

THE MINISTERIAL ROLE OF CHOIRS IN THE LITURGY

Jude Tooohukwu Orakwe Ph.D.

Abstract

This essay reflects on the ministerial role and relevance of choristers within the Catholic liturgy. Fact is that in the contemporary explosion of charismatic/Pentecostal spirituality and worship--which, by the way, coincides with the era of inculturation and spontaneity of worship, and also, given the gradual decline of Latin liturgy--there is the tendency within the Catholic Church--and this can be verified in other non-Catholic confessions--to pose a fundamental question regarding the functionality of the choir. Indeed, there is the feeling or temptation of thinking that the advent of Vatican II era has abolished the role of the choir such that cultivation of church choirs should now be a matter of secondary importance. The author in this study (originally presented as paper at the conference of the National Catholic Liturgical Music Council of Nigeria, 2022) seeks to interrogate some of the post Vatican II assumptions by a systematic and analytic exposition of what the Council really taught in continuity with previous magisterial positions of the Church--not what someone thought the Council said--and concludes by indicating that the exigency of the choral function remains as fresh as it was, ever since the Church conceived of the liturgical duties of the *schola cantorum*, right from the middle ages. While the conclusions of this article are based on findings from Catholic Church documents, its thesis concerning the sempiternal exigency of the choral ministry within the liturgy has much relevance for the worship of other Christian communities.

Prolegomena

The relevance of the choir within liturgical service has been a burning question in many Christian churches. It caught the attention and reflection of the Fathers of Vatican II, such that it occupied a notable locus in the Council Fathers' reflection on the liturgy. Today, it remains an important issue in the organization of church worship in the Catholic Church. In this essay, I will reflect on the ministerial role of the choir in the liturgy. I am particularly delighted to engage with this topic because an Igbo adage says that when one is ignorant of his great status, he ends up being carried atop by opponents beyond his father's compound (as though he is an inferior person). Bearing in mind that this essay was originally presented to a Conference of Nigerian Catholic choristers, I, nevertheless, expect members of church choirs - Catholic or non-Catholic - who would read this discourse would start to be proud of their status as ministers of the liturgy, holds their heads high with some bit of genuine spiritual self-esteem, and approach their ministry of sacred music with greater sense of gravity. Let me say it straight away that the service of the choir in the liturgy is not a tangential addendum or musical appendix within the sacred worship. It is a service that is so integral to the liturgy.

But how do we establish the ministeriality of the choir? Is there any Church teaching on that? The answer is Yes. But before examining the teaching of the Church on the ministerial status of choir within the liturgy, let us first examine the meaning of the term itself.

Conceptual Definitions

The term "choir" has both architectural and human definitions. In terms of architecture it refers to "that part of the church where the stalls of the clergy are. [Sometimes it] is often loosely used for the whole of the eastern arm, including the choir proper, sanctuary, retro-choir..." (Poole 1908). Another definition from New Oxford American

Dictionary (NOAD) talks about "the part of a cathedral or large church between the [high] altar and the nave, used by the choir and clergy." The architectural choir is sometimes referred to as chancel. On the other hand, the word "choir" also designates "an organized group of singers, typically one that takes part in church services or performs regularly in public" (NOAD). Now, a choir can be described as mixed if composed of male and female voices; but there could also be an all-male choir as typically seen in the Sistine chapel choir or even all boys' and all girls' choir. Shebbeare (1908) also defines a choir as "a body of singers entrusted with the musical parts of the church service, and organized and instructed for that purpose." As is evident from the above definitions, the choir is not necessarily the group that sings at Mass. There can be concert choirs that are primarily engaged in musical performances in theatres and concert halls.

