# Storytelling and Spiritual Healing During Mass: Priests with an Eye for Ordinary Stories

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## ABSTRACT

Sermons are meant to ignite the human heart and preachers frequently rely on ingenious ways that help them to connect with the everyday struggles and existential anxieties of ordinary people. Originally presented at the Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) Annual Conference held in Diani, Kwale County, Kenya (August 21–24, 2024), this paper centres on how a local Catholic parish priest, known locally as the "story-telling priest", uses the art of oral storytelling during mass to achieve his homiletical goals. Over a four-week mass series, data were gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 4 congregants, and analysed using theoretical propositions by St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Albert Camus. The findings show that by including ordinary, localized stories in his sermons, tempered with various presentation techniques, the priest creates a safe, relatable space for his audience. The artistic delivery breaks down the distance between the altar and the pews, leading parishioners through a shared cathartic experience where they can release feelings of guilt, isolation, and anxiety. Ultimately, the study highlights how orality can turn an ordinary sermon into a lively tool for collective comfort, self-awareness, and spiritual renewal.

**Keywords:** Spiritual Healing, Homiletics, Performance Theory, Orality, Existentialism, Therapeutic Storytelling, Human Condition.

## INTRODUCTION

At the core of Christian homiletics lies the primary imperative to ignite the human heart, foster spiritual renewal, and alleviate inner suffering. While grounding in biblical principles serves as the prerequisite foundation for effective preaching, the transformative capacity of a sermon may rely heavily on the preacher's selection of communication and delivery strategies. Scholarly literature widely categorizes preaching into established homiletic models, including expository, narrative, evangelistic, biographical, thematic, and prophetic preaching. These structural frameworks offer distinct approaches to communicating sacred texts, yet their practical execution remains deeply intertwined with the individual delivery choices of the preacher. There, therefore, remains a critical research gap regarding how an individual preacher's unique delivery skills can directly influence audience reception, emotional processing, and spiritual deliverance.

In ordinary parish settings, congregants are bound to experience a state of existential distress, quiet guilt, alienation, and psychological fatigue born from the burdens of everyday existence. Traditional homiletic approaches may tend to rely on abstract, elevated doctrinal exposition that unintentionally reinforces a rigid divide between the clergy, perceived as speaking from unyielding moral perfection, and a congregation wrestling with human vulnerability. If preaching remains detached from the immediate socio-cultural realities of the pews, it is bound to fail to address the lived struggles of the human condition.

To address this gap, this study investigates how a Catholic parish priest in Bungoma County, Kenya, locally referred to as "the story-telling priest", appropriates orality and narrative performance to cultivate a therapeutic environment. The paper examines whether, by integrating localized folk narratives, ordinary life experiences, and performance techniques in the liturgy, the priest converts his homilies into a dynamic mechanism for psychological relief and spiritual transformation. This investigation is thus guided by two central research questions: first, what specific composition, stylistic, and performance strategies characterize the priest's oral

narrative delivery during Mass? Second, in what ways do these narrative and performance strategies facilitate emotional catharsis, psychological release, and spiritual healing among parishioners?

Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to demonstrate that in the hands of a skilled preacher, oral technique can help mediate human suffering and foster spiritual restoration within a liturgical space.

**Theoretical Framework**

To examine how oral storytelling during Mass may bring about emotional release, psychological healing, and spiritual renewal, this study relies on the views of St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Albert Camus. Together, they map the arc of human struggle, from Augustine's "restless heart", Aquinas's "wounded nature" to Camus's "existential absurdity".

