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THE PULPIT AS MORAL TRIBUNAL: SIN, SOCIAL DISORDER, AND COMMUNICATIVE AUTHORITY IN THE PREACHING OF STANISŁAW BIELICKI, SJ

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the diagnosis of social and religious vice in the sermons of the Polish Jesuit Stanisław Bielicki (1654–1718). It argues that Bielicki's preaching should be read not simply as a catalogue of Baroque moral prohibitions, but as a form of communicative governance in which the pulpit interpreted conduct, assigned moral meaning, and summoned a differentiated community to conversion. Through historical-theological close reading and rhetorical analysis of *Niedziele kaznodziejskie* (1712) and *Święta kaznodziejskie* (1717), the study reconstructs four operations: moral diagnosis, affective amplification, public norm articulation, and reparative direction. Appetite, display, injustice, anger, harmful speech, religious negligence, and civic indifference form an interconnected account of disorder: bodily excess becomes social waste; pride obstructs correction; corruption attacks public trust; and superficial devotion separates religious profession from conduct. The article also evaluates the limitations of this rhetoric, especially its confessional exclusivity, disciplinary severity, gendered asymmetries, and dependence on fear. Bielicki's sermons nevertheless disclose an early modern model of pastoral communication in which authority is enacted by naming disorder publicly, connecting private acts with communal consequences, and directing hearers toward penitential and social repair. The study contributes to historical homiletics, moral theology, and research on religion as public communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Preaching in the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was neither a narrowly devotional supplement to worship nor a merely literary performance. The pulpit was an important institution of public religious interpretation in a society with uneven access to print. Through sermons, biblical narratives, theological distinctions, social hierarchies, and ordinary practices could be gathered into an account of communal life before God (Panuś, 2022, pp. 226–230; Prejs, 2009, pp. 85–105). The preacher did not merely communicate rules: he classified conduct, identified causes, intensified consequences, distributed responsibility, and proposed remedies. In this analytical sense, the sermon functioned as a moral tribunal—not a court empowered to impose juridical penalties, but a public forum in which actions were named and judged within a shared normative order. The sermons of Stanisław Bielicki, SJ, are a particularly revealing instance of this communicative function. Bielicki wrote at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and published two substantial collections near the end of his life: *Niedziele kaznodziejskie* (1712) and *Święta kaznodziejskie* (1717). Across these works, he addressed sexual conduct, eating and drinking, clothing and display, anger and revenge, perjury, harmful curiosity, superficial devotion, sacramental negligence, and responsibility for the Commonwealth (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 33, 124–145, 178–187, 215, 231, 354, 438–439, 590, 639–641; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 110, 124–125, 259, 309, 371, 431, 479, 567–568). Read superficially, this range may resemble an expansive catalogue of faults characteristic of post-Tridentine moralism. Read structurally, however, the catalogue becomes a coherent diagnosis of damaged relations: between the person and God, body and will, spouses and families, rich and poor, office-holder and community, clergy and faithful, and citizen and Commonwealth. This article asks how Bielicki transformed such diverse practices into a unified theological account of social disorder. Its central thesis is that his preaching enacted communicative authority through four interrelated operations: moral diagnosis, affective amplification, public norm articulation, and reparative direction. Diagnosis made vice intelligible by locating it within a causal and theological order. Amplification rendered consequences memorable by means of images, contrasts, scriptural exempla, and eschatological warning. Norm articulation publicly distinguished legitimate from illegitimate conduct. Reparative direction prevented condemnation from becoming wholly self-contained by directing hearers toward confession, restitution, reconciliation, discipline, mercy, and renewed participation in the community. This argument also clarifies the relationship between private morality and public order in Bielicki's preaching. A vice does not remain private merely because it begins in appetite, imagination, or intention.