The Choir as Liturgical Ministry in the Church

An original or seminal teaching on the ministerial role of the choir within the liturgy in the modern time is located in the document, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, an Instructions on Sacred Music that was issued by Pope St. Pius X, on November 22, 1903. In articles 12-14 of the document, Pope Pius X defined singers in the liturgy as the "choir of levites." In designating singers as a "levitical" choir, Pius X (1903, ¶12) was highlighting the fact that singers are indeed performing a ministerial role, for the reason of which their vocal renditions in the liturgy ought to have "the character of choral music." Indeed, precisely because of their ministerial collocation or emplacement within the liturgy, "singers in the church, even when they are laymen, are really taking the place of the ecclesiastical choir" (Pius X 1903, ¶12). It is important at this point to indicate that the use of the term "ecclesiastical choir" bears a contextual reference - or at least an allusion - to the choir of the clergy, which would usually occupy the part of the church known architecturally as the "choir." In other words, St.

Pius X (1903, ¶13) is alluding to the role of the choir as being semi-clerical. And it is exactly for this reason that he excluded women were from singing in the choir at the liturgy and suggested that their role should be taken by boys and perhaps male falsettists.¹

In furtherance of his desire of having the choir perform its role in a most worthy and dignified manner, Pius X (1903, ¶14) insisted that
only men of known piety and probity of life are to be admitted to form part of the choir of a church, and these men should by their modest and devout bearing during the liturgical functions show that they are worthy of the holy office they exercise.

We may define this as pious spiritual or internal disposition that should be a prerequisite for participating in the choral function. But the Pope goes further to indicate some criteria for external decorum: "It will also be fitting that singers while singing in church wear the ecclesiastical habit and surplice, and that they be hidden behind gratings when the choir is excessively open to the public gaze" (Pius X 1903, ¶14).

Now, we know that presently the Church values the contribution of women in the making of church choirs. But apart from the changing role of women in the constitution of church choirs, everything else that we see in the above cited papal document, including the pope's emphasis on appropriate liturgical vesting, has lost none of its validity, even if there would be need for some form of adaptation in the application of the instructions in the present-day circumstances. Indeed, it is intriguing and would be interesting to point out that in Nigeria of today, the instruction of wearing ecclesiastical habit and surplice is most punctiliously observed mainly by non-Catholic choirs, especially in the

¹ Falsettists sing with what in Nigerian cantorial parlance is defined as head-voice.

Anglican church. But suffice it to say that all the above provisions from Pope X were ways of accentuating the specifically ministerial function of the choir within the liturgy. Choristers are not just out there in the choir stand to lead the congregation in singing one cheap tune or the other. It would, therefore, be inappropriate to reductively assign them to the role of intoning songs for the congregation and, worse still, placing them under obligation of singing musical pieces that are "liked" by this or that priest and/or the people, even when these pieces have no liturgical relevance.

Next in recognizing the ministry of the choir in the liturgy was Pope Pius XI. Twenty-five years after *Tra le sollecitudini*, precisely on the 20th of December, 1928, he issued the document, *Divini Cultus*, On Divine Worship, in which he expressly recommends "the formation of choirs," acknowledging that they were formerly "established in the basilicas and greater churches especially for the singing of polyphonic music," sacred polyphony itself being "rightly held second only to Gregorian chant." Pius XI (1928) therefore instructed that choirs be established "in churches where the scale on which the liturgy is carried out demands a greater number and a more careful selection of singers" such that choral music may flourish anew in those churches as they did in the 14th to 16th centuries, that is, the renaissance period. More importantly, he earnestly demanded that "choir-schools for boys should be established not only for greater churches and cathedrals, but also for smaller parish churches" and that "the boys should be taught by the choirmaster to sing properly..." (Pius XI 1928)²

Of course, there is no gainsaying that the era of having choir-schools for training only boys as choristers has passed. Although this tradition is still upheld in some famous and historic European cathedrals, yet it

² Pope Pius XII also made similar demand in his Encyclical, *Musicae sacrae disciplina*, ¶73.

is definitely clear that such choir school as Pius XI intended can and should also include girls. Indeed, in a latter instruction, *Musicae sacrae disciplina* by Pope Pius XII (1958), the possibility was foreseen of allowing "a group of men and women or girls, located in place outside the sanctuary... [to] sing the liturgical texts at Solemn Mass..." One of the recent happy incidences in Onitsha is the foundation of parish-based music academies, dedicated to the formation of boys and girls from very early age. It is important and necessary that dioceses in Nigeria explore ways of initiating and sustaining such music academies and even try as much as possible to have a version of it in all parishes. I strongly believe that formation of young boys and girls in singing and even playing of modern musical instruments will have far-reaching positive effects on their spiritual and human development. I am personally struck by Pius XI's rather uncanny argument that liturgy and music are "matters closely associated with Christian doctrine" (1928).

