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Music, Catholic Liturgy and the Nigerian Context: An Exposé

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Abstract

It was the opinion of the Greeks that music as an art should go beyond a mere pastime venture. In addition to making it an indispensable foundation of civilization and morality, they also reckoned it as a source of peace and order for the soul, health and wellbeing. Plato's definition of music gives a clearer image of this picture. He presents music as "an art so ordering sound as to reach the soul, inspiring a love of virtue". This work assesses the nature and forms of music used for worship in the Catholic worshipping communities in Nigeria. While doing this, it makes a conscious effort at identifying the level of the success (or otherwise) music has attained as a devotional tool. The work employs exposition as the instrument of the analysis and explanation of the subject before us. In a nutshell, it unravels the state of Catholic liturgical music in Nigeria. Most importantly, it makes recourse to Church documents to establish the position of the Church in this whole endeavour. It establishes that liturgical music must comply with specific requirements. Finally, the study recommends that the Catholic Church

in Nigeria should as much as possible invest into having a standardized quality of music in the liturgy.

Keywords: Music, Liturgy, Nigerian Context, Catholic, Worship

Introduction

General observation clearly indicates that so many things go by the name, music in the Nigerian society today. The explanation of the nature of what we find prevalent in Nigeria, in the name of music is not far from the noise that represents the strife and strain, which the society unfortunately now has to grapple with. This no doubt

constitutes some form of opposing forces that now contend for the mastery of the soul. The justification of the use of music in worship points to the fact of its perception as an art that can rightly be seen not just like any other, but a prominent devotional tool. The Greeks' understanding of music had it that, with music, the soul was to be lifted into a sphere of idealistic contemplation, there to find peace with herself and with the outer world, and so to rise to greater power of action. Dom Andre Mocquereau better presents this view in the following words:

The sweet melody of these canticles prepares the powers of the soul for the immediate celebration of the holy mysteries, and by the unison of those divine songs, brings the soul into subjection to God, making it to be at one with itself and with its fellows, as in some single and concordant choir of things divine: peace, strength, purity, love: in very truth, the music of the Christian Church soars to greater heights than that of the ancients (Mocquereau, 2001).

One question we cannot therefore help but ask is; to what extent do the different forms of music we find in the different places of worship truly aid the realization of the picture painted above? How correct will it be to say that these forms of music that currently pervade some worship

communities in Nigeria can be rightly seen as being truly devotional in nature? It is believed that the only constant thing is change. Evident in the world order also is this very fact. Music largely deals with the concept of taste; and with the change in the world it can be argued, there emerges a corresponding shift in matters of taste. Is the musical life of the liturgy also susceptible to this change? The nature of the popular music that seems to have captured the fancy of the majority, and has even found its way into the Nigerian worship settings is such that raises more questions than it is ready to provide answers to. To what extent do these aid contemplation? With this music, how realizable is the practice of reflection?

Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher would have the best music to be that, which perfectly expresses the soul's good qualities. In his words,

the muses have given us harmony whose movements accord with those of the soul, but rather to enable us thereby to order the ill-regulated motions of the soul, even as rhythm is given us to reform our manners, which in most men are so wanting in balance and grace (Mocquereau

2001) .

Music therefore becomes a tool, which is at the service of religion in the work of character building and moral formation. This work is set out to expose the adulterations that are gradually infiltrating the music used in different areas of worship, in the name of change and modernism. It also intends to point out the gradual undermining of the necessity of reflection and contemplation as aids to constant self-evaluation and assessment.

Music and Worship

One of the generally perceived views relating to the role of music in human history lies with that, which has to do with man's relationship and interaction with the supernatural realm. This can be explained by the belief that the recognition of the existence of a supreme being to

whom man owes a form of allegiance is as old as man himself. And this cuts across every race and culture. The mystery of existence obviously points to the helplessness of man and his necessary need of a higher and metaphysical kind of assistance in the fulfilment of his destiny. The situation presented here gives rise to the notion of worship. Cunningham (2009) explains worship as:

- a. Expression of one's devotion and allegiance pledged to God (deity).
- b. Religious rituals which salute, revere or praise a deity.
- c. Human response to the perceived presence of the divine.