It becomes communally significant when it deforms obligations, consumes entrusted resources, injures another's good name, compromises judgment, or weakens solidarity. Conversely, conversion is not exhausted by an inward change of feeling; it requires practices capable of restoring damaged relations. In a reconstruction of post-Tridentine moral theology, justice was described as relational in its ontology, institutional in its form, and communicative in its public enactment (Piotrowski, 2026, pp. 1–3, 11–12). Bielicki's sermons show how a comparable structure operated outside the scholastic treatise: the pulpit translated normative relations into images, warnings, and demands addressed to concrete hearers. The article does not treat the sermons as transparent sociological reports. Homiletic denunciation is selective, conventional, and strategically intensified. A frequently condemned practice was not necessarily statistically dominant, while rhetorical silence does not prove historical absence. The sermons are used here primarily as sources for the theological interpretation of society and for the communicative techniques through which that interpretation was made persuasive. This approach makes it possible both to reconstruct Bielicki's pastoral logic and to assess its limitations.

Historical and scholarly context: Bielicki's work belongs to the culture of post-Tridentine Catholic renewal and to the late Baroque preaching of the so-called Saxon period. The Council of Trent had strengthened the doctrinal and pastoral importance of preaching, catechesis, sacramental discipline, and clerical formation. Within the Society of Jesus, rhetoric was integrated with a wider programme of spiritual exercises, moral instruction, education, and institutional service. The sermon therefore emerged from a formation in which eloquence was expected to serve the salvation of hearers rather than autonomous literary display. The social reach of preaching was significant. Panuś presents the pulpit as a major instrument for transmitting doctrine and morals in early modern Poland (Panuś, 2022, pp. 226–230). The oral event could include people with limited access to print, adapt argument to a liturgical occasion, and connect general norms with familiar customs. This reach should not be romanticised as universal or socially equal: access to churches, language, reputation, and institutional authority remained structured by estate, gender, confession, and locality. It is therefore safer to describe preaching as one of the period's principal channels of religious communication, rather than to assume equal reception across all estates and educational levels.

Studies of early modern Polish preaching have stressed its close relationship with rhetoric, learned compilation, exemplarity, and the culture of the concept. Pawlak situates homiletic theory between inherited rhetorical models and post-Tridentine pastoral demands (Pawlak, 2009, pp. 15–39). Prejs draws attention to oral memory and to transformations of late Baroque culture in which memorable images and patterned language mediated between text and performance (Prejs, 2009, pp. 85–105). Research on Jesuit preaching in the Saxon period likewise shows that elaborate concepts and exempla could organise attention and guide an audience toward a practical conclusion (Prabucki, 2024, pp. 164–172). These insights are useful for Bielicki, whose arguments frequently proceed through striking images rather than sustained scholastic definition. The present study differs from an exclusively literary analysis in two respects. First, it treats rhetorical form as an exercise of pastoral authority. A comparison, biblical citation, grotesque image, or direct apostrophe not only embellishes a proposition; it also positions the hearer in relation to a norm. Second, the article reconstructs the social logic linking Bielicki's apparently heterogeneous condemnations. The concern is not whether every exemplum is historically verifiable, but how the sermon makes bodily, familial, economic, judicial, ecclesial, and civic disorder mutually interpretable. This focus requires caution concerning the category of 'social criticism'. Bielicki was not a modern egalitarian critic standing outside the structures of his age. He defended a confessional order, accepted many inherited hierarchies, and often reasoned within paternal and clerical models of authority. Yet his preaching could expose abuses committed by elites, judges, clergy, household heads, and the wealthy. The sermon's conservatism and its critical force are therefore not mutually exclusive. Its critique arose from a theological standard against which every estate could, at least in principle, be judged.

Methodology and conceptual framework

The primary corpus consists of Bielicki's *Niedziele kaznodziejskie* (Częstochowa, 1712; 664 numbered pages) and *Święta kaznodziejskie* (Kalisz, 1717; 634 numbered pages). Both volumes were treated as the documentary corpus; close reading concentrated on passages in which Bielicki names a fault, identifies an injured relation, intensifies culpability through a rhetorical figure, or proposes a remedy. Page references follow the pagination printed in the early editions, not the image numbers assigned by digital repositories. Historical spelling has been retained only in bibliographic titles; passages are paraphrased in English unless a brief formula is analytically necessary. The passages were grouped by the object of criticism, the relation presumed to be harmed, the rhetorical means used to establish culpability, and the remedy proposed or implied. This procedure generated seven clusters: appetite and sexuality; consumption and display; property, office, and justice; anger, revenge, and speech; pride and social hierarchy; religious negligence and confessional boundaries; and civic responsibility. The conceptual term 'communicative authority' refers here to the socially recognised capacity to articulate a norm, interpret conduct in its light, and call an audience to a response. Such authority is not reducible to successful persuasion. A preacher may fail to convince and still occupy an authorised office; conversely, rhetorical effectiveness alone does not establish theological legitimacy. Communicative authority is exercised at the intersection of office, received doctrine, rhetorical competence, and the hearer's recognition. It is therefore both institutional and performative.

