

Tudorel-Constantin Rusu\*

## *Ethos-Pathos-Logos:* Aristotle's Triad of Persuasiveness in Homiletical Discourse

**Abstract:** The homiletical discourse of the Eastern Christian Church – on which tradition this paper focuses – is considered standardised and prescriptive, as it also plays an important liturgical role. My research identifies and presents those ambon proclamations that best circumscribe and fall within Aristotle's three means of persuasion – *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. It is also essential to consider where persuasive declamations are present in these homiletical discourses. Therefore, it will be related to the conventional parts of an oration in Classical rhetoric.

**Keywords:** persuasion, Classical rhetoric, ethos, pathos, logos, homiletical discourse

### 01. Rhetoric: *Craft* or *knack*?

Aristotle begins, not by coincidence, his famous treatise on persuasion – *On Rhetoric* – with the following statement: “Rhetoric is an *antistrophos*<sup>1</sup> to dialectic” (1.1.1354 a1). What does Stagirite mean by this assertion, and why does it attach so much importance to it that it is placed right in the opening paragraph?

Before we proceed, it might be helpful to provide a brief background. As Kennedy (2007) notes, “Aristotle is more likely thinking of and rejecting the analogy of the true and false arts elaborated by Socrates in *Gorgias*” (30), where oratory is considered not a technical art (*techné*) or craft, but rather “...a knack (...) for producing a certain gratification and pleasure” (*Gorgias*, 462c). Seen this way, the main point of oratory is flattery, and those who want to practice need to have “...a mind given to making hunches takes to, a mind that's bold and naturally clever at dealing with people.” (*Gorgias*, 463a-b). In other words, Socrates does not consider oratory an art “...because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them, so that it's unable to state the cause of each thing” (*Gorgias*, 465a). On the other hand, art can be defined as a thing that can be

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\* Tudorel-Constantin Rusu, PhD, Assistant professor, Department of Communication Sciences and Public Relations, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (Romania). Email: [tudorelrusu@gmail.com](mailto:tudorelrusu@gmail.com).

\*\* *Acknowledgement:* This article represents a partially reworked version of the views held in my doctoral thesis, *Resources of Classical Oratory in Homiletical Discourse*, which I defended at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași in September 2023.

accounted for. The Socratic and Platonic view is evident: “You’ve now heard what I say oratory is. It’s the counterpart in the soul to pastry baking, its counterpart in the body” (*Gorgias*, 465 d-e).

## 02. A systematisation of persuasion

As a counterargument to what has been said in the Platonic *Gorgias* dialogue, Aristotle places rhetoric in a complex relationship with dialectic through the word *antistrophos*, which reflects “both a parallelism and a difference at the level of the two arts” (Maftai 2011, 374). In this way, the Stagirite intends to ground rhetoric rationally and to shape it into a *techné* that aligns with the definition in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which states that rhetoric is “...a certain characteristic bound up with making that is accompanied by true reason” (6.4.1140 a20). Furthermore, rhetoric provides “a coherent model of the connection between the method and its results” (Andrieş 2011, 14). In Aristotle’s view, “less *art* in the sense of *fine art* than any craft or body of *technical* knowledge used to produce an artefact: shoes, tables, a building and hence the art of shoemaking, of carpentry, and of architecture. (...) Aristotle maintains that art, like prudence, pertains to the realm of things that admit of being otherwise but differs from prudence in that it is bound up with *making (poiesis)* rather than with action (*praxis*); it therefore, has an end other than its activity” (Bartlett and Collins 2011, 1).