**The Human Condition and Existential Affliction**

From a Christian theological perspective, human suffering originates in a fundamental rupture between humanity and God. The fall introduced spiritual disorientation, vulnerability, and systemic alienation into everyday existence: "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Human beings exist in a state of spiritual brokenness that human agency alone cannot repair, necessitating divine grace and redemption: "For by grace you have been saved through faith... it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

St. Augustine of Hippo articulates this psychological and spiritual struggle in *Confessions*, observing that the postlapsarian human heart is perpetually disquieted: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Augustine, 397/1991, I.1). Augustine demonstrates that when human affection strays from the Creator, love becomes fragmented (*cupiditas*), compelling individuals to seek enduring peace in fleeting, temporal objects, a state that induces chronic anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Within this study's analytical framework, Augustine' "restless heart" serves as an empirical diagnostic for the pre-liturgical state of congregants, who possibly enter the Mass carrying unaddressed emotional friction and an unfulfilled desire for interior peace.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas deepens this diagnostic by mapping how original sin inflicts structural wounds upon human nature: "As a result of original sin, the reason is darkened... the will is hardened to evil... and the irascible and concupiscible powers are weakened" (Aquinas, 1265-1274/1948, ST I-II, q. 85, a. 3). Aquinas categorizes these afflictions into four objective limitations: ignorance in the intellect, malice in the will, weakness in moral/emotional resolve, and disordered desire (concupiscence). Far from an abstract doctrine, Thomistic theology frames human suffering as an experiential reality that impairs both cognitive clarity and emotional equilibrium. This concept directly underpins the main research objective, which is to establish efficacy of the priest's delivery techniques in relieving the parishioners of their psychological burdens and human wounds.

This theological diagnosis finds a secular parallel in Albert Camus's philosophy of the Absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus conceptualizes the Absurd as the agonizing friction between the human craving for meaning and the indifferent silence of the universe: "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus, 1942/1955, p. 28). Camus invokes the mythic figure of Sisyphus, condemned eternally to roll a boulder up a mountain only to watch it fall, as a metaphor for modern labour and existence: "The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd" (Camus, 1942/1955, p. 121).

Camus's observation links directly to the present study's focus on the task that awaits the contemporary priest and how best to tackle it. Parishioners often enter the church exhausted by the "Sisyphean" weight of daily life—repetitive work, domestic strain, and quiet grief. When a priest notices these everyday struggles and speaks about them directly from the pulpit, he validates their lived reality. Instead of offering distant dogmas, he meets parishioners in their existential reality, showing them that their daily suffering is recognized within the sacred walls of the Church.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review grounds the study where oral literary theory, performance aesthetics, and pastoral psychology meet. To build a solid theoretical and empirical foundation, the discussion is organized around the study's two primary objectives. First, it explores the composition, stylistic choices, and performance strategies that define the delivery of ordinary stories during Mass. Second, it examines how delivery choices create space for emotional catharsis and psychological release among members of the audience. Together, these bodies of literature show how ordinary storytelling within a sacred space may transform a sermon into a moment of genuine restoration.

**Composition, Stylistic, and Performance Strategies in Oral Delivery**

As already explained above, the study looks at the homily not as a static piece of written theology or a formal doctrinal address, but rather as an active, live oral literary performance where meaning is continuously negotiated between the speaker and the audience. In her foundational work on oral literature, Finnegan (1970/2012) establishes that a spoken text cannot be detached from its immediate moment of delivery. The visual and vocal elements, including vocal modulation, shifts in tempo, strategic pauses, facial expressions, and bodily posture, are not mere decorative additions to a prepared text; they are integral components of the text's core meaning. Applied to the liturgical space of the Mass, Finnegan's performance framework reveals how a priest's vocal cadence and physical presence transform a routine scriptural reflection into an engaging, living encounter. Through intentional vocal dynamics and paralinguistic cues, the priest draws parishioners into the narrative, converting abstract religious principles into accessible, human experiences.

Building on this structural foundation, Okpewho (1992) provides a comprehensive taxonomy of stylistic devices that characterize oral storytelling across performance traditions, including repetition, dramatic ideophones, digressions, conversational opening formulas, and direct audience engagement. Within the sacred environment of liturgy, these stylistic markers take on distinct pastoral and pedagogical functions. For instance, repetition may operate as a mnemonic device that reinforces key moral and spiritual themes, allowing parishioners to absorb and retain core messages while formulaic phrases may serve as structural links that smoothly transition the listener from ancient, sacred scriptures to contemporary, secular life.