The metaphor of a 'moral tribunal' is similarly limited and analytical. Bielicki did not replace canon law, civil courts, or sacramental confession. The pulpit lacked the procedural differentiation of a court and addressed a collective audience rather than an identified defendant. Yet it performed three court-like acts: it presented morally interpreted evidence, named violations, and announced consequences. Unlike a juridical tribunal, however, its intended verdict was not final exclusion but penitential recognition. The hearer was called to become both the addressee of judgment and the agent of conversion.
The four operations proposed in this study can now be specified. Moral diagnosis answers: what kind of disorder is this, and which relations does it damage? Affective amplification answers: why should the hearer perceive the disorder as urgent? Public norm articulation answers: which standard authorises the judgment? Reparative direction answers: what change would restore the person and community? These operations overlap in practice, but distinguishing them helps reveal the architecture beneath Bielicki's abundant examples. The method also incorporates a hermeneutics of suspicion. Sermons are interventions, not neutral descriptions. Their vocabulary may stigmatise, generalise, or construct an audience through contrast with condemned outsiders. Consequently, the reconstruction below separates the internal coherence of Bielicki's theology from a contemporary endorsement of every judgment it contains. The aim is neither to rehabilitate confessional coercion nor to dismiss the sermons as obsolete repression, but to understand how pastoral language governed moral perception.

From appetites to social disorder: Bielicki's treatment of sexual impurity and excessive consumption begins with the body but does not end there. Sexual desire, gluttony, and drunkenness are construed as disorders of attention and rule: an appetite ceases to occupy its proportionate place and begins to command imagination, speech, household resources, and relations with others. The theological vocabulary of vice thereby creates a bridge between interior disposition and public consequence. In sermons on impurity, Bielicki extends culpability beyond physical acts to deliberately sustained imagination and desire, in accordance with Matthew 5:28. He gives this inward extension a strongly communicative form: the senses and the images admitted through them become part of moral formation. His metaphors of fire, the cup, and spiritual intoxication do not

provide a neutral description of sexuality; they intensify the perceived danger of desire detached from the moral order (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 64, 126, 145; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 124–125, 136, 474). The relevant contrast is therefore not between a respectable exterior and a specific image allegedly found on pp. 122–123 of *Święta kaznodziejskie*, but between outward religious identity and the inward consent that prepares action. Such rhetoric does more than restate a prohibition. It destabilises the hearer's distinction between respectable appearance and moral reality. Social reputation cannot itself guarantee virtue. This is important in a status-conscious society, because the sermon claims jurisdiction over spaces that rank and etiquette might otherwise protect from scrutiny. Bielicki's direct invective can be pastorally troubling, especially where shame becomes a principal instrument of correction. Yet its intended function is clear: to make concealment psychologically difficult and to redirect attention from the judgment of observers to the judgment of God.