The relationship between rhetoric and dialectic has also been understood as a link or correspondence between private and public address: “Dialectic and rhetoric are antistrophic in the precise sense that what dialectic is to the private and conversational use of language (between two people alternatively speaking and hearing, asking questions and answering them), rhetoric is to the public use of language (political, in a broad sense), addressed by a single speaker to a collective audience” (Brunschiw 1996, 36). In a logical manner, based on its special relationship with dialectics, the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric continues with an important distinction. This is about the fact that “the genre of rhetoric, like that of dialectic, is not delimited” (Andrieş 2011, 25): “But rhetoric seems to be able to observe the persuasive about *the given*, so to speak. That, too, is why we say it does not include technical knowledge of any particular, defined genus [of subjects]” (*On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1355 b30-34)<sup>2</sup>. This leads to the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric: “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (*On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1355 b25).

Aristotelian rhetoric is thus considered “the art of discovering persuasive means” (Sălăvăstru 1996, 37), and it is comprised of two distinct categories of evidential sources: those that are intrinsic to the art of rhetoric and those that are independent of this art. By employing a simple criterion: “Can the

mean be found with (or without) the rhetorical *techne* or method?” (Braet 1992, 309), the Stagirite distinguishes between means of persuasion that are not related to the orator but existed prior (witnesses, testimony from torture, contracts) and means of persuasion related to the oratorical method: “Of the *pisteis*, some are *atechnic* (non-artistic), some *entechnic* (embodied in art, artistic). I call *atechnic* those that are not provided by us [i.e., the potential speaker] but are preexisting: for example, witnesses, testimony from torture, contracts, and such like; and *entechnic* whatever can be prepared by method and by us; thus one must use the former and invent the latter” (*On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1355 b35-1356 a). As Kennedy (2007) notes, “*pistis* (pl. *pisteis*) has a number of different meanings in different contexts: proof, means of persuasion, belief” (31).

It is also important to say that the Aristotelian view that the *entechnic pisteis* are uncovered and used by the orator, while *atechnic pisteis* are not, and this results in the distinction between *inventio* and the other canons of rhetoric (Maftai 2011, 374). *Heurein*, the word used by Aristotle, meaning “to find,” will become the regular Greek word for rhetorical *invention* (Kennedy 2007, 38).

The *entechnic pisteis*, those that are “provided through speech” (*On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1356 a1), that “come from within the oratorical art” (Sălăvăstru 2010, 37), are of three kinds: “for some are in the character [*ethos*] of the speaker, and some in disposing the listener in some way [*pathos*], and some in the speech [*logos*] itself, by showing or seeming to show something” (*On Rhetoric*, 1. 2.1356 a1-4). In this passage can be found the summary of the well-known “Aristotelian triad *ethos* (orator), *pathos* (auditor), and *logos* (language, discourse), which is significant for any oratorical approach and which is still today the criterion for ordering the art of oratory” (Meyer 1993, quoted in Sălăvăstru 2010, 23).

### 03. Homiletical discourse and persuasion

The *prooimion* (lat. *exordium*) of the current homiletical discourse of the Eastern Christian Church generally begins with the declamation “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!” and continues with the address “Beloved faithful,” or with an emotional appeal in the same register. In terms of *pistis*, or *proof*, as part of an oration (lat. *confirmatio* – and *refutatio*), this part of the ambon discourse contains formulations such as “Evangelion of the day shows us” and “the Holy Fathers tell us” or, generally speaking, “the Church teaches us.” “Amen!” uttered in a rousing tone, is – and always has been – the final word of the oratorical clergymen’s *epilogos* (lat. *peroratio*).

These homiletical pastoral declamations, in various forms, together with others specific to the pulpit discourse of the Eastern tradition, are well

known to people who belong to the category of so-called “practising faithful” or, in general, to people to whom the universe of the biblical text and the doctrine of Eastern Christian Church teaching is not (totally) new. As for the emitters of these utterances, the orators – current clergy preachers – have learned and inherited it from generation to generation and have taken it on as such. It is known that the tradition of homiletical discourse is a standardised and prescriptive one.

