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Homiletics of Law and Law in Homiletics. Theological Views on Justice in Orthodox Preaching

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Abstract: *This article aims to analyze the relationship between Orthodox homiletical discourse and the concept of justice, focusing on the way in which legal themes are integrated, interpreted and transfigured within religious preaching. In a contemporary society characterized by ideological polarizations, economic inequalities and deep ethical crises, Orthodox preaching is called to go beyond a mere didactic or moralizing role, assuming a prophetic function, capable of illuminating reality with the light of revealed Truth. Thus justice is presented not merely as a legal or social concept, but as a spiritual and eschatological dimension, reflecting God's will in the life of the community and of the individual. The article explores the multiple implications of this dialogue between law and theology: from the interpretation of the divine commandments as fundamental norms of equity to the sermons of the Holy Fathers, who denounced abuses of power and advocated justice for the marginalized. At the same time, it highlights how law, understood as an expression of order and balance in society, can be reinterpreted through the lens of the Gospel, becoming a means of active love and service of neighbor. In this sense, Orthodox preaching becomes a space for articulating an integrating vision in which justice is inseparable from mercy and legality is subordinate to truth and human dignity.*

Keywords: *homiletics; justice; Orthodox theology; preaching; justice; Christian morality; canon law;*

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Introduction

Orthodox preaching is not a mere exercise in public speaking, or a refined form of religious rhetoric, but is a sacred act of witness to revealed truth. It is meant to translate the teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into living words of spiritual power, into a language which penetrates hearts and transforms consciences. The sermon is a bridge between the Word of God and the concrete realities of the world in which we live, a theological space where eternity and history, transcendence and the everyday meet. At the heart of this witness is a central theme of biblical revelation: justice, not as mere human equity, but as an attribute of God, a holy and saving justice. Biblical justice is not reducible to legal norms or social imperatives; it is the expression of God's faithfulness to his creation, to his promises and to man as the bearer of the divine image. That is why the Orthodox preacher is called to embody, in word and in life, holy justice, which not only judges but saves, which does not condemn but restores and heals. We live in an age in which the discourse of legality, equity, human rights and social justice has become ubiquitous. Contemporary society, influenced by ideological currents and the development of democratic systems, increasingly demands an articulate legal conscience and a genuine concern for the defense of the fundamental rights of the person. In this context, Orthodox preaching cannot remain indifferent. It

must involve itself responsibly, without lapsing into political activism, assuming its prophetic vocation to enlighten consciences, to promote justice and to guide society towards a spiritual understanding of justice. Orthodox homiletics, faithful to the Tradition of the Church and in dialog with the challenges of today's world, is called to recover its prophetic dimension. This is not a simple social critique but an eschatological proclamation. The sermon must speak of justice from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, a justice which is not limited to the equitable distribution of goods or the observance of the law, but which springs from love, mercy and truth. This justice is grounded in Jesus Christ, the merciful Judge, who perfectly combines justice and mercy in himself. The preacher thus becomes a servant of a justice which transfigures, which offers hope to the oppressed and which calls the powerful to moral responsibility and repentance.

Divine justice and the theological meaning of law

In Orthodox theology, divine justice is understood not as the mere impersonal application of a moral law, but as a living expression of God's love, a restorative work designed to heal and restore the ontological order of creation fallen into sin. This perspective differs from modern legal concepts that reduce justice to the mere mechanical application of laws. God is not a distant judge, imposing punishments according to a rigid code, but a Father, who seeks the healing and restoration of the human being. It is profoundly different from secular concepts of retributive justice. Whereas human justice focuses on punishment and retribution, divine justice seeks to restore the relationship between Creator and creature.

At the center of divine justice is not the idea of punishment, but the saving will of God, who "wills that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). This apostolic affirmation reveals the essence of divine justice: it is not an end in itself, but a means to salvation. This perspective underpins the message of Orthodox preaching, which must express justice not as moral rigorism, but as a mystery of loving mercy. The preacher is called to show how God's justice is manifested in his mercy, how punishment always has a pedagogical and healing character.

In the Orthodox tradition, justice cannot be separated from mercy and grace. The Fathers of the Church have always emphasized this indissoluble unity. God is just and good; but His goodness is greater than justice (Grigorie de Nazianz, 2022, p. 164). The divine paradox of God's justice and mercy underlies the Orthodox understanding of justice. The preacher is called to express spiritual balance. He must show how God's justice is not a destructive but a transforming force.

