
THE RELEVANCE OF POPE FRANCIS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE *CATHOLICUS CHORUS* FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF MUSIC BY CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

Cyprian Onyemauche Duru
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria
durucypriansaxx@gmail.com

Bruno Dafe Ekewenu
Delta State University,
Abraka, Nigeria
dbekewenu@gmail.com

Peter Ogheneghwanre Odogbor
University of Benin,
Benin City, Nigeria
peter.odogbor@uniben.edu

Abstract: *Music is an important part of the Catholic worship. It enriches the prayer, participation, unity and spiritual growth of the worshipping community. The music in the Catholic churches of contemporary Nigeria lives in the interface of universal music tradition of the Catholic Church and the rich indigenous musical traditions of Nigeria. The research explores the current relevance of Pope Francis' views on the Catholicus Chorus (in this study called the Catholic liturgical choir or schola cantorum) to the performance of music in Catholic Churches in the modern Nigeria. The study is qualitative with secondary sources used for data collection such as Pope's addresses, Catholic liturgical documents, scholarly works on Nigerian liturgical music and inculturation. Nevertheless, insights from the authors' personal observations also played important role in the discourse. The paper outlines the four main principles in Pope Francis' view of choral ministry: Music serve as a tool of evangelisation; The choir is a facilitator, not a replacement for congregational involvement; Harmony and communion must be developed; Spiritual, liturgical and musical formation is vital. These are explored in the light of the practice of music performance in the Nigerian Church today, especially the growing emphasis on Pentecostal worship styles, popular gospel music and indigenous musical idioms and technological amplification. The study concludes that Pope Francis' thoughts can serve as a helpful template for the balance between artistic excellence, cultural inculturation, liturgical fidelity, and active*

participation. The study recommends that Catholic choirs in Nigeria should perform music in a manner that is not a concert devoid of the liturgy but as a sacrament that elevates the assembly of the faithful, conveys the text of the Bible and liturgy, fosters community prayer and reflect a positive Nigerian cultural identity within the framework of Catholic worship.

Keywords: *Pope Francis, Catholicus Chorus, sacred music, inculturation, active participation, Catholic liturgy.*

Introduction

In the Roman Catholic Church worship cannot be separated from music. Music has been used throughout the history of the Church as a way to proclaim the faith, celebrate the liturgy and share the liturgical action of the assembly, from psalmody and the hymns of the Bible through sacred polyphony, vernacular hymnody and modern forms of liturgical song. The Second Vatican Council [known as Vatican II] *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 1963) highlighted this dimension of participation with the message that liturgical celebrations should encourage “full, conscious, and active participation” of the faithful (no.14). In the wake of this, *Musicae Sacram* (Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 1967) further held that music must serve to glorify God and to sanctify the faithful; Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony, organ music, as well as sacred popular music were accepted as part of the Church’s musical tradition.

The study of liturgical music in the Nigerian Catholic Church is an interesting case. Nigeria is a country which is rich in linguistic, ethnic and musical diversity. The performance of Catholic liturgical music has therefore evolved as a result of the interaction of the traditional Western Catholic music and the indigenous musical resources of Nigeria. Liturgical music in Nigeria in the context of this encounter has led to creative potentials and pastoral challenges. For instance, Agbo (2017) explores the inculturation of Catholic liturgical music in Igboland and Carter-Enyi and Carter-Enyi (2019) records the Forum for the Inculturation of Liturgical Music and its utilization of the Nigerian languages and their musical cultures in Catholic sacred music.

Things are even more complicated in today's world. Nigeria’s Catholic worship takes place in a religious context that is heavily associated with Pentecostalism, popular gospel music, and the use of digital devices and now more sophisticated sound production. As a result of these developments new musical opportunities have appeared in Catholic worship, but the difference between liturgical music and religious entertainment has also come to the fore. In recent scholarship in Nigeria there

has been debate on the application of indigenous music idioms, popular styles, instrumental ensemble and contemporary choral technique in the liturgy (Agbo & Okeke, 2025; Orakwe, 2025).