A significant process took place at the beginning of the formation of Christian communities: the original homiletical expressions or declamations metamorphosed into constitutive parts of the liturgical language, which is characteristic of the sacramental space. It is not by chance that the earliest known Christian Easter homily – *On Pascha* (c. 160 AD), by Melito, Bishop of Sardis – is considered by scholars such as Siegert (1997, 438), Alistair Stewart-Sykes (2001, 221-228), and John Ică jr (2008, 853) to be the earliest known Easter service. Thus, at the end of the process of their transformation from declamation to liturgical acts, it was lost sight of the fact that these pastoral utterances had *ab initio*, in the Christian orator’s intention, a rhetorical purpose, the purpose par excellence of any discursive construct: to persuade the audience.

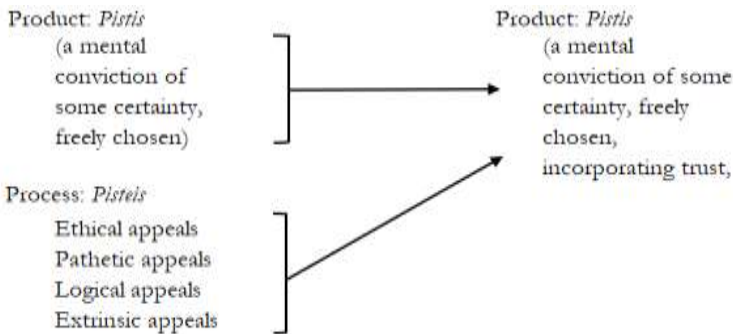
The opinion of some authors like Vasile Florescu<sup>3</sup> that current homiletical discourse is not (anymore) aimed at persuading the faithful, who are already convinced, already forever converted, does not stand up, and the textbooks of Orthodox Christian homiletics, especially the current editions, acknowledge this. In his book *Rhetorical Preaching: Studies on Rhetoric, Homiletics & Preaching*, Zoltán Literáty notes that “The simplest argument for this case is that it would be difficult to imagine a sermon without intent, but all intentional speeches are *rhetorical by nature*. (...) rhetoric, as the intrinsic cohesive power of speech, is not a question of form, style or presentation, but a practical ability based on *common sense* that produces effective speech in the most optimal way possible” (Literáty 2020, loc. 73). If the homiletical discourse is rhetorical by nature, as Literáty states, in the Aristotelian view, that means it is persuasive.

Following the theses of George A. Kennedy and Jaroslav Pelikan (2000), I consider it no coincidence that the Greek word *pistis*, by which Aristotle calls the three kinds of artistic means of persuasion – ethos, pathos, and logos – has been considered the most appropriate term to cover the biblical term “faith.” *Pistis*, according to dictionaries and online applications such as [www.billmounce.com](http://www.billmounce.com), appears in the New Testament 243 times. Considering all this, and aware that for Aristotle, rhetoric is “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (*On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1355 b25), the triad ethos-pathos-logos constitutes an undeniable value in the case of homiletic discourse as well. As James Kinneavy has shown in *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith*, “the concept of faith inscribed in the New

Testament reflects the influence of Greek theories of persuasion” (Youngdahl 1996, 573):

“The juxtaposition of *Greek rhetoric* and *Christian faith* may seem a trifle bizarre, maybe even irreverent – the two notions appear somewhat distant. Yet if we remember that rhetoric is the art of persuasion and that the Greek word for persuasion was *pistis* and that the Christian word for faith was also *pistis*, the embodiment of both meanings in the same word suggests that the two notions may not be too far apart. Indeed, in Liddell and Scott, the first meaning of *pistis* conjoins the two concepts: *trust in others, faith ... generally persuasion of a thing, confidence, assurance*. And both meanings persisted from the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. through the times of classical and Hellenistic Greek and into the period of the church fathers. In other words, a user of Greek in the first century A.D. would ordinarily be aware of the two meanings of the word” (Kinneavy 1987, 3).