From earliest times, writes Donald Jay Grout (Grout 2014), music was an inseparable part of religious ceremonies. The lyre, he continues, was a characteristic instrument in the cult of Apollo, while in that of Dionysius, it was the aulos. From all indications, this does not pertain to the West alone; music is also seen as an important (if not indispensable) part of religious worship in the African society. Though African musicologists emphasized the idea of communalism and social bonding as those things which music in most African societies tend to achieve, when religious ceremonies are involved, it can be argued that it goes beyond these. Music is among the many and great gifts of nature with which God, in whom is the harmony of the most perfect concord and the most perfect order, has enriched men, whom He has created in His image and likeness (Cf. Gen. 1.26). This position is in agreement with that of Augustine who identified God as the originator of music.

Going further, he states that music contributes to spiritual joy and the delight of the soul. Hence he believes that no one will be astonished that always and everywhere, even among pagan peoples, sacred song and the art of music have been used to ornament and decorate religious ceremonies (Pius XII, 1955).

It may be argued that the power to take man beyond the sphere of the natural world is not an exclusive reserve of music; that it is

something that belongs to the arts. In line with this, Benofy (2013) quotes Pope Pius XII thus “All art has as its purpose - to express in human works the infinite divine beauty”. The Pope however clarified that this applies in a stricter way to sacred music. In the same vein, she added that Music has always been essential to the worship of God — for it has the unique capacity to transport those who hear it beyond words, engaging our emotions and minds in inexpressible ways. The view stated above can be likened to the therapeutic role of music as the music therapists posit. Since prayer is seen as the raising up of the mind and heart to God, true worship is achieved when the mind makes a contact with the divine, its source and origin.

Donald DeMarco (2012) shares a similar view in his work, *Music and Silence*. Here he observed that Music, poetry, and the Liturgy offer us wonderful opportunities to be freed from material containment, and to sense another and more resplendent world. He however noted that we suffocate, spiritually, when we are enclosed in the material order. He further observed with utter dismay that our materialist world is intent on crowding out silence, and therefore, opportunities to glimpse, however fleeting, a sense of the transcendent. But he saw a form of consolation in music, which he described as our most spiritual art because its silences are best suited to permit the entrance of another world.

Features of Sacred Liturgical Music

In a document titled “Rejoice in the Lord Always” dated January 21, Bishop Sample (2013) reminded the priests, musicians, and faithful of Michigan's upper peninsula that sacred music is not a subjective matter of taste, but that it is defined by “objective principles.” Music sounds sacred when it owns, among its hearers, a deep association with sacred things and at the same time a distinction from other kinds of music heard in the secular world. Sacred music, as enforced by the Church document, *Tra le Sollecitudini* should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality (Pius X, 1903).

- I. It must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity. This is not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it.
- II. It must be true art. Otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.
- III. It must, at the same time, be universal in the sense that while every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinated in such a manner to the general characteristics of sacred music that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing them (Pius X, 1903).

This document further remarked that since modern music has risen mainly to serve profane uses, greater care must be taken with regard to it, in order that the musical compositions of modern style which are admitted in the Church may contain nothing profane, be free from reminiscences of motifs adopted in the theatres, and be not fashioned even in their external forms after the manner of profane pieces. Our attention was further drawn to the various forms of music, which of their very nature are diametrically opposed to Gregorian Chant and classic polyphony, and therefore to the most important law of all good sacred music. Besides the intrinsic structure, the rhythm and what is known as the conventionalism of these styles adapt themselves but badly to the requirements of true liturgical music.

Finally it was noted that liturgical music must indeed comply with its specific requirements: full adherence to the texts that it presents, consonance with the liturgical season and moment to which it is destined, adequate correspondence to the gestures that the rite proposes. It must be admitted that the Church clearly furnished us with what we could term a near perfect picture of an ideal liturgical music. But the question still remains; how achievable is this ideal? How many persons are even still interested in the ideal?

Sacred Music and Instrumentation

The question of whether or not, musical instruments should be made to accompany sacred music has been a question of heated debate for quite some time. Several conflicting opinions have arisen concerning this subject, within and outside Africa; from within, as well as outside the

church. We consider it necessary to take a brief look at the Gregorian chant which remains the primordial, occupies the central

place, and remains the reference point as far as Catholic sacred music is concerned. Concerning this subject, the church has this to say:

The inherent qualities of Gregorian chant are particularly in its rhythm. The more strongly metric music is, the more closely it is tied to the passage of time. The non-metric qualities of Gregorian chant leave it free from being tied down to the temporal and allow it to evoke the eternal (Mahrt, 2006).