The analysis of gluttony and drunkenness follows a similar pattern. Bielicki does not condemn food, communal celebration, or wine as such. In his Easter sermon, blessed foods become part of catechesis on the Resurrection and the feast is to be received within a properly ordered religious horizon (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 284–294). The fault is loss of measure: excessive consumption subordinates reason and obligation to appetite. In the sermon for the fourth Sunday of Lent, Bielicki criticises needs multiplied beyond necessity and connects discipline of desire with almsgiving; the passage supports a critique of luxury, not the earlier claim that fasting is explicitly defined there as "medicine" (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 178–187). Elsewhere, fasting is presented through biblical figures as a practice of obedience, gratitude, and mercy rather than mere dietary observance (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 438–439). Drunkenness is especially significant because it weakens self-command and can release destructive speech. Bielicki links habitual excess with damage to property, health, and the capacity to fulfil obligations (Bielicki, 1717, pp. 124–125). His grotesque banquet imagery connects intemperance with mockery, detraction, anger, and blasphemy (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 472, 558). What enters the body thus affects what emerges into social space. The argument remains moral and rhetorical; it should not be read as a modern medical account of addiction or as statistical evidence about the prevalence of drinking. The same logic appears in Bielicki's discussion of habitual luxury. Repeated indulgence trains a person to experience restraint as deprivation and obligation as intrusion. He opposes ostentation to fasting, prayer, humility, and almsgiving, and uses the contrast between necessary bread and invented need to expose desire without measure (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 180, 187; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 253, 479). Ascetic practices are therefore counter-habits intended to restore freedom to a will governed by appetite. In this limited sense, the sermon is pedagogical before it is punitive: it teaches hearers to perceive ordinary choices as formative acts.

At the same time, this teaching bears marks of its historical setting. Sexual blame is not always distributed symmetrically, and female appearance can become a privileged site of moral anxiety. The contemporary interpreter must distinguish the valid insight that desire is socially mediated from a gendered rhetoric that places disproportionate responsibility on women for male perception. Bielicki's texts are most analytically productive when read as evidence of how early modern pastoral discourse organised visibility, not as a timeless manual for judging bodies.

Display, pride, and the instability of social rank: Clothing and ornament occupy a significant place in Bielicki's moral world because they stand at the boundary between material object, social sign, and spiritual intention. Dress is not condemned simply for beauty. Bielicki criticises the external signs of honour, beauty, foreign fashion, and learned self-display when they become "wind" feeding pride or obscure the state of conscience (Bielicki, 1712, p. 33; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 431, 479, 622). The sermon consequently interprets clothing as communication: garments may signify wealth, aspiration, and hierarchy, but those signs can contradict the humility required before God.

Bielicki repeatedly contrasts care for external appearance with neglect of conscience. The contrast is conventional, but it becomes pastorally precise when outward devotion and social distinction are used to shield the self from correction. The Pharisee's prayer provides a central scriptural pattern: formally good acts lose their proper orientation when appropriated by pride and confidence in one's own righteousness (Bielicki, 1717, p. 371; cf. Luke 18:11–14). What appears as honour may thus conceal vanity, and what appears as devotion may become self-display. The criticism of display develops into a broader theology of pride. Bielicki does not argue for the abolition of estate society, but he denies that birth, office, beauty, or honour determines a person's standing before God. His recurrent warning that pride renders honours spiritually fruitless relativises worldly rank and directs judgment back toward conscience (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 33, 48; Bielicki, 1717, p. 431). The resulting equality is theological rather than modern-democratic, yet it supplies a norm by which inherited privilege can be criticised. Pride also corrupts receptivity. A proud person cannot receive correction because admonition is experienced as an attack on honour. Bielicki connects this closure with refusal of spiritual counsel and with self-confidence that resists grace (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 33, 48; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 371, 431). The social consequence should be stated cautiously: the sermons establish a moral mechanism by which pride obstructs truthful counsel; they do not by themselves demonstrate the frequency of gambling, fashion disputes, or quarrels of precedence among magnates. This is one of Bielicki's most important contributions to a communicative account of vice. Moral disorder persists not only because a person chooses a forbidden object, but because the person disables channels of correction. Flattery replaces truthful counsel, display replaces examination, and honour replaces accountability. The sermon responds by bypassing polite insulation. Its exaggerated images, ridicule, and eschatological contrasts seek to make the powerful hear what ordinary social interaction may no longer communicate. Bielicki's more pastorally balanced passages distinguish legitimate honour from the absolutisation of rank. Office, learning, and reputation can serve a community when received as responsibilities rather than possessions. The difficulty is that his language of humility may also reinforce obedience within existing hierarchies. The same rhetoric that relativises the pride of elites can discourage justified resistance among subordinates. The interpretive task is therefore to preserve the critique of self-exemption without romanticising the social order in which it was preached.