On the assumption of Kinneavy, Pat Youngdahl (1996) explains that he “argues that the New Testament writers and their audiences understood *pistis* (usually translated *faith*) to refer not only to human trust in God (the concept of faith emphasized in the Hebrew scriptures) but also to the human process of giving free assent, despite some uncertainty, to a new perspective (the notion of persuasion exemplified in the writings of Isocrates and Aristotle). The early church assumed, as Kinneavy’s analysis reveals, that persuasion to the faith was not a once-and-for-all event, essential only for potential converts, but an ongoing process, a day-by-day assent that would likely increase in depth and power as doubt was explored and commitment was tested” (573).



**Figure 1.** Greek persuasion and Christian faith: A transfer, interpreted by James Kinneavy in *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith* (1987)

#### 04. The homiletical ethos-pathos-logos

As I already mentioned, the current homiletical discourse of the Eastern Christian Church generally begins with the declamation “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost!” The particular ethos of homiletical discourse has as its primary foundation a public liturgical act, namely the ordination or *cheirotonia*. By means of ordination, the bishop or priest becomes a public *witness* who speaks to the faithful not in his own name but in the name of the One who sent the first apostles<sup>4</sup> to preach, i.e., *in the name of Jesus Christ* (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49).

If Jesus sends the apostles to preach in his name and “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,” chapter 5 of the *Gospel of John* reveals that he himself declares the same about his own ethos. Thus, Jesus tells the Jews on several occasions that everything he does and says is from the Father and *in the name of the Father* (John 5:19; John 5:22-24; John 5:24; John 5:26-27; John 5:30; John 5:31-32; John 5:36-38; John 5:43).

Therefore, one of the assumptions of this paper is that the formulation “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost,” before the cultic or liturgical role, has in view the rhetorical purpose of persuasion through ethos. The Eastern Christian preaching cleric does not speak in his own name but follows the ethos specific to the Christic discursive tradition, continued by the apostolic and patristic tradition. The pastoral ethos, following entirely the classical rhetorical rules, is predominantly found in the homily’s *exordiums*. The most appropriate correspondent for the pastoral ethos is that of *archetypal discourse*: the orator cleric, both by his prior or pre-existing institutional authority and by his discursive credibility, persuades the audience by referring to his *venerable ancestors* – the Apostles and the first bishops – whose *auctoritas* and testimony he assumes through the Mystery of Ordination.

Homiletic pathos also falls within the conventional parts of an oration in classical rhetoric, and the culmination of this means of persuasion is found, without exception, in the peroration of ambon speeches. It is not by chance – as the treatises on classical rhetoric point out – that pastoral pathos shows its rhetorical abundance at the end of clerical speeches: the auditor, once persuaded by the passionate words, is called upon to act on what has been proclaimed. Of course, the addresses, or rather the emotional appeals in the exordiums such as “Beloved faithful,” “Beloved brothers and sisters,” “Christian brothers,” – and others in the same category – also persuade the second means of classical rhetoric – pathos: the listener feels that he is appreciated and that he belongs to a community.

By persuading the audience through pathos, homiletical discourse becomes a *synergetically active discourse*. “What is the most powerful pastoral passion?” – is a question that can be asked in this context. Generally

viewed, the most powerful homiletical passion is not so much desire as fear (Meyer 2010, 237). Thus, the homiletic pathos relates mainly to the great existential differences. Clerical orators try to arouse passions in their audience, especially related to the existential conflict between life (resurrection-Heaven) and death (Hell), as an antithesis between joy (trust), fear (distrust), or virtue (sin), which, as we have pointed out, are meant “to trigger a concrete action-attitude on the on the part of the faithful, who are to judge, to choose what is morally correct” (Rusu 2021, 101)

As for the homiletic logos, it transforms the pulpit discourse into a *testimonial discourse* by declaiming numerous biblical verses, quotations from the Holy Fathers, and stigmata from hymnography and prayers, which are, in fact, specific rhetorical examples of *induction*, as specified in Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*. The pastoral logos, following the logical thread of classical and modern rhetoric, manifest their argumentative impact in the parts of speech called confirmation or proof and refutation. Another important mention in the case of persuasion by means of “the speech [*logos*] itself, by showing or seeming to show something” (*On Rhetoric*, 1.2.1356 a4) is that only in the case of the homiletical logos does the famous saying about Christianity as a “religion of the book” seem to be valid, at least in part (Rusu 2024, 149). The general characterization of Christianity strictly in terms of this Qur’anic dictum is tendentious.