The evocation of the eternal here accounts for the fact that Gregorian chant is rarely used for anything else; it is not even very successfully employed in concerts, despite its high artistic status. Rather, whenever it is heard, its character is unmistakable—it is sacred music, set aside for a most high purpose (Mahrt, 2006). Speaking about the sacred polyphony, which is to a great extent modelled after the Gregorian chant, Perrignon (2008) writes, “... there is another compelling reason why this music ought to be reconnected with the living liturgy. It expresses the sacredness of the liturgical action, and of the occasion. It is, by its very nature, “other worldly”. It defines sonically the difference between a sacred space or experience — that is, within a church or sanctuary — and the ordinary experience of everyday life.”

In line with these, the church document, *De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia* legislates: because of the nature, sanctity, and dignity of the sacred liturgy, the playing of any musical instrument should be as perfect as possible. It would be preferable to omit the use of instruments entirely (whether it be the organ only, or any other instrument), than to play them in a manner unbecoming of their purpose. As a general rule it is better to do something well, however modest, than to attempt something more elaborate without the proper means (Cicognani, 1958). The difference between sacred, and secular music, this document states, must be taken into consideration. Some musical instruments, such as the classic organ, are naturally appropriate for sacred music;

others, such as string instruments which are played with a bow, are easily adapted to liturgical use. But there are some instruments which, by common estimation, are so associated with secular music that they are not at all adaptable for sacred use.

Finally, the document continues, only instruments which are personally played by a performer are to be used in the sacred liturgy, not those which are played mechanically or automatically. The principal musical instrument for solemn liturgical ceremonies of the Latin Church, the document states, has been and remains

the classic pipe organ. Besides the classic organ, the harmonium or reed organ may also be used provided that its tonal quality, and volume are suitable for sacred use. As a substitute, the electronic organ may be tolerated temporarily for liturgical functions, if the means for obtaining even a small pipe organ are not available.

The musicians who play the instruments mentioned above should be sufficiently skilled in their art so that they can accompany the sacred chant or any other music, and can also play alone with appropriate skill. Indeed, since it is also often necessary to be able to improvise music suited to the various phases of the liturgical action, they should possess sufficient knowledge of, and capability in the techniques of organ playing, and of sacred music. The organ playing, whether during liturgical functions or private devotions, should be carefully adapted to the liturgical season and feast day, to the nature of the rites and exercises themselves, and to their various parts (Cicognani, 1958).

Sacred Music and Inculturation

One of the points that have constituted an issue for controversies regarding the liturgy and sacred music is that, which borders on a consideration of particular cultures and their peculiarities. Whatever the case may be, it is necessary to note that the church was not silent in this regard. Pope John Paul II in his letter on the 100th anniversary of Pope Pius X's document on music commented as follows: Song and music demanded by the liturgical reform -- it is well to emphasize -- must also

respond to the legitimate demands of adaptation and of inculturation. Yet it is clear that every innovation in this delicate area must respect special criteria, such as the search for musical expressions that answer to the necessary involvement of the entire assembly in the celebration and that avoid, at the same time, whatever concession to levity or to superficiality. On the other hand are also to be avoided, in general, those forms of "inculturation" of an elitist stripe, which introduce into the Liturgy ancient or contemporary compositions which are perhaps of artistic value, but which indulge in a most incomprehensible language. The sacred sphere of the liturgical celebration must never become a laboratory for experimentation or compositional and performance practices introduced without careful control (John Paul II, 2003).

This controversy in question has always bordered on the text (language) as well as the rhythm (and/or instrumentation). In one of his papers, Ekwueme (1975) stated that one of the resulting effects of reformation in the Christian church had

been the making of worship more relevant to the masses of professed Christians. This, he explained, has meant the employment of vernacular which will be understood by the congregation instead of a dead language comprehensible only to a few initiates. As good as this observation may sound, one cannot afford to ignore his idea of "a dead language". Here I suppose he was referring to Latin. Is Latin really a dead language?

In as much as the church permits the idea of the use of vernaculars in the liturgical celebrations, she still holds Latin in a very high esteem. According to the Congregation on the Liturgy, "the use of the Latin language with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved in the Latin rites" (Constitution, 1965). The Second Vatican Council recognizes the Gregorian chant as "the song proper to the Roman Liturgy" to which it is necessary to reserve, all things being equal, first place in sung liturgical actions celebrated in the Latin language. Saint Pius X observes how the Church has "inherited" it "from the ancient Fathers", has "guarded" it "jealously over the centuries in her liturgical

codices" and still "proposes" it "to the faithful" as her own, considering it "as the supreme model of sacred music". Gregorian chant, therefore, continues even today to be an element of unity in the Roman Liturgy.