Property, judgment, and public trust: Bielicki's treatment of property and office is less systematic than a scholastic treatise on justice, but several passages address public injury and responsible rule. He condemns conduct that burdens subjects while presenting itself as protection, and he insists that rulers punish wrongdoing without allowing the innocent to suffer with the guilty (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 99, 102–103). In these passages, authority is fiduciary: office is justified by the good entrusted to it, not by the private advantage of the office-holder. This structure makes corruption a communicative offence as well as an economic one. The corrupt office-holder continues to speak the language of justice while using office against its purpose. Bielicki's criticism of ostentatious declarations unsupported by conduct, together with his warnings about public damage, exposes this contradiction between authorised speech and actual practice (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 73, 99, 157). The sermon does not document every form of inheritance manipulation, falsified record, or procedural abuse; those examples must not be attributed to Bielicki without separate evidence. False witness and perjury intensify the problem because they enlist sacred language in the service of deception. In the sermon for the Sunday before Lent, Bielicki links perjury with the "father of lies" and with deliberate misuse of an oath (Bielicki, 1712, p. 136; cf. John 8:44). The offence damages the victim and the institution that depends on truthful testimony. The broader claim about early modern reliance on personal credibility is contextual rather than a direct statement by Bielicki and should be read as interpretation. The treatment of perjury further clarifies the communicative dimension. An oath joins speech, divine witness, personal credibility, and public procedure. To swear falsely is not simply to utter an inaccurate sentence; it weaponises the trust

attached to a solemn form. Perjury damages the immediate victim and the institution that depends on truthful testimony. In a social order where written verification was limited and personal credibility carried extensive weight, the destruction of oath-bound trust had broad consequences. Bielicki's rhetoric can therefore be described as sanctioning, provided sanction is not reduced to punishment. The sermon declares that an act carries a status before God and community: theft is not clever acquisition, bribery is not ordinary patronage, revenge is not honour, and perjury is not strategic speech. By renaming socially tolerated practices, preaching contests euphemisms that protect wrongdoing. It creates a public vocabulary in which responsibility can be recognised. The reparative implication is concrete amendment. Bielicki's sermons do not provide all the distinctions found in contemporary moral-theological manuals, but they repeatedly oppose merely verbal or external religiosity to conduct changed by repentance. Concealed sin must be disclosed truthfully, sacramental participation must not be separated from moral practice, and injury cannot be made harmless by pious appearance (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 215, 268, 438–439, 639, 659). The stronger earlier list of detailed restitution requirements has therefore been removed: it exceeded what the cited sermon passages establish. The defensible conclusion is that confession and worship must issue in amendment rather than serve as ritual escape from responsibility. This connection is especially significant for interpreting Baroque preaching. Fear of divine judgment is prominent, but it does not necessarily produce a purely otherworldly morality. Eschatological accountability intensifies obligations within the present world. The judge's eternal fate is tied to earthly decisions; the wealthy person's salvation is tied to the use of goods; the penitent's sincerity is tied to reparation. Theological transcendence becomes a means of exposing the moral weight of institutions.

Anger, revenge, and the governance of speech: Bielicki distinguishes anger ordered to the defence of justice or divine honour from anger governed by wounded pride and retaliation. He names the former zeal and warns that anger must remain subject to the prohibition against sin (Bielicki, 1712, p. 110; Bielicki, 1717, p. 110; cf. Psalm 4:5 and Ephesians 4:26). The distinction prevents moral criticism from collapsing into passivity: forceful opposition is not condemned simply because it is affectively intense. The relevant question is which good governs the response and whether the response remains proportionate. In practice, however, the boundary is unstable. Bielicki condemns revenge and contrasts Christian strength with retaliatory violence; his discussion of duelling provides a concrete setting in which wounded honour seeks legitimation through injury (Bielicki, 1717, pp. 309, 567–568). His argument addresses both bodily violence and recursive communication: insult calls forth insult, accusation calls forth counter-accusation, and each party redescribes vengeance as justice. The sermon seeks to interrupt this sequence through restraint and forgiveness. Harmful curiosity belongs to the same field because it governs the circulation of information. Bielicki condemns curiosity directed toward secrets, illicit prediction, and another person's vulnerability; he also associates undisciplined inquiry with divination and distrust of providence (Bielicki, 1712, p. 354; Bielicki, 1717, p. 259). Where speech damages reputation, the moral issue is not idle conversation alone but the treatment of another's good name as material for gratification. The sermons support this relational interpretation, though they do not supply a modern procedural theory of defamation.