Is there a pre-eminence in the homiletical discourse of one of the three means of persuasion? The answer is given by Aristotle in his *On Rhetoric*, which also shows the intrinsic connection between pastoral discourse and classical oratory: “for it is not the case, as some of the handbook writers propose in their treatment of the art, that fair-mindedness [*epieikeia*] on the part of the speaker makes no contribution to persuasiveness; rather, character is almost, so to speak, *the most authoritative form of persuasion*” (1.2. 1356 a10-15). In the Eastern Christian homiletical oration, the discursive ethos is complemented by the prior ethos – which, through the Mystery of Ordination, succeeds in producing various types of proofs such as *witnesses present, oath, public contract, ancestors, public consent* – and together they produce among the catechized audience a powerful, persuasive impact. Taking into account the indelible character of ordination, the prior ethos of the clergy orators is a permanent one. In fact, all clerics in the superior clerical ranks, regardless of their age, are perceived and called “fathers” or “spiritual fathers” by their communities immediately after ordination (Rusu 2022, 133).

## **05. In lieu of a conclusion: a particular word**

From a rhetorical perspective, the (simple) word “Amen,” which every Eastern Christian homily (and liturgical services) ends, is also worthy of

consideration. This pastoral term can confirm – etymologically and discursively – what rhetoricians have long asserted, that the three means of the persuasive triad ethos pathos logos are interdependent and can be interwoven in a discourse. Firstly, on the basis of numerous biblical sources, the person of Jesus Christ himself can be designated by “Amen,” according to Apocalypse 3:14: “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of *the Amen*, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation.” Secondly, “Amen!” with the etymological meaning of “So it was” or “So let it be!” (Romans 1:25; 9:5; 11,36; 16,27; Galatians 1:5; 6:18; Ephesians 3:21; Philippians 4:20; Hebrews 13:21; 1Peter 4:11; Apocalypse 5:14; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20) is used in homiletical discourse as a formula of conclusion and confirmation of what has been said, but also as a hope in a passionate optative sense, with a finally actional effect. Thirdly, “Amen, amen,” the meaning of “True, true” (John 5:19; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Mark 3:28; 1 Corinthians 14:16; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Apocalypse 1:7) helps the speech to demonstrate.

All four *Gospels* – *after Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* – end with “Amen,” but in the past tense, where it has the meaning of confirmation, of “So it was,” which belongs to logos means of persuasion. That is different from the “Amen,” for example, at the end of the book of *Apocalypse*, where the wish returns in an optative sense, Apocalypse so “So be it!” which belongs to pathos. Therefore, the traditional adaptation of “Amen” with the meaning “So it was, so it is, and so let it be!” can also be interpreted rhetorically: “*So it was* (logos-testimony), *So it is* (ethos-authority) and *So let it be* (pathos-wish and hope).”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Commonly translated as “counterpart.” Other possibilities include “correlative” and “coordinate” (Kennedy 2007, 30).

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* references are from G. A. Kennedy’s translation (1991).

<sup>3</sup> “The crucial difference between *ars predicandi*, which some exaggeratedly call *Christian rhetoric*, and traditional discipline lies first in the particular quality of the audience. The preacher speaks before an already convinced audience. He does not tend to turn a *res dubia* into a *res certa*. The auditor agrees with the dogmas and moral precepts because he belongs de jure to the *ecclesia*. As a result, the essential concern of rhetoric, to obtain persuasion, is missing” (Florescu 1973, 110).

<sup>4</sup> Apostle is “the English transliteration of a Greek word meaning *one who is sent out*” (*The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, 44).

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