The council however comments as follows; since "the use of vernacular may frequently be of great advantage to the people, it is for the competent ecclesial authority to decide whether, and to what extent, the vernacular language is to be used. Its decrees have to be approved by the Apostolic See. But pastors of souls were advised to take care that besides the vernacular, the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin, those parts of the ordinary of the mass, which pertain to them. As it pertains to the use of musical instruments, the council also advised that the culture and tradition of the peoples be taken into account. However she maintains that such instruments, which by common opinion and use, suitable for secular use only, are to be altogether prohibited from every liturgical celebration and from popular devotions (Cicognani, 1958).

Commenting on the use of instruments in the liturgy, Anthony Mereni (2014) has this to say: ". for drumming and dancing in the church I would really believe that there is a problem with such externally-induced trance experience." He explained that if a piece of music is composed with a drum accompaniment and notated like it is done in orchestral accompaniment, it is nice, acceptable and meaningful. We must conclude here by making some very salient observations. Music is

an art; and in it, matters of taste necessarily come in. How do we reconcile this with the ideal? By the way, who determines what becomes the ideal? On another note, music is a culture. The church has a culture of its own. Individual societies that practice the religious belief of the church also have their own cultures. In a situation where a conflict arises, which culture gives way for the other?

Liturgical Music and Singing at Mass – The Nigerian Situation

The bulk of our data came from participant observation, in the sense that

the researcher was part of the liturgical celebrations in which the singing being exposed and analysed took place. Occasional visits were made to some Catholic communities in Lagos, Enugu, Port Harcourt, Abuja, and Oyo (Ibadan), for the purpose of this research. Some of these churches include: Holy Ghost Cathedral, Enugu; St. Francis Catholic Church, Rumuokwuta, Port Harcourt; St. Patrick Catholic Church, Ibadan; Holy Cross Cathedral, Lagos; Regina Mundi Catholic Church, Mushin, Lagos; and Holy Rosary Catholic Church, Wuse II, Abuja.

We shall begin by discussing the compositions that are most commonly used at liturgical celebrations. With the legislation from the Musicam sacram of the second Vatican document, allowing the use of vernacular pieces at liturgical celebrations, it is now commonplace to hear about five or more different languages at a particular mass. The languages range from English to Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, Igala, Efik and so on. Most choirmasters give the explanation that the congregation is usually of a mixed breed (from different ethnic groups). This practice therefore is usually aimed at giving as many people as possible, a sense of belonging.

The explanation regarding the justification of singing in the people's language no doubt, sounds very reasonable. However one cannot help raising some salient questions here: if the Church really prays with one heart and mind, does the language really matter? Secondly, does the power, with which music moves the soul, lie with an understanding of the text? It is observed that liturgical singing in most Catholic churches in Nigeria is done with the use of published hymn books, leaflets, notebooks, and sometimes merely by rote. Some of the most commonly found hymnbooks are:

- I. The Westminster Hymnal (1912)
- II. The Broadman Hymnal (1940)
- III. The Baptist Hymnal (2008)
- IV. Iwe Orin Mimo L'ede Yoruba (2005)

- V. New Catholic Igbo Hymn Book (2005)
- VI. Music for the Catholic Hymn Book (2015)

VII. The Catholic Hymn Book – English (2016)

The first three on the list are well notated (staff notation), including an SATB harmony. The Iwe Orin Mimo L'Ede Yoruba is notated on staff but without a harmonised version. The New Catholic Igbo Hymn Book, as well as the Music for the Catholic Hymn Book are also notated and harmonised in the SATB fashion, though with the use of the tonic solfa. The English version of the famous Catholic hymn book is not notated. In spite of these efforts, it is observed that most of the songs being rendered within the liturgy cannot be found in any known hymn book. The choirs seem to be more comfortable with compositions (mostly recent) that are merely on leaflets with different shade of music notation. Very few of the said musical pieces have notable composers. Many of these recent compositions present us with most of these instances of ill-baked composers. Many see the ability to interpret the tonic solfa as a qualification to become a composer, with no knowledge of any compositional technique. With this situation, we have compositions of different shades being used in the liturgy.