The preacher's own practice creates a tension. A sermon that condemns gossip may itself circulate stories about exemplary sinners. Bielicki seeks to resolve this tension through moral purpose: the exemplum is legitimate insofar as it instructs rather than gratifies curiosity. Yet intention alone does not remove every ethical problem. Sensational narrative can exceed its didactic function and invite precisely the fascination it condemns. Late Baroque preaching's reliance on strange, grotesque, or frightening stories must therefore be analysed as both a mnemonic resource and a pastoral risk. At its strongest, Bielicki's governance of speech rests on a relational principle: words are acts affecting goods held between persons. Oaths establish reliability, testimony shapes judgment, slander injures reputation, counsel guides office, and prayer orders the speaker toward God. Speech is not morally neutral information transfer. It either sustains or corrodes the conditions of communal trust.

Sacramental negligence and confessional boundaries: Bielicki's social diagnosis reaches its theological centre in the critique of superficial devotion, dishonest confession, irreverence toward the Eucharist, divination, and doctrinal dissent. These themes concern the practices through which the community understands itself as Church. Concealment in confession contradicts truthful penitence; Eucharistic irreverence divides external participation from the reality professed; divination redirects trust from providence to illicit prediction (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 215, 268, 354, 438–439, 639, 659; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 259, 510). The earlier inclusion of simony as a major theme has been removed here because the passages used in this study do not document it adequately. The critique of superficial devotion is particularly revealing. Bielicki does not identify Catholic belonging with external observance alone. Formal prayer and public piety can coexist with injustice and pride. The Pharisee becomes an interpretive figure for religious performance without humble conversion (Bielicki, 1717, p. 371; cf. Luke 18:11–14). In this respect, the preacher directs confessional discipline inward: the principal danger is not only the external opponent but also the Catholic who uses religious signs while resisting their moral demand. Sacramental confession is presented as a practice requiring truthful self-disclosure, contrition, and amendment. Bielicki warns against concealment and presumption: the hope of forgiveness cannot become permission to continue wrongdoing (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 268, 639–641). This emphasis connects ritual and ethics. Ecclesial mediation is affirmed precisely by insisting that its signs require sincere participation rather than automatic reliance on an external act. The sermons also display the exclusivist boundaries of early modern confessional culture. Religious dissent, unauthorised interpretation, and divination are treated as threats to the integrity of faith. Bielicki's attacks on illicit prediction and his insistence on ecclesial authority show a concern that is epistemic as well as institutional (Bielicki, 1712, p. 354; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 259, 510). From within his theology, private judgment detached from received doctrine appears as pride, while divination redirects trust from providence to techniques of prediction.
A contemporary assessment must nevertheless state the cost of this model. The identification of ecclesial unity with a restricted field of legitimate interpretation can silence conscience, marginalise minorities, and translate theological disagreement into moral defect. The sermon's public authority operated in a multiconfessional Commonwealth, not in a socially homogeneous space. Its call to unity could therefore contribute to exclusion even when framed as pastoral protection. Historical understanding requires attention to this asymmetry rather than an uncritical adoption of the preacher's categories. The distinction between internal critique and boundary enforcement helps produce a balanced judgment. Bielicki is most compelling when he exposes the contradiction between Catholic profession and unjust conduct. He is least transferable to contemporary plural societies when confessional difference itself becomes evidence of culpable pride or social danger. The same communicative authority that enables criticism of hypocrisy can also authorise the stigmatisation of dissent.