This dynamic is further illuminated by Bauman's (1977) concept of "Verbal Art as Performance", which frames performance as a specialized mode of spoken communication wherein the speaker assumes responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. Bauman emphasizes that performance activates a specific frame of expectation in which the audience actively evaluates the performer's skill, artistry, and authenticity. This study argues that when the preacher integrates ordinary stories into his homily, he operates directly within this performance frame. His artistic competence as a storyteller determines whether an ordinary daily observation resonates deeply as a moment of spiritual insight or fades into background routine.

Adding a crucial African literary perspective to this discourse, Alembi (2002) explores how contemporary religious leaders can draw upon indigenous oral traditions to convey specific messages. Alembi observes that effective preachers do not rely strictly on abstract theological doctrine; instead, they deliberately incorporate familiar local narratives, proverbs, and traditional storytelling devices to bridge the gap between sacred doctrine and the daily lives of their listeners. For the present study, Alembi's work offers a vital contextual link, demonstrating that when a priest utilizes ordinary stories during Mass, he is participating in a culturally grounded oral practice that uses shared narrative traditions to make faith feel immediate, practical, and personal. While his focus was on how traditional oral narratives could help reinforce the preacher's message, the present study focuses on how an individual preacher's unique delivery skills can directly influence audience reception, emotional processing, and spiritual deliverance.

Recent developments in contemporary homiletics and performance theory continue to strengthen this interdisciplinary bridge. Childers and Schmit (2004) argue that preaching is fundamentally an embodied performance art. They assert that dramatic timing, vocal rhythm, and physical storytelling do not distract from the sacred message, but rather serve as the primary vehicle that brings scripture to life. Similarly, modern studies on sacred performance (such as Nyahokwe, 2021) confirm that contemporary congregants respond far more

profoundly to authentic, conversational storytelling than to rigid, top-down lectures. Collectively, these empirical insights reinforce the central premise of this study: a priest's capacity to compose and deliver ordinary stories during Mass can indeed facilitate emotional catharsis, psychological release, and spiritual healing among parishioners.

### Psychological Release and Narrative Therapy

In his foundational work on emotional release in drama and ritual, Scheff (1979) defines *catharsis* as the healthy discharge of accumulated emotions, such as grief, fear, or distress, achieved when an audience experiences an optimal balance of emotional engagement and distance. Scheff points out that when individuals are overwhelmed by their own immediate pain, they experience distress rather than relief; conversely, if they remain entirely detached, no emotional resolution occurs. The present study holds that listening to an ordinary story told by a priest creates the ideal "aesthetic distance." Parishioners recognize their own human vulnerabilities reflected in the story without feeling put on the spot, allowing them to experience genuine emotional catharsis and psychological release.

This process closely aligns with the therapeutic principles developed by White and Epston (1990) in *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* where they contend that human beings understand their lives through stories, and psychological suffering often arises when individuals feel trapped in negative, single-focused narratives about their worth or circumstances. Healing occurs through "re-authoring" which is the process of identifying alternative meanings and placing life events within a broader, more hopeful interpretive context. The present study contends that when a priest connects a parishioner's ordinary daily struggles to scriptural truths, he offers a powerful framework for narrative reframing. By hearing relatable human experiences shared from the pulpit, parishioners externalize their private burdens, integrate their personal struggles into a larger story of divine grace and community support, and may leave the liturgy with a renewed sense of emotional wholeness and spiritual peace.

This psychological bridge between storytelling and inner transformation is vividly illustrated in Reasor's (2020) work on narrative preaching. Reasor shows that when a preacher structures a homily like an unfolding story, building real tension before revealing a moment of grace, listeners do not just sit passively analysing concepts; they mentally enter the plot. They experience what psychologists call narrative "presence," stepping directly into the shoes of the story's characters and processing the emotional stakes for themselves. For the present study, Reasor's findings provide a crucial empirical anchor: they explain the exact mental mechanism through which a priest's ordinary stories move beyond simple entertainment to become instruments of spiritual healing. When a priest grounding his homily in everyday human struggles resolves that narrative through the lens of scripture, parishioners sitting in the pews do not merely hear about comfort, but they actively experience a shift in perspective, internalizing the story's resolution as a source of their own psychological release and emotional healing during Mass.