In this context, Pope Francis' teaching on sacred music and choirs takes on importance. Participation, evangelization, communion, beauty, formation and spiritual authenticity have been his constant reminders on sacred music. During an international conference on sacred music in 2017, Pope Francis (2017) introduced the concept of sacred music and the present culture and highlighted the importance of the musical and aesthetic formation of the clergy, religious and those involved in the *schola cantorum*. During the Third International Meeting of Choirs, Pope Francis (2018) spoke about music and song as a tool of evangelization, and encouraged the community to use their musical instruments to help the community pray, instead of taking the place of the community. He likewise encouraged the sacred musicians to contribute to the whole People of God to sing with conscious and active participation in 2019. In 2024, in his message to the 4th International Meeting of Choirs, he highlighted the themes of harmony, communion and joy as the choir is an image of the Church where everyone participates according to his or her role without expecting to be the centre of attention (Francis, 2024). These viewpoints are very relevant to the current Catholic worship situation in Nigeria, as they provide the guidelines to be used in negotiating the relationship between the choir, the congregation and culture versus liturgy.

Objectives

This study examines Pope Francis' perspectives on *Catholicus Chorus* as model for the performance of music in Catholic Churches in contemporary Nigeria. The objectives are to:

- a. explore the role of the Catholic liturgical choir;
- b. highlight the principles embodied in Pope Francis' perspectives on sacred music and choral ministry;
- c. assess the relationship between the principles and contemporary Nigerian Catholic musical practices;
- d. discuss the implications of Pope Francis' perspectives for the inculturation of Catholic liturgical music in Nigeria;
- e. identify the challenges that Nigerian Catholic choirs face in implementing the principles; and
- f. propose measures for improving musical performance in Nigerian Catholic liturgical celebrations.

Research questions

Deriving from the objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. What is the role of the Catholic liturgical choir?
- ii. What principles arise from Pope Francis' perspectives on sacred music and choral ministry?
- iii. In what ways are the principles and contemporary Nigerian Catholic musical practices related?
- iv. What implications do the perspectives have for the inculturation of Catholic music in Nigeria?
- v. What challenges do Nigerian Catholic choir encounter in the application of the principles?
- vi. How can musical performance in Catholic liturgical celebrations be improved upon in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Catholic sacred music and the liturgical tradition

Under the microscope of Catholic sacred music, however, one soon discovers that the Church is not looking to it as merely pretty background music. It is more; it is part of the very act of the liturgy itself. The question that *Musicam Sacram* (Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, 1967) addresses is quite different: sacred music is intended to accompany the liturgy and to help to sanctify the faithful, it is not supposed to "decorate" the Mass. Echema (2026) correctly states that "sacred music...is not an independent art set apart from the liturgy; it is a product of the liturgy, subject to the liturgy, and carried out through the liturgy" (p. 8). The *Musicam Sacram*, as it is called, recognizes other types of sacred music but continues to assert that the music for liturgical celebrations must reflect the nature of the celebration. It is not a "play anything as long as it is religious" thing. That music should not be an impediment to the people's active participation, or the liturgy be turned into a concert, the assembly taking on the role of a spectator.

The idea is further reinforced in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM, 2003) with a few minor variations. It provides the choir, in fact the *schola cantorum*, with a particular liturgical function. The choir is expected to sing its own part, but also there to assist the Church assembly/congregation to participate more fully in singing (no. 103). The choir is not a performing body of singers, but a servant of the liturgy. Given this, Weman (1960) sees the choir as "...virtually indispensable when it comes to the question of creating living congregational singing..." (p. 213); Shebbeare (1908) describes a choir as "a body of singers entrusted with the musical

parts of the Church service, and organised and instructed for that purpose.” Indeed, Onwuka (2004) argues:

The choir... is like the heart of the Church, the throbbing part of the living body of Christ or even the nerve-centre of the Church, they stimulate and sustain spiritual life; by singing in the Church choir, one imbibes the spiritual ethics of communicating with God in spiritual songs like the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lk. 1:46-55) and with mortals (Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16) (p. 12).

So, the choir’s leadership is not that of being showy but of relating to the assembly’s singing and holding it up. Even if the choir might sound impressive, it is not a primarily artistic group in Catholic worship. They have a liturgical role, rather than a purely performative role, to serve the liturgy and to support the assembly. The choir is a ministry a family that praises God; Ensure that the music is singable and known to the people and not so complex that it is only suitable for the choir.

