Jonah hid from the sun. The entire story ends with God’s statement that reveals His mercy and thus an attitude completely different than Jonah’s indignation resulting from the dried-up plant: “But God said to Jonah, ‘Have you reason to be angry over the plant?’ ‘I have reason to be angry,’ Jonah answered, ‘angry enough to die.’ Then the Lord said, ‘You are concerned over the plant which cost you no labor and which you did not raise; it came up in one night and in one

Another way of adding a touch of humor to preaching is to add a witty thought to the theological explanations found in it. In the middle part of the homily on the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians for the second Sunday of year C (1 Corinthians 12 : 4–7), Walter J. Burghardt argued that the “new man” collaborates with the Holy Spirit and cautioned against two extremes: “One is Pelagianism, and the other is pessimism. The advocate of Pelagianism is a hopeless optimist... The pessimist, meanwhile, sins in a different way. He believes that there is nothing he could offer to others.”³⁴

Finally, another way of using humor in a homily can be parenthesis in which there is typically a question about what the previously undertaken Biblical and theological reflections can add to the listener’s current existential situation. For example, in the homily for the fourth Sunday of Easter of year A Walter J. Burghardt focused on the word “life” more than any other expressing the essence of Easter. He wrote: “We all know people who are not dead, but are only half-alive... Such are people who work on the production line and keep performing the same monotonous tasks over and over again. Such are students who waste time until the moment that they receive their diplomas and enter into the real world. Such are two people who live together in marriage, but everything has become routine. Something similar happens with life in the spirit, with life in Christ. I feel like I’m ready to die when I see a great number of Christians who have life within them, but appear to be dead. They do everything they’re supposed to, avoid mortal sin, and in reality have no sins to confess. But they don’t radiate Christ, Who is in them. He does not set them on fire. They care less about Jesus’ death than they do about John Lennon’s death. They look for something else that could set them on fire, such as yoga, rock and roll [...] kibbutzes in Israel, the war of the worlds [...]. The real enemy of life is not pain or even death. The real enemy of life is boredom. My dear

night it perished. And should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left, not to mention the many cattle?” (Jonah 4 : 9–11) – cf. W. J. Burghardt, *Preaching. The Art and the Craft*, New York–Mahwah, NJ 1987, p. 168–169.

34 W. J. Burghardt, *Preaching. The Art and the Craft*, op. cit., p. 169. Pelagianism does not acknowledge original sin; at most it acknowledges a bad example. It reduces grace to a good example given to us by Christ. It preaches the need for the existence of the Church for the moral elite – cf. G. O’Collins, E. G. Farrugia, *Leksykon pojęć teologicznych i kościelnych z indeksem angielsko-polskim*, Kraków 2002, p. 237.

friends, I recommend to you the following Easter prayer: ‘Lord, don’t let me get bored!’”³⁵

And here is another example of humor in the parenthetical fragment of a homily: “One time a certain man was asked: ‘If you had two houses, what would you do with them?’ ‘I would keep one for myself and give the other one to the needy,’ he replied. ‘And what if you had two cows?’ he said that he would keep one for himself and give the other to the needy. ‘And what if you had just two hens?’ In that case, he said that he would keep both for himself. That man had two hens! As long as these questions were solely hypothetical, he was ready to be generous. However, when the question directly pertained to him, a clear declaration becomes problematic. Perhaps some of us claim that if we were to win the lottery, we would give 10 percent of our winnings to our parish or to the poor. I myself once accepted such a donation for my parish, because a certain person had won something in the lottery. Although this was a small amount; this obligation had been fulfilled. However, you don’t have to wait to win the lottery, because if today we are not capable of sharing what we have with others, then sharing lottery winnings could be very difficult. If you want to be conditionally good, then you are just an ordinary dreamer. Just like the conversion of a person, noble decisions occur ‘today’ and thus without any planned delay, without any ‘as long as’ or ‘if.’ In this regard, the radical lifestyle change of Mother Teresa of Calcutta is instructive. As she walked across the street, she saw a dying person and made an immediately decision to take care of him. She discerned in her that if she would not help him, then she would never be sufficiently sensitive to those dying on the streets. It is not dreamers, detached from reality, but people who turn good intentions into good actions without hesitation and hear the words that Zacchaeus heard: *Today, this house has begun to participate in salvation (19 : 9).*”³⁶

This type of humor does not cause a bellyache or raucous laughter, but instead causes the listener to reflect. However, thanks to such humor the homily is free of deathly solemnity. Thus fear disappears. Listeners experience kindness and forget about the passage of time. They have the right to smile; they feel happy. The Good News brings them joy. They are motivated and prepared for life in accordance with Christ’s teachings.³⁷