## METHODOLOGY

I engaged in direct participant observation during liturgical services during three out of the four-week Lenten mass series, focusing on documenting the priest's composition and delivery techniques with a focus on composition strategies and his use of localized formulae. The overt reactions, attentiveness, and collective responses of the congregation across three primary narratives designated as S1, S2, and S3 were also taken into account. To supplement these observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key participants captured as Mary, Julius, Ruth and Tom (not their real names) to probe how congregants interpreted specific sermon stories, the extent to which narrative listening provided a sense of relief or temporal escape, and the degree to which storytelling reduced personal stigma and fostered spiritual transformation.

### Empirical Data

Following, are the three stories that form the basis of discussion in this paper. S1 is a story about a poor old man who miraculously landed a job as a gatekeeper at a wealthy man's palatial home at Hillside Estate, Bungoma. The owner was remarkably generous, giving him a clean bed, good meals, and a fresh set of clothes. Soon after

he arrived, the master asked him to take all his tattered old rags and worn-out shoes and burn them, wanting to give him a clean slate. To anyone watching, his life had completely changed. But hidden beneath that fresh start was a lingering shadow.

Unbeknownst to his host, the old man couldn't bring himself to destroy his past. He had tucked his old clothes away in a dark, quiet corner. Every now and then, when the house grew silent, he would pull them out and slip them on—a quiet, painful ritual to remind himself of the misery he had escaped and the quiet gratitude he held in his heart. Then came the moment that shattered everything. Without warning, the master walked in and caught him standing there in his faded rags. The air in the room instantly turned heavy. The master stood in shock, while the old man froze, terrified. For a long, agonizing moment, neither made a sound, staring at each other in a cold, suffocating silence. When the master finally spoke, his tone was distant and unyielding. He told the old man he could see he still longed for his past, asking if he was being kept there against his will. The old man stood completely paralyzed, the words catching in his throat. But before he could utter a single word to explain himself or plead for his livelihood, the master ordered him off the property immediately, abruptly closing the door on his brief sanctuary and casting him right back out onto the unforgiving streets.

Like S1, S2 is also set near Bungoma along the Malaba-Nairobi highway. It was the kind of spectacle that brought traffic to a complete standstill. Right at the notorious Kipkaren tunnel, infamous for its brutal height restrictions, a massive double-deck car carrier trailer had wedged itself tightly under the concrete arch. Tempers were flaring, traffic was backed up for miles, and a growing crowd of self-appointed experts was loudly arguing over how to free the metal monster. Every complex idea they tried flopped miserably. Then stumbled in the hero no one asked for: a severely intoxicated street urchin, swaying like a palm tree in a storm. Slurring his words badly, he called out to the frustrated crowd that he had the answer, asking if he could give them the solution for free. Nobody took him seriously. But as he kept nagging them, turning from a minor distraction into a full-blown nuisance, he realized he wasn't welcome. Throwing his hands in the air, he let out a loud cackle and yelled back as he shuffled away that they should just let some air out of the tires to free the trailer. A stunned silence fell over the crowd. The realization hit them like a tons-of-bricks moment. Jaws dropped as every sober person standing there realized a guy who could barely stand up had just outsmarted all of them.

They quickly hissed air out of the tires. Sure enough, the trailer lowered just enough, creaked forward, and slipped smoothly out of the tunnel, leaving everyone relieved, amazed, and thoroughly embarrassed by a stroke of drunk genius.