The sermon must speak of justice, which does not destroy but uplifts; of judgment, which does not condemn definitively but calls to return. This is the fundamental difference between human and divine judgment: God judges not to destroy, but to save. Just as the physician sometimes cuts in order to heal, so divine justice may hurt temporarily, but its intention is always salvific. In this sense, evangelical justice shows itself as a call to metanoia. Metanoia is not a superficial change of behavior but a radical transformation of the whole being. Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, proclaims: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). These words reveal a profound dimension of Christian justice. Hungering for justice is not just an abstract desire for social equity, but a deep thirst to restore lost communion with God and neighbor. It is a longing for the Kingdom, for peace and inner restoration. Man, who yearns for justice, does not seek only external correctness, but ontological harmony, reconciliation with himself, with his fellow men and with the Creator. Homiletics must therefore express this soteriological dynamic of justice, oriented towards life, not

condemnation. The preacher must show how divine justice is not an end but a beginning, not a condemnation but an opportunity for a new beginning.

St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies, insists that God delays punishment not because He is careless, but because He is a lover of people (Ioan Gură de Aur, 1994, pp. 45-47). The aspect of divine longsuffering is essential to understanding Christian righteousness. Divine justice is not arbitrary but pedagogical, designed to lead the soul to repentance. God gives time to the sinner not because He ignores sin, but precisely because He desires his salvation. For this reason, Orthodox preaching must combine the courage to denounce sin with compassion for the fallen in a constant effort to heal the human conscience. The preacher can be neither too gentle, so as not to minimize the gravity of sin, nor too harsh, so as not to destroy hope. He must follow the model of Jesus Christ, who condemned the sin, but He pardoned the sinner.

The restorative dimension of justice is also visible in the Church's canonical practice. Church canons are not mere instruments of social control or discipline. Canons are not mere punitive codes, but spiritual cures, intended to restore the health of the soul and reintegration into the ecclesial body (Vasile cel Mare, 2011, p. 354). They are like the prescriptions of a spiritual doctor, adapted to the specific needs of each sick soul. From this perspective, any sermon on justice must be inspired by the therapeutic ethos of the Church, which does not break but heals, which does not isolate but brings back to communion. The preacher must present ecclesial justice not as a dividing wall, but as a bridge that allows the prodigal son to return home.

In contemporary times, marked by a profound crisis in the understanding of justice, often reduced to legal, contractual or ideological dimensions, Orthodox preaching has a prophetic mission. In a world that has lost sight of the spiritual dimension of justice, the Church has a responsibility to recall the fundamental truth. She is called to recall that justice is not merely a juridical category but an ontological state, a reality of communion between God and man. True justice is achieved not only by just laws, but by the transformation of the heart. Human laws, however well intentioned, are incapable of radically changing human nature. In this sense, justice is not a "what" but a "who"; it is the working presence of Jesus Christ in the world. He is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30), and it is only through union with Him that we can share in true justice. The Church cannot abandon this vision. In the face of the temptation to reduce justice to mere social justice or distributive equity, the Church must remain faithful to its spiritual vision. In her preaching, she must recover the discourse of justice as a way of salvation, of rehabilitating the image of God in man. It is not a question of replacing state justice, but of complementing it with an authentic spiritual dimension. The Church does not dispute the need for organized human justice, but she points out its limits and complements it with the perspective of salvation. Only such an understanding can lead to a just society, not by force but by grace. In this sense, the Orthodox sermon on justice is a call to return, to God, to oneself, to our fellow human beings, and a promise of the kingdom where justice will dwell with peace and love will be the supreme law (Larchet, 2001, pp. 89-91).