Pope Francis and sacred music

The first Jesuit Pope, the first from America and the first from Southern Hemisphere, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was the 266th Bishop of Rome, and head of the Catholic Church from 13 March 2013 until his death on 3 March 2018, when he succeeded to the papacy upon the death of Pope Benedict XVI. Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina on December 17, 1937. He pursued studies in chemistry, philosophy and theology, and was a member of the Society of Jesus (Jesuit Order) since 1958. He was ordained priest in 1969 and served in diverse roles for the Jesuit Order and the Catholic Church in Argentina, among them as Provincial Superior of the Jesuits in Argentina (1973-1979), and as Archbishop of Buenos Aires (1998-2013). In 2001, he was made a cardinal by Pope John Paul II. In March 13, 2013, he was elected Pope. His choice of the name Francis comes from Saint Francis of Assisi. He had been known as an eminently humble and accessible man, and his papacy had been focused on social justice, poverty, mercy, the environment, and all that. He passed away in April 21, 2025 at the age of 88. His 12 years papacy saw a world-changing voice for morality and a revolution of tenderness in a world too often defined by conflict and inequality.

In teaching about sacred music, Pope Francis does not deprecate the principles of the post-Vatican II liturgical renewal, but rather further elaborates upon them. In his address on sacred music in 2017, he reflected on the connection between sacred music and culture, and highlighted the importance of musical formation for those entrusted with the responsibility of liturgical music. During his speech to choirs in 2018, he stressed on evangelization and participation. He asserted that music may be used to communicate the Word of God and to help celebrate the sacraments. The choir, however, should not be used interchangeably with the assembly and should be a means to assist the community to sing the assembly. Pope Francis once again stressed

the importance of “conscious and active participation” and the promotion of parish choirs, sacred music schools, organists and musical formation in 2019 (Francis, 2019).

As it were, Pope Francis always underscored the fact that sacred music is a means to the liturgy and to the spiritual life of the Church. His work fits into his larger program of a Church that is missionary, pastoral, inclusive and committed to the cultural context of the various peoples. Pope Francis considers the liturgy to be a tremendous means of evangelization through music. It can communicate the beauty of faith and it can make a glimpse of the beauty heaven. Speaking in Vatican City, to an audience of more than 6,000 choristers and musicians from all over the world, opines:

Your music and song are truly an instrument of evangelization to the extent that you bear witness to the depth of the Word of God, which touches people’s hearts, and to the extent that you assist in the celebration of the sacraments, in particular the Holy Eucharist, allowing us to perceive the beauty of Paradise.

This evangelising role does not imply that sacred music should be mimicked from the popular in secular culture, rather that it is to remain connected to worship, and the mystery being celebrated. It becomes clear in this context what *Catholicus chorus* is.

The *Catholicus chorus* (Catholic choir) in the view of Pope Francis is the musical animator of the entire Church community: as witnesses of Christ, they enhance and embellish the liturgy with their music; they encourage the Church worshiper to participate and pray during the liturgical celebration. The choir is a vital instrument in the work of evangelisation worldwide as a witness to Christ. The choir’s role in the liturgy is to reveal the tonality of the choir, Francis (2018) writes, “the choirs are liturgical animators”. He was referring to their role in ‘vibrating’ or at least ‘leading’ the worship and spiritual life of the Church community through song. They faithfully help the faithful pray and be active members of the liturgy and not observers. Choirs as animators, via musical renderings, make certain moments unique in a person’s life in the liturgy which could lead to conversion as in the case of Augustine of Hippo. When Augustine was still unconverted and almost a heretic, he would sneak into the Cathedral of the Bishop Ambrose of Milan and listen to the homilies of the holy bishop, but also the solemn, calm and soothing music of Ambrose’s choir. The words of the liturgical songs kept on sinking into the soul of Augustine until he became converted.

Pope Francis warns choir to be careful they do not lead the way with songs during liturgy that may lead to conversion, thus discouraging the participation of the Church from the Mass. As quoted by Watkins (2018): Pope Francis says, “You are the musical animators of the whole congregation; do not do the congregation’s job, take the place of the congregation and deprive the people of God of the opportunity to sing with you and share in the Church’s prayer together.”