35 W. J. Burghardt, *Preaching. The Art and the Craft*, op. cit., p. 170.

36 H. Sławiński, *Chrystus objawił miłosiernego Boga. Homilie na rok C*, Kraków 2009, p. 296.

37 W. J. Burghardt, *Preaching. The Art and the Craft*, op. cit., p. 171.

Conclusion

Preaching announces Jesus Christ's Good News. Its central theme is always Christ's paschal mystery. It contains within itself all the initiatives that God undertakes throughout human history in order to save people and lead everyone to the joy of eternal life. Like people's everyday lives, salvation history is replete with both dramatic and comic events. They can be reflected in preaching of the Word of God. There is also a place for humor in preaching. For it to fulfill its purpose, the mutual interaction of three factors (the sender, recipient, and message) is necessary. Only a speaker who has a sense of humor and thanks to it knows how to discern humor in everyday social interactions or to construct a humorous message can skillfully use humor in a homily. Listeners should have a similar trait. They can properly interpret a humorous message if they have a sense of humor and thus be capable of interpreting the preacher's humor. And, finally, a humorous message containing such means as surprise and exaggeration is necessary. Furthermore, the circumstances are also significant. It is difficult to expect humor at a time of grief or agony, but it is easier to use it during a wedding. Furthermore, humor, which can be used in preaching, should meet the above-described criteria: it should be related to the topic of the homily, respect Sacred Scripture through an appropriate interpretation, be original, be appropriate, respect the listeners, and be used sparingly.

In conclusion, we can say that there are no obstacles to preaching using humor, as long as such humor is appropriate to the substance of the Word of God. After all, many centuries ago Cicero (106–43 BC) and after him St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) taught that teaching and proving the truth (Latin: *docere*) can touch and set afire (Latin: *movere, flectere*), and furthermore it can be done in a way that is pleasing to the listeners (Latin: *delectare*).

Abstract

The Criteria and Ways of Using Humor in Preaching

Humor is a positive element of human life that should be consciously nurtured and developed. It can also be used in the preaching of the Word of God, as long as it meets certain criteria. These are: subordination to the theme of the homily or sermon, compliance with the correct interpretation of Scripture, originality, relevance, respect showed to the audience, and limited use. Humor can be used in preaching in different ways: in the very address to the recipients or in the periphrastic, hortatory,

persuasive part of the homily or sermon. Thus we can preach with humor as long as doing so is suitable for the transmission of the word of God.

Keywords: humor; preaching; sermon; homily

References

- Anzulewicz, H., & Maryniarczyk, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii. 4. Go-Iq*. Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu.
- Arbuckle, G. A. (2008). *Laughing with God: humor, culture, and transformation*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Burghardt, W. J. (1987). *Preaching. The art and the craft*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Chmielewski, M. (Ed.). (2002). *Leksykon duchowości katolickiej*. Lublin; Kraków: Wydawnictwo M.
- Gajda, S., & Brzozowska, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Świat humoru*. Opole: Uniwersytet Opolski. Instytut Filologii Polskiej.
- Homerski, J., & Szlaga, J. B. (Eds.). (1986). *Wstęp ogólny do Pisma Świętego*. Poznań; Warszawa: Pallottinum.
- Kazania księdza Piotra. (n.d.). Retrieved January 30, 2018, from <http://www.kazaniaksiedzapiotra.pl>
- Kucharska, E., & Przyczyna, W. (2000). Czy podczas kazania jest miejsce na (u)śmiech. *Współczesna Ambona*, 28 (2), 184–189.
- Landmann, S. (1999). *Śmiech po żydowsku czyli Wczorajszy i dzisiejszy świat w dowcipach i dykteryjkach żydowskich*. (R. Stiller, Trans.). Gdynia: Wydawnictwo Uraeus.
- O'Collins, G., & Farrugia, E. G. (2002). *Leksykon pojęć teologicznych i kościelnych z indeksem angielsko-polskim*. (J. Ożóg & B. Żak, Trans.) (2nd ed.). Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Ostafiński, W. (2012). Księdza Tischnera mocowanie się ze słowem. Wokół Kazań starsosądeckich. *Polonia Sacra*, 16 (1), 227–250. <https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.544>
- Pawlukiewicz, P. (2016, June 18). Kazania księdza Piotra. Retrieved January 30, 2018, from <http://www.kazaniaksiedzapiotra.pl>
- Przyczyna, W. (Ed.). (2011). *Humor z ambony*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo M.
- Sławiński, H. (2008). *Głosimy Chrystusa Ukrzyżowanego. Homilie na rok B*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Sławiński, H. (2009). *Chrystus objawił miłosiernego Boga. Homilie na rok C*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Sławiński, H. (2015). *Sławiński, H. (2015). Rok liturgiczny C*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Salwator.
- Słownik języka polskiego*. (1997). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Sodi, M., Triacca, A. M., & Piovanelli, S. (Eds.). (1998). *Dizionario di omiletica*. Torino; Bergamo: Elledici; Velar.
- Surdykowski, J. (2006). *Wołanie o sens*. Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka.
- Telushkin, J. (2010). *Humor żydowski. Co najlepsze dowcipy i facecje żydowskie mówi o Żydach?* (E. Westwalewicz-Mogilska, Trans.). Warszawa: Bellona.
- Węgrzyniak, W. (2001). *Listy z Niebieskiej Ameryki. Kazania i refleksje ruczajowskiego czasu*. Kraków: Format.
- Willimon, W. H., & Lischer, R. (Eds.). (1995). *Concise encyclopedia of preaching* (1st ed.). Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press.