S3 centres on a protagonist lingering at the absolute periphery of his society, deep on the edges of Nalondo village. The lone old man whose only companions were two cows, a heavy bull for ploughing his garden, and a few sheep kept entirely to himself, with not a single friend to his name. Then, out of nowhere, he started rambling in a bizarre, gibberish language. He muttered strange phrases like *"kebundende, aisee"* to anyone within earshot. The neighbours didn't give him a second thought, chuckling to themselves that the poor guy's solitude had finally fried his brain. Until one morning, he was just gone. Word quickly spread that he had secretly sold off every last animal and crossed the border into Uganda. The locals had a good laugh over his weird vanishing act. Then disaster struck. Months later, a brutal drought scorched the region, instantly followed by a vicious plague that wiped out every farm animal and chicken in the village. Panic set in. Panicked whispers began flying around. Should they have actually listened to his crazy ramblings? Did he know this nightmare was coming? Was this plague a curse he left behind for how badly they treated him? It was too late for answers. The barren village was left with nothing but empty pastures and a bitter lesson about underestimating the outcast.

## DISCUSSION

### Composition, delivery and Relevance of the Stories

It may be observed from the above empirical data that the parish priest focuses his stories on the socio-economic realities of the places his parishioners know well, mostly Bungoma County. By including familiar places, such as Hillside Estate (S1), the Kipkaren tunnel on the Malaba-Nairobi highway (S2), and Nalondo village (S3), the priest succeeds in fostering deep empathy and resonance, making his audience to feel like the priest is genuinely one of them and he knows the things that are happening around them. This makes the audience more receptive.

Equally, the priest has weaved his plots in a simple and linear structure that is not complicated to follow. Linear plots in S1, S2 and S3 quickly transport members of the congregation from their immediate conditions and situations into liminal spaces of collective human experience. The uncomplicated story lines that develop from the exposition to closure, through the climax, also help to immerse the audiences in a vicarious (healing) journey and provide pathways to renewed self-awareness and cathartic release.

In terms of language, the priest enhances his oral text through an array of devices. As evident, he frequently deploys hyperbole, vivid description, imagery, and comic effect to break the emotional tension inherent in confronting personal weakness and existential shortcomings. By strategically embedding humour and comic relief during the confrontation of personal sin and guilt, the priest also managed to release physiological and emotional tension. These stylistic choices were paired with intentional body movements, facial expressions, vocal shifts, gesticulations, and direct involvement of the congregation. This embodied performance transformed passive listening into an active shared event with heightened tension, creating a temporal space where parishioners are fully immersed in the performance.

Equally, the priest's delivery relied heavily on personalized performative formulae, seamlessly weaving recurring opening call-and-response exchanges and structured closing cues consistently. Rather than serve as mere routine transitions, these oral conventions functioned as interactive bridges that kept the congregation engaged, curious, and personally invested in the process. To initiate a narrative, the priest skilfully deployed a variety of conversational hooks. On one occasion, he stirred intrigue by feigning familiarity with his listeners:

**Priest:** Now, there is a story I told you… do you remember it?

**Audience:** No, we don't! *(eagerly anticipating either a fresh tale or a masterfully retold classic)*

**Priest:** Maybe you forgot, or perhaps you skipped mass last week…where were you?

**Audience:** Tell the story again! *(laughing knowingly, well aware of the priest's playful tactics to prime their attention)*

On another occasion, he leaned into localized mystery to hook his listeners immediately:

**Priest:** Now, something remarkable happened back where I come from… do you want to hear it?

**Audience:** Yes, tell us! *(answering in an enthusiastic unison that signalled collective anticipation)*

At other times, he invited the congregation into a shared, conspiratorial call and response:

**Priest:** There is this man—or woman—I told you about earlier. Of course, you remember they aren't from my village, don't you?

**Audience:** Yes, we do! *(responding eagerly, keen not to break the momentum or disappoint him)*

When saving a story for the climax of his homily, he inverted the dynamic entirely, coaxing the congregation to actively demand the tale:

**Priest:** So, that is my interpretation of today's readings… is there anything left to cover?

**Audience:** Yes!

**Priest:** And what on earth could that be?

**Audience:** A story about where you come from!

**Priest:** Ah, haven't I told you all of them already?

**Audience:** No, just one last one! *(visibly buzzing with excitement)*

To signal the end of a narrative arc, he used a signature closing formula that warmly shifted responsibility back onto his flock:

**Priest:** My story ends there. If any of you have a more interesting one, please share it with us next time.

Ultimately, these performative techniques break through monotonous routine of one-way communication. The opening formulae act as cognitive reset buttons, pulling distracted, anxious minds back to the present liturgical moment. The signature closing formula (*"My story ends there. If any of you have a more interesting one, please share it..."*) gracefully de-escalates emotional intensity, returning the listener from vicarious narrative immersion to quiet, interior reflection.