Further, the choir, for Pope Francis, is an epitome of unity due to the singers' passion for music and harmony of faith. "The Church choir is an eloquent sign of unity, united by faith and a passion for music", as Lubov (2024) quotes it. To elaborate, Francis highlighted the three fundamental elements of the choral service to the liturgy, which are: Harmony, Communion and Joy. On harmony, Francis agrees that music is agreement, it enters everyone, it comforts the afflicted, it restimulates the discouraged, it produces wonderful values that mirror God's harmonious light: beauty and poetry. Because music is harmonious, when the choir sings, it becomes a doing of love with keen hearts and voice. "Singing is an act of love and when we sing we pray with words and music, heart and voice, devotion and art" (Francis, 2023).

Francis emphasized in the aspect of communion that singing is not done by single voice, but done together. Francis explained that it is using a concerted voice for singing, especially chorale. According to him:

This...speaks to us about the Church and the world in which we live, our journey together can be likened to the performance of a great 'concert', where each person offers contribution according to...abilities, playing or singing their 'part', thereby discovering...unique richness within the symphony of communion...[thus], ...we are all called to fulfill our role for the benefit of the entire community, so that a song of praise to God may rise from all over the world (Lubov, 2024).

Finally, about joy, Francis (as cited by Lubov, 2024) says that Catholic choirs are:

Custodians of a centuries-old treasure of art, beauty, and spirituality, [*but cautioned them against letting*] the mentality of the world taint it with self-interest, ambition, jealousy, or division, for such things, as you well know, infiltrate the life of choirs as well as communities, making them places that are no longer joyful but sad and burdensome, even leading to their disintegration. To this end, it will be good for you to maintain the lofty spiritual tenor of your vocation through prayer and meditation on the Word of God, participating in the liturgies you animate not only with your voices but also with your minds and hearts.

Sacred music and inculturation in Nigeria

In the context of Nigeria, this entire issue of inculturation takes the center stage. It is a very critical problem in the context of Catholic liturgy in Nigeria and not a theoretical concept. It is a door that was already opened by Vatican II with their recognition that the Church should respect the legitimate cultural traditions of different peoples, as long as they are harmonised with the genuine spirit of the liturgy.

Pope John Paul II (1995) says in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa*:

The inculturation process is not limited to the life of the Church alone, but embraces the entire Church life and evangelization process. It covers the life, beliefs and organisation of the church including theology, liturgy. All this underlines the need for research in the field of African cultures in all their complexity. For just this reason, the Synod called for the Pastors to make the most of the many opportunities in this field given by the Church's existing discipline (no. 62).

This spirit has inspired the creation of all kinds of Nigerian Catholic works that incorporate indigenous language, rhythm, melodic structure and performance style. Local drums, call-and-response singing, and vernacular texts are present in most Masses in Nigerian parishes, and are more immediate than imported European hymns. In the context of the Roman Catholic Church in Igbo Land, the author of this article, Agbo (2017) has taken an interest on this and has proposed liturgical music that truly respects the musical resource of Nigerian cultures, especially in Igboland. He is not only encouraging the use of local songs, but for a true dialogue between the liturgical tradition and the native musical idioms. Such an approach can help the liturgy not appear so alien and more organic to the local community.

Another interesting perspective is the one of Carter-Enyi and Carter-Enyi in their article "Thirteen ways to "Hail, Mary": A Case Study of the 2013 Forum for the Inculturation of Liturgical Music in Nigeria" (2019) who studied this Forum for the Inculturation of Liturgical Music in Nigeria. Their research has recorded the Ave Maria in seven Nigerian languages. The fact that it is the same prayer, but expressed in various linguistic and cultural ways is already saying a great deal. They demonstrate the art of choral music in Nigeria that can be both Catholic and language and culture diverse.

This discussion has been continued in recent times by further research. In the study of Jude Nnam's music, Agbo and Okeke (2025) identify features such as call and response, ostinato, and pentatonic tendencies as some of the components that shaped the interaction between the music of Nigeria and the liturgy of the Catholic Church during the post-conciliar period. These qualities are clearly audible when listening to Nnam's pieces the repeated motifs, the interaction between choir and assembly, the melodic contours which are easily recognised as familiar from African tonal systems. Their research too demonstrates the current disputes about the boundaries of sacred and popular music. This is not a philosophical argument it is a reality for parish musicians that they are constantly working out the issues around this boundary. What may seem pious to one group may trigger the feelings of potential danger to another. Some members of the choir remark, "This does not sound like party music" and others note that the style makes it easier for the younger people to connect with the liturgy.