Canon law and the normative dimension of preaching

Orthodox preaching cannot be conceived outside the normative framework provided by the Church's canon law. This assertion is not a mere theoretical observation, but expresses the essence of the relationship between the preached word and ecclesial tradition. Far from being a mere inspired discourse, the sermon is part of an ecclesial ethos, which is grounded in the canonical rite. It is not a personal creation of the preacher, but an expression of the teaching of the Church, filtered through the prism of pastoral grace and the concrete needs of the community. In this perspective,

the preacher is not an exegete of Sacred Scripture or a moralist, but a formator of consciences and a mediator between the norm and life. His role is not confined to the transmission of abstract truths, but consists in linking the Church's teaching to the daily realities of the faithful. It is intended to bring the Church's teaching up to date in a way that is faithful to Sacred Tradition, but also sensitive to the concrete situations of the faithful. The sermon thus becomes a bridge between canonical normativity and everyday life, between the demands of faith and the challenges of human existence.

Preaching is a space of articulation between normativity and pastoral discernment, between the letter of the canons and the spirit of the Gospel. This is not a negative tension, but a necessary one, because it reflects the dynamics of Christian life, which cannot be reduced to mere external rules. Not infrequently, the minister of the altar finds himself in the position of interpreting the canonical commandments and ordinances in the face of a community afflicted by moral dilemmas, family crises, social conflicts or spiritual misinformation. In such situations, canon law should not be imposed as a burden, but assumed as a pedagogy of salvation, in the spirit of iconomy, without laxity or moral relativism (Larchet, 2006, pp. 115-118).

Homiletics has an indirect normative function. The word spoken in the name of the Church clarifies limits, reaffirms principles, calls to conversion and lights the way. It is not a juridical code, but a spiritual guide that helps the faithful to understand and live according to God's will. The preacher is both teacher and interpreter of the spiritual law. He translates the commandments into life and contextualizes them without falsifying them. This statement expresses the essential tension of any homiletic act: how to preserve unaltered the revealed truth and, at the same time, offer it in an accessible and edifying way without betraying either form or spirit?

There is an ecclesial and communitarian dimension to the sermon, which involves the canonical ordinance. The sermon is delivered in the liturgical setting, before the Eucharistic assembly, and is intended to strengthen unity in faith and life. It is not an isolated monologue, but an integral part of divine worship, a moment when the community listens together to the word of God and is called to put it into practice. In this sense, it becomes an instrument for transmitting the Orthodox ethos, the unmodified but deeply lived norms of the ascetical, dogmatic and liturgical tradition of the Church.

The preacher is not an isolated theologian, but a servant of the ecclesial body, called to speak "in season and out of season" (II Timothy 4:2), but with discernment. His word must be in harmony with the teaching of the Church and the pastoral needs of the faithful. He may not speak from his own opinions, but from the authority he receives through ordination and obedience to Holy Tradition.

On the other hand, in today's context, where authority and normativity are often questioned, preaching must return to its prophetic but not authoritarian character, calling for an interior acceptance of the commandment of Jesus Christ, not outward conformity. In a world which rejects every form of authority, the Church cannot respond by rigidity, but by understanding and credible witness. In this approach, canon law becomes a resource, not an obstacle, and the preacher a living interpreter of a dynamic tradition, not a reciter of fixed formulas (Behr, 2006, p. 89).

The responsibility of the sermon in the ecclesial education of the faithful must be mentioned. The purpose of preaching is to introduce the believing people to the thinking of the Church, to the logic of the Gospel and to the Orthodox way of relating to justice, authority and freedom. Without this constant pedagogical endeavor, the risk is that the Church's ordinance will be perceived as arbitrary or outdated, and its justice as rigorous and unmerciful (Evdokimov, 1996, p. 144).

Therefore, Orthodox preaching, anchored in canon law, is not simply a presentation of rules, but a spiritual guide that helps the faithful to live in communion with God and with their neighbor. It is both a gift of the Church and a solemn responsibility for those to whom it is entrusted.

Preaching and the social justice crisis

Orthodox preaching cannot remain indifferent in the face of deepening social inequalities and the increasingly evident polarization between classes, regions or communities. In an age in which economic disparities are widening and social tensions threaten the cohesion of communities, the Church is called to be the voice of the silent and to remind the world that the dignity of every human being is sacred. While not ideological in character, preaching is by its very nature a witness to revealed truth and, at the same time, an act of solidarity with the marginalized and the unjust. It cannot be reduced to mere moralizing, but must be a reflection of the mercy of Jesus Christ, who stood on the side of the humiliated and oppressed.

