

Discourse Functions of Rhetorical Devices in Selected Roman Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letters in the Ecclesiastical Province of Onitsha, Nigeria

Authors : Virginia Chika Okafor

Abstract : The pastoral letter, an open letter addressed by a bishop to members of his diocese for the purpose of promoting faith and good Christian living, constitutes a persuasive religious discourse characterized by numerous rhetorical devices. Previous studies on Christian religious language have concentrated mainly on sermons, liturgy, prayers, theology, scriptures, hymns, and songs to the exclusion of the persuasive power of pastoral letters. This study, therefore, examined major rhetorical devices in selected Roman Catholic bishops' Lenten pastoral letters in the Ecclesiastical Province of Onitsha, with a view to determining their persuasive discourse functions. Aristotelian Rhetoric was adopted as the framework because of its emphasis on persuasion through three main rhetorical appeals: logos, pathos, and ethos. Data were drawn from 10 pastoral letters of five Roman Catholic bishops in five dioceses (two letters from each) out of the seven in the Ecclesiastical Province of Onitsha. The five dioceses (Onitsha arch-diocese, Nnewi, Awka, Enugu, and Awgu dioceses) were chosen because pastoral letters are regularly published there. The 10 pastoral letters were published between 2000 and 2010 and range between 20 and 104 pages. They were selected, through purposive sampling, based on consistency in the publication and rhetorical content. Data were subjected to discourse analysis. Three categories of rhetorical devices were identified: those relating to logos (logical devices), those relating to pathos (pathetical devices), and those relating to ethos (ethical devices). Major logical devices deployed were: testimonial reference functioning as authority to validate messages; logical arguments appealing to the rationality of the audience; nominalization and passivation objectifying the validity of ideas; and modals of obligation/necessity appealing to the audience's sense of responsibility and moral duty. Prominent among the pathetical devices deployed were: use of Igbo language to express solidarity with the audience; inclusive pronoun (we) to create a feeling of belonging, collectivism and oneness with them; prayers to inspire them; and positive emotion-laden words to refer to the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) to keep the audience emotionally attached to it. Finally, major ethical devices deployed were: use of first-person singular pronoun (I) and imperatives to invoke the authority of the bishops' office; Latinisms to show learnedness; greetings and appreciation to express goodwill; and exemplary Biblical characters as models of faith, repentance, and love. The rhetorical devices were used in relation to the bishops' messages of faith, repentance, love and loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. Roman Catholic bishops' pastoral letters in the Ecclesiastical Province of Onitsha are thus characterized by logos-, pathos-, and ethos-related rhetorical devices designed to persuade the audience to live according to the bishops' messages of faith, love, repentance, and loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. The rhetorical devices, therefore, establish the pastoral letters as a significant form of persuasive religious discourse.

Keywords : ecclesiastical province of Onitsha, pastoral letters, persuasive discourse functions, rhetorical devices, Roman Catholic bishops

Conference Title : ICSRD 2020 : International Conference on Scientific Research and Development

Conference Location : Chicago, United States

Conference Dates : December 12-13, 2020