Contemporary challenges

The modern Nigerian Catholic choir is no exception to this rule. It is playing in a very competitive religious and musical environment that is very loud - literally and metaphorically. Expectations of the sound of worship have been influenced by popular gospel music, Pentecostal worship, social media, electronic instruments, and amplified sound. In several urban congregations, the demands to match the energy and output of Pentecostal services frequently include having a full band, high power radio equipment and songs that are heard on the radio or online. This may be thrilling for some choirs, but it may also be a minor temptation to make liturgical music an arena for performance. Not only contemporary or indigenous musical resources are being used, but the real danger was made evident by Nigerian scholarship, as it is always been pointed out. These can actually be used in a proper way to enrich the liturgy. The issue is where music ceases to be a part of the liturgy as it is, and begins to blend into or even to oppose the liturgical action. The difficulty lies when the choir minister(s) have some of the more musical and decorative instruments, there is a considerable amount of percussion, and there are extended instrumental interludes, and the congregation is passive during the liturgy. This is an abuse in that the choir "takes away from the people of God the right and the joy to actively and fully participate in the celebration of the liturgy" (Lazzarini, 2016).

Orakwe (2025) urges for discernment in use of instruments and popular musical idioms. The emphasis is on the use of instrumentation which enhances, not dominates, the liturgical action. This could involve, for example, controlling the volume, not using flashy improvisations at important ritual times, or selecting rhythms that facilitate contemplative involvement. To sum up, the current issue in Nigeria is how to use locally and modern genres of music in such a way that they truly enrich the liturgy and promote participation, and not turn the Mass into a concert or a rally. Many of today's disputes surrounding sacred music and choirs have their origins in this tension.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily in the "Liturgical Participation Theory" derived from the ecclesiology and liturgical theology of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), and developed in *Musicam Sacram* (1967) and the teaching of Pope Francis. The central assumption of this framework is that liturgical music is fundamentally participatory and ministerial. Music is not simply something performed for worshippers; it is something through which the worshipping community participates in the liturgical action. In this, three concepts are particularly imperative.

Active participation

Active participation is more than just physical exercise. It involves conscious, attentive and spiritual engagement in the liturgy. The *Musicam Sacram* is constantly returning to the theme of participation. This document explains how sacred music can help the Church assembly to be active, conscious and fruitful in liturgical worship. *Musicam Sacram* (1967) says that the faithful are called to contribute to the liturgy “in a manner that is full, conscious and active” (no. 15), which is the very nature of the liturgy. These words are a direct response to the famous teaching of Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963, no. 14) which calls such participation the right and duty of every baptised Christian. The choir should ensure that the Church assembly is involved, but not make the Mass a concert. This is very much in tune with Pope Francis’ frequent directive that choirs should help the whole People of God to sing.

Inculturation

In the light of inculturation, the use of legitimate Nigerian musical resources in the Catholic worship can be explained. The theory transcends the idea that the music in the Catholic liturgy should be culturally Western. It is not to say that all music from a particular culture or tradition is fit for use in the liturgy. Instead, musical elements should be critically assessed in terms of their theological, cultural, musical and liturgical suitability. When looked closely, these unique characteristics can complement the active involvement of the Church assembly and enrich sacred worship/liturgy, making it more meaningful and impactful; so that the famous words of Karl Rahner (1979) could come to life: “The Church must be inculturated throughout the world if it is to be a World Church...” (pp. 718,724).

Communal ministry

Pope Francis’ image of the choir as a musical community provides an ecclesiological understanding of choral ministry. In his 2024 address, he compared musical performance with the Church itself: each member contributes his or her part, listens to others and works for the good of the whole rather than personal prominence. Consequently, the choir is understood not as a group of individual performers but as a ministry within the ecclesial community.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is qualitative with documentary and theological-analytical approach. It does not purport to record primary field interviews or statistical observations, but does include some observations based on experiences of the authors. The paper is based on information extracted from the examination of the relevant documents, papal speeches and studies of the Catholic liturgy in Nigeria. These are mainly from *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), *Musicam Sacram* (1967), the