In the context of a world in which justice is often relativized or instrumentalized, the preacher is called to proclaim clearly and prophetically that justice is an essential virtue of the Christian life, an expression of active love and of God's order of the world. His word must not be an abstract one, but one that touches people's concrete realities, reveals injustices and inspires hope for a more just world. The sermon is not simply a social analysis, but a call to conversion, to change, to involvement.

Drawing on the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, Orthodox preaching continues the message of Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah, who unequivocally condemned the corruption of rulers, the abuse of the poor and religious formalism devoid of love and compassion. The prophets did not speak from positions of safety, but took risks to bring the word of God to a world full of injustice. They were the voice of the disenfranchised, the widows, the orphans and the strangers, calling to repentance and reconnect with the Just. The same spirit is found in the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, who brought "good news to the poor" and confronted hypocrisy, injustice and religious and social oppression head-on (Luke 4:18). He did not hesitate to criticize the powerful, to defend the innocent and to show that true religiosity is measured by mercy and justice. His message was radical but not revolutionary in a political sense. He did not call for violence, but for a change of heart (Stăniloae, 1997, pp. 104-106).

A prime example in this direction is St. John Chrysostom, whose prophetic homily uncompromisingly denounced unjustly accumulated wealth, indifference to the poor and exploitation of the labor of the needy. He did not speak from theory, but saw with his own eyes the suffering of the simple people and strongly condemned the greed of the rich. He was clear that not to share what you have with the poor is to rob them (Ioan Gură de Aur, 1994, p. 217). For him, material goods are not just personal property but gifts from God to be used for the common good. The message, genuinely evangelical, offers a current and valid model of an involved but non-ideologized preaching, anchored in the vision of the Kingdom of God and not in utopian projects. His homiletic was not revolutionary in a political sense, but one that highlighted the demands of the Gospel in a profoundly unequal society. Today the Church needs such voices to speak with the same clarity and courage.

In the face of the crisis of social justice, which today affects families, young people, workers, the elderly and migrants, preaching must rediscover its prophetic and therapeutic dimension. A moralizing approach is not enough; what is needed is a word that heals, that liberates, that invites to personal conversion but also to community engagement. Thus, the Orthodox

preacher must understand the social and economic context in which his hearers live and shed an evangelical light on the structural injustices that destroy lives and communities (Meyendorff, 2013, pp. 78-81).

The sermon should not be a general discourse on "good" and "evil", but one that touches on concrete problems: poverty, exploitation, corruption, marginalization. It must be a call to action, but not in a political sense, but in the sense of Christian mercy, by supporting the poor, defending the weak, fighting against indifference.

Preaching can be a space of spiritual resistance against systemic poverty, marginalization and the moral disintegration of society. This resistance is not aggressive, but filled with the spirit of mercy, as the Gospel teaches us: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). Gospel justice is not about vengeance or forced redistribution, but about restoring communion, about restoring the image of God in each person.

Orthodox preaching that addresses social justice must avoid two extremes: secularizing the message by adopting ideological language and abdicating social responsibility in the name of an abstract spirituality. True Orthodox homiletics takes account of man, understood in body and soul, individually and communally, and proclaims a justice that springs from love and leads to salvation. It cannot be reduced to mere social activism, but neither can it ignore human suffering. It has to be a balance between speaking the truth and showing mercy to those who suffer, between calling for change and being patient with human weaknesses. Only in this way can Orthodox preaching be truly prophetic, not just in words but in its power to transform hearts and society.

The prophetic dimension of homiletics in the face of worldly justice

Orthodox preaching, faithful to its prophetic mission, cannot ignore the juridical, social and moral realities of the world in which it is delivered. It is not simply a moralizing discourse, but a call to awareness and transformation in the light of faith. Although the Church does not assume the role of a political or juridical court, it is called to offer a moral and theological evaluation of the structures and mechanisms of worldly justice in the spirit of the Gospel. The preacher thus becomes a mediator between conscience and truth, between the demands of human law and the demands of divine justice. Through his word, the preacher informs and challenges, encouraging believers to live in accordance with God's will in a world often dominated by self-interest and inequity.