It was observed that the promotion of the use of sacred songs written in the vernacular has meant for so many, a total neglect, even a disregard for Latin, which happens to be the unifying language of the Church. According to the constitution on the liturgy, “the use of Latin language, with due respect to particular law, is to be preserved” (Pope Pius VI, 1965). More emphatically the document further states as follows: pastors of souls should take care that besides the vernacular “the faithful may also be able to say or sing together in Latin those parts of the ordinary of the mass which pertain to them”.

This aversion for Latin often goes beyond the language, to what the Gregorian chant stands for. Here there is a total disdain for anything chant. It is sometimes termed boring and old-fashioned. Consequently even the responsorial psalms that are traditionally chanted are now very commonly composed in heavy metric tunes. The metric nature of these tunes is never the only issue, but the fact that most of the rhythms, and sometimes, tunes are from these genres of music that most times sound so alien to the liturgy; like reggae, R&B. Rock, etc.

Umezina (2010), made some observations regarding the situation of liturgical music in many of the Catholic communities in Igbo land. In his words, “many who teach choirs, select songs for worship, lead the singing, play instruments; even

some who talk about it to others are regrettably ignorant of the position of the church on liturgical music.” As stated in the early pages of this enterprise, this is what this study seeks to address. He noted with dissatisfaction that the swift changes being witnessed in liturgical music in Igbo land were really disturbing.

Another fear which he expressed concerns the priests who are meant to be custodians and the leading ministers at liturgical celebrations. According to him, “some priests care very little about music, singing and the parish choir. Some are interested only in the offertory (when they ask the choir to sing a powerfully moving gospel song)”. The place of the gospel songs in the liturgy is another point for discussion. In line with this, Fr Banjo (2017) has also noted that there have been complaints the way liturgical music was becoming too secular in nature, too noisy, too entertaining and the choice of songs not having a correlation with the liturgy of the day.

Singing lends every voice in the assembly import by releasing into the common acoustic space every person’s vibrational resonance, every person’s interiority, every person’s will and intention, all regardless of voice quality or vocal skill. And because of the manner in which sound pervades space and binds interiorities, singing becomes an avenue whereby every member of the assembly gains access to every other member, seen or unseen, near or distant. Only designated individuals perform certain liturgical ministries such as proclamation of the readings or distribution of communion, but every member of the assembly carries out the ministry of singing the rite (Harmon, 2014).

At the recommendation of the second Vatican council, “there should be choirs, or *Capellae*, or *schollae cantorum*, especially in cathedrals and other major churches, in seminaries and other houses of studies, and they should be carefully encouraged. The duty of the choir states the document, is to ensure the proper performance of the parts, which belong to it, according to the different kinds of music sung, and to encourage the active participation of the faithful in the singing (Pope Pius VI (*Musicam Sacram*), 1967). It can be deduced from the discussion so far, that singing in the Catholic liturgy is not an exclusive prerogative of the choir or the cantors; it is meant for every member of the worshipping community including the Chief Celebrant (the priest or bishop). In order to state the central role of singing in the liturgy and

its importance, Musicam Sacram (1967), states that liturgical music is given a more noble form when it is celebrated in song, with the ministers of each degree fulfilling their ministry and the people participating in it.

It must therefore be emphasised that the Catholic Church highly encourages active participation in the liturgy, especially in the area of singing. Unfortunately it is observed that in most of the worship communities visited, many of the worshippers don't seem to be interested in the singing. And where you find some that are interested, the choir does not make it easy for them, by either not making use of the hymn books or by focusing on complex pieces that are very far from being congregation-friendly. It becomes evident in cases of this nature that the choirmaster saddled with the responsibility of choosing the hymns or songs, lacks the necessary formation on the clear-cut difference between performance and worship. It must therefore be constantly noted that liturgical music in its composition, interpretation and rendition, must indeed comply with its specific requirements: full adherence to the texts that it presents, consonance with the liturgical season and moment to which it is destined, adequate correspondence to the gestures that the rite proposes.

Conclusion

It must always be borne in mind that every music, not only has its proper place but also its guiding principles. It is one thing to do music; it is another to do it well bearing in mind the required norms and standard. The quality of music used for worship is something that is not expected to be compromised. It is the duty of all concerned to make sure that mediocrity and complacency are by all means, totally eradicated. The Catholic Church hierarchy cannot afford not to show sufficient interest in making liturgical music what it needs to be, since they lead while others follow. Each local ordinary must invest into having a standardized quality of music in the church's liturgy. Nonetheless, all hands must be on deck in this task of looking inwards, going back to the roots in order to make sure that the image of music in the area of worship is restored.

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