General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM, 2003) and Pope Francis' address to attendees of international conferences and meetings on sacred music and choirs (2017, 2018, 2019, 2024). The secondary sources also consist of scholarly works on Nigerian Catholic liturgical music, which includes those works with focus on inculturation, choral ministry and contemporary Nigerian music (Agbo, 2017; Carter-Enyi & Carter-Enyi, 2019; Agbo & Okeke, 2025; Orakwe, 2025). Thematic analysis was used in the analysis of the materials. These main themes were the participation, the evangelisation, the harmony and the communion, and finally the formation and the liturgical responsibility. The themes were then evaluated in the context of the Nigerian Catholic.

Findings

Choir should encourage, not supplant, congregational singing. The congregation is at the heart of liturgical singing during the Mass at the hands of Pope Francis. While the choir is an important contribution, it is not the only one and should not crowd out the assembly. It is particularly significant for the Nigerian Catholic Churches where some of the choirs could be performing elaborate arrangements which may be impressive to the technical standard but may be hard to follow by the ordinary worshippers. The importance given by Pope Francis in his emphasis indicates that musical complexity should never be an end. In the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2003) it also says that the choir should be able to promote the involvement of the faithful (no. 103).

Moreover, the excellence in music must be linked to spiritual development. Pope Francis does not have an issue with musical excellence; he links that with spiritual preparation. In his 2017 speech he speaks about the need for musical and aesthetic formation, and in 1967 *Musicam Sacram*, the need for musical and liturgical/spiritual formation of choir members (no. 24) is evident throughout. Pope Leo XIV (2025) is of this opinion stressing that the choir is "a true ministry that requires preparation, commitment... and above all, a deep spiritual life". For Nigeria, this implies the necessity to train choristers in vocal proficiency, sight-singing, harmony, performance, scripture, liturgy, Catholic theology, pronunciation, liturgical seasons and the interpretation of the texts to be sung.

Inculturation is compatible with liturgical fidelity. The results show that Pope Francis' style allows for interaction with the culture of our times while at the same time keeping the sacredness of Catholic liturgy. This is especially true of Nigeria. Research on the Forum for the Inculturation of Liturgical Music shows that Nigerian Catholic composers (Jude Nnam, for instance) have already produced multilingual and culturally diverse sacred music. In conclusion, Nigerian rhythms, languages, call and response structures and indigenous instruments, as appropriate, can enrich the Catholic liturgical life if they are used appropriately. But inculturation is not to be equated with indiscriminate borrowing. A song does not make itself a liturgical song because it is religious or popular.

Moreover, choir ministry should be harmonious and communicate. Pope Francis' harmony, communion and joy presentation in 2024 has direct implication to the Nigerian choirs. Where there is competition and rivalry, celebrity culture or personal ambition, the theological aim of choral ministry is contradicted. Instead, the members of the choir ought to know that they are members of one ecclesial body. It has implications for the discipline of rehearsals, leadership, working together with clergy, and relationships between various parish choirs.

Moreover, music is an evangelizing tool. Key among the findings is that Pope Francis sees music as a tool for evangelization. During his 2018 speech he said music and singing can bear witness to the Word of God and help to celebrate the sacraments. This is especially important in Nigeria where music is a huge cultural and communicative power. Catholic music, if chosen and used appropriately, can be used to convey biblical teaching, Catholic spirituality, and Christian hope to those who are participating in the Catholic liturgy, particularly to young people.

Besides, there is also a demand for discernment in today's styles. But the study concludes that while Pope Francis is open to culture, such a stance was not an endless affirmation of all the styles of music that are being created today. Adaptation is always subject to the nature of the liturgy. In contemporary Nigerian Catholic music, therefore it is necessary to use discernment in the use of volume, instrumentation, rhythm, choreography, length of time, lyrics and relationship between choir and congregation. Tensions between inculturation and liturgical solemnity have also been noted in recent research on Nigerian liturgical music (Agbo & Okeke, 2025; Orakwe, 2025).