Biblical tradition abounds with examples of prophetic vocation engaged in the socio-political realities of the time. Old Testament prophets did not hesitate to condemn corrupt judges, unjust laws and political leaders who betrayed their moral mandate. They spoke not from positions of power but out of loyalty to God, addressing both the rulers and the people, calling them to repentance and reconnect with the Just One. In this spirit, Orthodox preaching must remain attentive to the tensions between legal justice and divine justice, being the voice of the defenseless and the critical conscience of the community. Church prophetism today must recognize and combat the structures of sin that perpetuate exploitation, marginalization and alienation from God.

The prophetic dimension of homiletics involves not simply theological analysis, but also the spiritual courage to denounce what contradicts the Gospel, even if this means discomfort or opposition. The Church cannot remain silent when man is wronged, for silence would mean complicity with evil. Orthodox preaching, therefore, must speak the truth with gentleness, but also with fidelity to God's justice, without compromising with worldly interests. This does not mean that the Church enters into political polemics, but that it maintains a clear position in defense of human dignity and Christian principles (Stăniloae, 2013, p. 194).

The sermon is also intended to form the moral conscience, inviting the faithful to respect civil law and to evangelical discernment and responsibility. In the face of imperfect or even unjust laws, the preacher can call the community to reflection, prayer and action inspired by Christian love and the restorative sense of justice. The sermon thus becomes a bridge between morality and public life, between conventional silence and the courage of confession. It does not promote anarchy or blind disobedience, but an obedience to God's will, which can sometimes come into tension with the existing social order.

The Church must not become politically militant, but neither must it abdicate its role as a candle in the darkness. Homiletics, in this light, is called to speak the truth, not in the language of condemnation, but in the healing and righting language of the Holy Spirit. The preaching of justice is not a call to rebellion but to conversion. In the face of a worldly justice, often marked by formalism or interests, Orthodox preaching remains the vertical conscience of a society tempted to relativize values. It does not propose technical solutions or legislative reforms, but a change of heart which can then transform social structures.

The prophetic dimension of Orthodox preaching must not be understood as a form of activism or interventionism, but as an authentic witness to the Truth, which liberates (John 8:32). Where the law of the world fails to do justice, preaching remains the call to mercy, which judges with love, and to justice, which restores, not destroys (Larchet 2020, pp. 156-157). Through her word, the Church offers not only criticism but also hope, showing that true justice is not merely a human ideal but a divine gift, which is fulfilled through the grace of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

Conclusions

Orthodox homiletics plays an essential role in articulating a theological perspective on justice. It does not limit itself to the mere transmission of abstract truths, but reveals, through the inspired word, the profound connection between human justice and God's justice. In an age dominated by moral relativism, the Orthodox homily highlights the fact that justice is not just a juridical concept but an expression of divine harmony in the world. It reminds us that true justice flows from obedience to the will of Jesus Christ, Who transformed the law from a set of rules into a call to love and mercy. Not just as a form of moral teaching, but as a liturgical and communal event that calls the faithful to a life of justice, integrity and love. The sermon is not a moralizing monologue, but an integral part of the Divine Liturgy, where the word opens to the faithful the profound meaning of life in Jesus Christ. By participating in the Holy Liturgy, man is called to listen to and live justice as a gift and a communal responsibility. Holy Liturgy, as a mystery of unity, shows that justice cannot be separated from love, and homiletics emphasizes this by calling for reconciliation, mercy and patience. Here, justice becomes concrete through acts of compassion and solidarity with the poor, following the example of Jesus Christ. In a world where the law risks becoming an instrument of power and justice a formality, Orthodox preaching can revive an awareness of justice as a theological virtue. Today, laws are often manipulated to serve particular interests, and human justice can be distorted by prejudice or corruption. In contrast, homiletics brings to the forefront the idea that true justice is obtained by the grace of God, Who does not show partiality. It exposes the danger of a justice that ignores human dignity and calls the believer to be vigilant against injustice, even when it is legalized. Through the prophetic words of its preachers, the Church preserves the memory of the saints who fought for justice. Based on the revelation of divine love, homiletics transforms justice into a spiritual guide. It is not just about righteousness, but about transforming the whole of life after the model of Jesus Christ, who mercied sinners and condemned

hypocrisy. Orthodox preaching shows that justice without mercy is an illusion and mercy without justice is weakness. True justice is that which blends truth with compassion, punishment with forgiveness, law with mercy, all related to the sacrifice on the Cross, where God shows that His justice is essentially redemptive.

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