In terms of relevance, the three stories deeply connect with the themes of humility and penance the Lenten period represents. S1, for instance, aligns with the key themes of penance, faith and renewal (Matthew 25:1–9). The priest constructs a story contrasting outward ritualistic obligation with genuine interior faith and transformation. The protagonist's covert practice of dressing in his old rags highlights the Augustinian diagnosis of human nature: even after receiving unmerited favour, the human heart remains tethered to past wounds and anxieties (*cor inquietum*). When the master discovers him, the paralyzing silence between them illustrates St. Thomas Aquinas' wound of emotional weakness (*infirmitas*). After mass, a congregant that I interviewed stated:

When Father told the story of the old man hiding his rags, I felt he was talking about my own secrets. It made me realize I was holding onto past failures instead of accepting peace. (an interview with Mary, 22/02/2024)

The priest used the narrative to emphasize that true obedience pleasing to God arises from faith and total surrender rather than a mere outward conformity. In S2 and S3, the priest addresses themes of social rejection and divine grace, linking the rejection of Jesus by his own townspeople (Matthew 13:55–56) to the communal dynamics of the parish. The gridlocked highway and the futile efforts of "self-appointed experts" embody the exhausting, circular struggles of daily life. The intervention of the marginalized street urchin, whose simple instruction to deflate the tires resolves the crisis, practically demonstrates the Thomistic principle that grace elevates human weakness (*2 Cor 12:9*). The story forces congregants into Camusian "revolt," dismantling social pride and exposing the inadequacy of human self-sufficiency. A member of the congregation stated after mass:

We were all laughing, but then it hit me hard. I had been overthinking and ruminating over my struggles for months. Hearing how a simple step solved a big problem gave me immediate emotional relief and renewed my trust in God. (an interview with Julius, 28/02/2024)

Another parishioner said:

I came to church carrying heavy anxiety about my family. When Father mimicked the crowd's reaction in the trailer story, everyone laughed. In that moment, my chest felt lighter, and I realized I wasn't carrying my struggles alone. (an interview with Ruth, 28/02/2024)

In S3, the community's dismissal of the protagonist's warnings mirrors the notion of existential isolation. The subsequent drought and plague transform the community's mockery into profound existential dread and moral awareness. By framing this story within the Lenten context of penance, the priest leverages narrative tension to induce a cognitive shift: shifting congregants from self-righteous judgment to communal self-examination. A parishioner said later on:

It (the story) opened my eyes to how I treat my neighbours. I realized my spiritual dryness was caused by my own pride. It moved me to seek reconciliation during confession. (an interview with Tom, 11/03/2024)

From foregoing reactions, the emotional catharsis or psychological relief experienced by the parishioners after the priest's performances is clearly evident. Therefore, by embedding scriptural truths within relatable human narratives, the priest allows the congregation to recognize their own brokenness within the broader framework of divine acceptance.

## CONCLUSION

This study underscores that when oral technique is brought into the sacred space of the pulpit, it transcends mere rhetorical embellishment to become a transformative vehicle for spiritual deliverance and psychological catharsis. While scholarly discourse has long debated the nature, function, and enduring relevance of spoken art, often questioning whether traditional oral forms can maintain their potency in modern, institutionalized settings, the creative practice of priest demonstrates the dynamic vitality of living orature. By deploying personalized formulae, familiar social landscapes, and immersive performances, the priest bridges the gap between everyday existential suffering and spiritual renewal. Ultimately, this research reveals that spoken art is neither a nostalgic artifact nor a simple entertainment tool; rather, in the hands of a skilled performer, it functions as a profound, participatory process of meaning-making that ignites the heart, restores agency, and facilitates genuine communal healing.

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