Discussion of findings

The findings show that Pope Francis' views are quite relevant to the current Catholic musical practice in Nigeria since it is a middle way between two extremes. The first extreme is uncritical traditionalism, where Catholic liturgical music is only known in terms of what has been handed down from the past in Europe. This can lead to the alienation of liturgical music from the cultural and linguistic context of Nigeria's worshippers. The second extreme is uncritical popularization: anyone who is successful in gospel, pop or Pentecostal musical practice is deemed acceptable for the Catholic liturgy. This can make the liturgy into an 'event'.

There is a third alternative: faithful creativity; that is what Pope Francis is offering us. The arrangement of the Catholic liturgy, the theological meaning and content of its music and the sacrality of its music should be maintained and respected, while at the same time Catholic choirs can create and perform music that reflects the Nigerian languages, rhythms, melodic patterns and instruments. It reflects the principles of *Musicam Sacram* that emphasizes the role of vernacular languages and musical distinctiveness of various peoples, with the demand for new compositions to

be in line with the principles of sacred music. For modern Nigeria, this implies that a musical expression from any of the above-mentioned ethnic groups, provided it is properly filled with the appropriate theological message and is suitably applied to the liturgical expression, can be the authentic source for the Catholic liturgy. The examples presented by Carter-Enyi and Carter-Enyi (2019) with Ave Maria settings in a number of Nigerian languages provide a good illustration of the practicality of this approach.

The importance of participation is further reinforced by Pope Francis's focus on participation, which contrasts with some Catholic choirs who focus more on the technical aspects rather than on the participation. A choir can sing well, but fail to be a community of worship if the people in the congregation become mere onlookers. Hence, the measure of success should not just be: "How nicely did the choir sing?" but also: "Did the music assist the Church to pray?" This is a very crucial distinction. Moreover, the Pope's idea of harmony serves as a good model for choir leadership in Nigeria. It is important that the choir be an entity wherein the soprano, alto, tenor, bass, instrumentalist, cantor, director and congregation each play complementary roles. The highest energy output is therefore not one in which one person is the most dominant, but one where the entire ecclesial community is an embodiment of praise.

Conclusion

In the contemporary scenario of Nigeria, Pope Francis' views on Catholicus chorus are very relevant in the context of music performance in Catholic Churches. His teaching is not oppositional to musical excellence, cultural creativity or contemporary musical expression. Instead, it sees these in a broader theological context where music serves for the glory of God, for the sanctification of the faithful, for the proclamation of the gospel and for the participation of the worshipping community. Participation, evangelisation, communion and formation are four principles to be highlighted. Participation for a Nigerian Catholic Choir does not imply that the choir should supplant the congregation to sing but that the choir should contribute to the congregation sing. Music should be used for evangelisation to communicate the Christian message and to draw those who are participating in worship closer to God. During the communion the choir should be cooperative and not competitive. Formation implies the need for a musical competence to be complemented by liturgical and spiritual preparation.

However, inculturation must be carried out with discernment and not sentiment. Popular songs are not necessarily liturgical and technically expert performance cannot necessarily enhance the prayer of the Church. The question which always needs to be asked is whether the music supports the liturgy, and helps the assembly to encounter God. The future of Catholic liturgical music in Nigeria is not to be envisaged as a dichotomy between "traditional" Catholic music and "modern" Nigerian music, but rather as a development of the Catholic liturgical music in Nigeria. The more productive is a fusion of Catholic liturgical faithfulness, artistic quality and the Nigerian culture and active involvement of the members of the congregation. This

is what Pope Francis' vision teaches the Church in the present day in Nigeria: The choir must sing not only to be heard, but to enable the Church to pray, participate, unite and praise God.

Recommendations

Based on findings, the recommendations presented below are made:

- a. Choir's emphasis should be placed on liturgical function. It is not just the popularity of music that should be considered but the appropriate music for the liturgical occasion. There are different kinds of liturgical functions for entrance, offertory, communion, thanksgiving and recessional songs.
- b. The participation of members in congregational activities should be actively fostered. Choirs should not use music suitable for congregational singing and choral music for special musical contribution. Limitations in tonal range and/or melody should be avoided, and simple refrains can allow for greater participation.
- c. Nigerian languages should be encouraged. Promoting the use of Nigerian languages should be continued where appropriate. This facilitates the understanding of the liturgy and helps the Church's prayer to grow in local cultures.
- d. Indigenous resources in music need to be tailored. Catholic worship can be enriched in a variety of ways using call-and-response, indigenous rhythms, responsorial structures and traditional instruments. They should be assessed, however, in the light of the sacral nature and form of the liturgy.
- e. The sound needs to be amplified, but not to overwhelm. Modern amplification will enhance worship especially in large Nigerian Churches. However, loud numbers and too loud instruments can make congregational singing challenging and focus the attention on performance.
- f. Competition should be directed at the standard of excellence, not prestige. Choral competitions can foster creativity and help to safeguard musical heritage like in Nigeria through the Forum for the Inculturation of Liturgical Music. But competitions should not give rise to a culture in which choirs try to earn applause or prestige for the sake of the liturgical service.