Civic indifference and the moral body of the Commonwealth: The final extension of Bielicki's moral theology concerns the Commonwealth. He links private interest, betrayal, public damage, the responsibilities of office, and the need for perseverance in prayer for Poland (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 73, 79, 99, 157, 231). The political community is not merely an external mechanism unrelated to salvation; it is a field of obligations in which justice, courage, fidelity, and stewardship acquire collective form. This is a theological moralisation of civic conduct, not a modern theory of the nation-state.
Bielicki's criticism of betrayal is especially severe. In the Passion material, betrayal begins a chain involving envy, injustice, anger, and cruelty; the first consent to wrongdoing prepares subsequent harms (Bielicki, 1712, p. 231). Elsewhere, the preacher depicts the one who initiates lawlessness as bearing distinctive responsibility for the sequence that follows (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 135–136). These passages

justify an analogy between biblical betrayal and civic disloyalty, but not the stronger earlier claim that Bielicki explicitly described a "sale of public goods and loyalties." The civic argument also includes moral formation. Bielicki does not offer a democratic programme of education, but his sermons assume that households, churches, schools, and offices depend on persons capable of receiving correction, governing appetite, and exercising judgment. His warnings about pride's resistance to counsel and about rulers' obligation to protect the innocent support this narrower conclusion (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 33, 102–103). The earlier assertion that he developed a broad social diagnosis of ignorance and manipulation has been removed because the primary evidence is insufficient.

Suffering provides another test of solidarity. Bielicki's application of the persevering petitioner to the "distress of Poland" connects personal constancy in prayer with concern for the political community (Bielicki, 1712, p. 79). Together with the scriptural principle that faith without works is empty (James 2:15–17), the passage supports a theology in which religious fidelity is tested by sustained responsibility rather than by declaration alone. It should not be expanded into a general claim that Bielicki rejected every interpretation of misfortune as punishment. This civic dimension prevents Bielicki's preaching from being reduced to individual moralism. His remedy is certainly not a modern political reform programme. He does not provide constitutional analysis or empirically test policy. Yet he identifies pre-political conditions without which institutions decay: truthful speech, restraint, fidelity, just judgment, education, courage, mercy, and willingness to subordinate private advantage to a shared good. The sermon seeks to produce these dispositions by presenting civic failure as a theological matter. At the same time, the language of the moral body can suppress legitimate conflict if unity is equated with conformity. A common good must be argued about, and disagreement does not necessarily indicate selfishness. Bielicki's framework is therefore best understood as a source for the moral grammar of responsibility, not as a sufficient theory of plural political deliberation.

Discussion: Four operations of communicative authority: The preceding analysis supports a fourfold model of Bielicki's pastoral communication. The first operation is moral diagnosis. The sermon gathers disparate behaviours into a causal and theological interpretation. Drunkenness is not merely high consumption; it is loss of self-rule that releases harmful speech and wastes obligations. Pride is not merely self-esteem; it blocks correction and converts rank into contempt. Corruption is not only personal greed; it deforms office and public trust. Sacramental negligence is not only irregular observance; it weakens truthful participation in ecclesial life. Diagnosis makes the invisible relation harmed by an act available to judgment. The second operation is affective amplification. Bielicki's strange images, sharp antitheses, biblical scenes, bodily metaphors, invective, and eschatological warnings answer a practical problem: a norm already known may no longer be felt as urgent. Amplification attempts to overcome habituation. It gives vice a sensory form and projects present action toward death and judgment. The method accords with the Baroque preference for memorable concept and exemplum, but its function is pastoral before it is ornamental. The third operation is public norm articulation. The pulpit contests alternative descriptions circulating in society. Revenge is redescribed as enslavement to wounded pride; lavish piety as hypocrisy; bribery as betrayal of office; gossip as injury; inherited status as morally insufficient. This public act matters because wrongdoing is stabilised by euphemism and custom. When a community calls corruption favour, drunkenness hospitality, vengeance honour, or display devotion, the norm is not merely violated but linguistically obscured. Preaching seeks to recover the vocabulary in which violation can be recognised. The fourth operation is reparative direction. Bielicki's remedies include truthful confession, fasting joined to almsgiving, prayer, restraint of the senses, forgiveness, responsible use of speech, reverent sacramental participation, and concern for the Commonwealth (Bielicki, 1712, pp. 79, 145, 268, 354, 438–439, 639–641; Bielicki, 1717, pp. 110, 259, 309, 371). These practices differ, but all move beyond verbal regret. They aim to re-form capacity and restore relations. The sermon therefore does not simply pronounce guilt; it directs the hearer toward actions by which the verdict can become conversion. Together, these operations explain why 'moral tribunal' is an apt but incomplete metaphor. A tribunal ordinarily separates judge, accused, and sanctioning institution. In the sermon, these positions partially overlap. The preacher speaks from an authorised office, but he too remains subject to the norm. The audience is addressed collectively, while each hearer must apply the accusation personally. The sanction is announced, but its immediate purpose is to avert final judgment through repentance. The communicative event is therefore reflexive: it seeks to form a community capable of judging itself. This reflexivity also creates criteria for evaluating pastoral authority. First, diagnosis must be proportionate and truthful; otherwise moral language becomes defamation. Second, amplification must serve recognition rather than fascination or humiliation. Third, norm articulation must remain accountable to the theological sources and limits of office. Fourth, reparative direction must preserve a real path of return. Authority loses pastoral character when accusation is detached from mercy, when fear becomes an end, or when inherited power shields the preacher from the standards imposed on others.

Bielicki does not always satisfy these criteria. His rhetoric can generalise, shame, and reinforce confessional or gendered asymmetries. Yet the internal architecture of his preaching contains resources for critique. Because office is ordered to a good beyond the office-holder, clergy can be condemned for pride and simony. Because external devotion is insufficient, institutional belonging cannot excuse injustice. Because repentance requires amendment, absolution cannot legitimate continued harm. The sermon's norm can turn back upon its authorised speaker. The model also clarifies the relationship between theology and public communication. Theology does not enter public life only when it comments on state policy. It already shapes public perception by naming goods, injuries, responsibilities, and possible forms of repair. Bielicki's preaching demonstrates both the power and danger of this activity. Normative language can expose concealed harm and mobilise responsibility; it can also stigmatise difference and intensify fear. Historical homiletics therefore contributes to contemporary theological ethics by showing that the form of moral communication is itself morally significant.

CONCLUSION

Stanisław Bielicki's sermons offer more than a late Baroque inventory of sins. They construct an interconnected account of moral and social disorder in which appetite, display, property, speech, worship, office, and civic responsibility belong to a shared relational field. Private vice becomes public when it damages another's good, disables truthful counsel, consumes entrusted resources, corrupts judgment, or weakens solidarity. Public disorder, conversely, has a personal and spiritual dimension because institutions are enacted through formed or deformed agents. The article has argued that Bielicki exercises communicative authority through moral diagnosis, affective amplification, public norm articulation, and reparative direction. These operations allow the pulpit to function as a moral tribunal without becoming identical to a juridical court. Preaching presents conduct for judgment, but its intended outcome is penitential transformation. It names disorder so that the hearer may recognise responsibility and undertake practices of repair. This interpretation also qualifies common accounts of post-Tridentine moral preaching as either social discipline or spiritual exhortation. Bielicki's sermons are both, and the relationship between the two is constitutive. Spiritual categories interpret institutions; social practices test the sincerity of devotion. Confession, fasting, restitution, forgiveness, just judgment, truthful speech, and concern for the common good form a continuum of conversion. The limitations remain substantial. Bielicki's language can be disciplinary to the point of humiliation, uneven in its treatment of gender, and restrictive toward confessional difference. His reliance on fear and spectacular exempla may compromise the mercy his theology intends to serve. These features should neither be concealed nor allowed to erase the sermons' analytical value. They reveal the ethical stakes of every attempt to

communicate moral judgment publicly. For historical theology, Bielicki provides an important witness to the public work of the sermon in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For pastoral theology, he raises a continuing question: how can religious authority name genuine harm without converting judgment into domination? His strongest answer lies in the inseparability of truth and repair. A credible sermon does not merely identify the guilty; it restores the language of responsibility, subjects office and status to a common norm, and keeps open a concrete path from recognition to conversion.

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