References

Agbo, B. N. (2017). Inculturation of liturgical music in the Roman Catholic Church of Igbo Land: A compositional study. *Journal of Global Catholicism*, 1(2), 6–27. <https://doi.org/10.32436/2475-6423.1013>.

Agbo, B. N., & Okeke, B. (2025). The Vatican II soundscapes: Post-conciliar inculturation in Nigerian liturgical music and the Jude Nnam phenomenon. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 33(4), 164–177. <https://doi.org/10.62250/nsuk.2025.33.4.164-177>.

Acholonu, V. C. (2025). *Liturgical inculturation among Igbo Christians of Nigeria: A historical evaluation in the light of ecclesial liturgical norms and principles of liturgical inculturation*. Verlag Dr. Kovač.

Carter-Enyi, Q., & Carter-Enyi, A. (2019). Thirteen ways to “Hail, Mary”: A case study of the 2013 Forum for the Inculturation of Liturgical Music in Nigeria. *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1118>.

Echema, A. N. (2026). *Echoes of Faith: Restoring the Timeless Voice of Catholic Worship*. A keynote address on the 16th National Conference of the National Catholic Music Council of Nigeria (NACAMCON) Owerri. Rex Digital Press.

Francis. (2017, March 4). *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the International Conference on Sacred Music*. The Holy See.

Francis. (2018, November 24). *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants of the Third International Meeting of Choirs*. The Holy See/Vatican News.

Francis. (2019, September 28). *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia*. Vatican News.

Francis. (2024, June 8). *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the IV International Meeting of Choirs*. The Holy See.

General Instruction of the Roman Missal. (2003). *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. The Holy See.

John Paul II (1995). Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *The Church in Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa.

Lazzarini, P. (2016), “The Role of the Choir in the Celebration of the Mass: Still Neglected and Misunderstood!” in

<https://www.sierraleone.xaverians.org/missionary-experience/186-the-role-of-the-choir-in-the-celebration-of-the-mass-still-neglected-and-misunderstood>, accessed 11 March, 2025.

Leo XIV (2025), "Pope Leo: Choirs are called to be a sign of the Church's Unity" in <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-11/pope-leo-xiv-jubilee-choirs-mass-ecclesial-unity-synodality.html>, accessed 25 November, 2025

Lubov, D. (2024), "Pope to young Choir Members: Talk to the Lord in Prayer" in <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-06/pope-francis-welcomes-iv-international-meeting-of-choirs.html>, accessed 23 March, 2025.

Orakwe, J. T. (2025). The place and proper use of musical instruments in the liturgy. *Boston Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.63942/brjssh.v5.i2.p49.46974>.

Orakwe, J. T. (2022). The ministerial role of choirs in the liturgy. *Awka Journal of Research in Music and the Arts*.

Onwuka, U. (2004). *The Choir: A Glorious and Permanent Ministry*, Onitsha: West and Solomon Publishing Coy. Ltd.

Rahner K. (1979). Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II. *Theological Studies*, 40, 4 (December 1979), 718-724.

Sacred Congregation of Rites. (1967). *Musicam Sacram: Instruction on music in the liturgy*. The Holy See.

Second Vatican Council. (1963). *Sacrosanctum Concilium: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. The Holy See.

Shebbeare, W. (1908). Choir. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03693b.htm>, accessed 30 April, 2025.

Watkins D. (2018). Pope to Choirs: 'Help community sing, don't replace its voice. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-11/pope-francis-3rd-choirs-meeting-singing.html>, accessed 20 February, 2025.

Weman, H. (1960). *African Music and the Church in Africa*, Uppsala Appelbergs Boktry Ckeriab.