Vatican II and Post-Vatican II on the Liturgical Role of Choirs

According to the Instruction on Sacred Music, *Musicam Sacram*, issued by the Sacred Congregation of Rites [S.C.R.] on March 5, 1967, the role of the choir within the liturgy "has become something of yet greater importance and weight by reason of the norms of the Council concerning the liturgical renewal" (¶19). The liturgical function of the choir according to *Musicam sacram* 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" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶19). In saying this, the document assigns to the choir a double-pronged function in the liturgy, which is an appropriate execution of those parts of the liturgy that belongs strictly to the ministerial function of the choir itself and then fostering the general singing participation of the worshippers. On the one hand, the choir - obviously - should not monopolize the singing. Indeed, on the one hand, the Church exhorts that "directors of... choirs

and... rectors of the churches should take care that the people always associate themselves with the singing by performing at least the easier sections of those parts which belong to them" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶20). On a similar note, the Church affirms rather strongly that "the usage of entrusting to the choir alone the entire singing of the whole Proper and of the whole Ordinary, to the complete exclusion of the people's participation in the singing, is to be deprecated" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶16c). On the other hand, however, the Church is neither saying that the choir is redundant nor that they must only serve to lead in purely congregational singing. Rather, she recognizes the importance of great and large choirs, which, in the course of history, have been very instrumental in fostering in the Church "a musical heritage of inestimable value" and therefore demands that such choirs be employed in "sacred celebrations of a more elaborate kind" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶20).

In recognition of the weight and importance of the liturgical function of the choir, *Musicam sacram* gives the express instruction that "there should be choirs, or *capellae*, or *scholae cantorum*, especially in cathedrals and other major churches, in seminaries and religious houses of studies, and they should be carefully encouraged" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶19). The document further insists that "it would also be desirable for similar choirs to be set up in smaller churches" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶19). The implication of the foregoing is that the existence of the choir for liturgical service in each of our parishes and institutions is a necessity. It is not an optional extra. The choir has a unique relevance. It has no replacement. Indeed, with regard to the relevance of the choir, Pope St. John Paul II asserted in his Chirograph on Sacred Music: "the *schola cantorum's* [i.e. the choir's] task has not disappeared: indeed, it plays a role of guidance and support in the assembly and, at certain moments in the Liturgy, has a specific role of its own" (John Paul II 2003, ¶8).

In the contemporary charismatic/Pentecostal age, there is a real temptation to set the choir aside and employ the services of the gospel band, *nkwa* group or even the marching band, especially given that the latter (non-choral options) may be relatively cheaper, easier and quicker to come by. That would be flatly wrong because the highly percussive (western or local) gospel band musicians are more adapted to and usually given to performance of popular religious music but not liturgical music. Although one may argue that religious music/singing could be regarded as a form of sacred music, the fact remains that it is - pure and simple - NOT an equivalent of liturgical music (which is usually supplied only by a well-formed choir). Therefore, no amount of resources employed to ensure the establishment and fostering of liturgically functional choirs in parishes would be too much.

A next important concern of *Musicam sacram* is the formation of the members of the choirs themselves. In paragraph 24, we read thus:

Besides musical formation, suitable liturgical and spiritual formation must also be given to the members of the choir, in such a way that the proper performance of their liturgical role will not only enhance the beauty of the celebration and be an excellent example for the faithful, but will bring spiritual benefit to the choir-members themselves (S.C.R. 1967).

I am thinking that we really need to do more in terms of training church singers. Some of our choir members really do not know their left from their right. They have a serious ignorance of catechetical issues, hence their inability to do a proper placement of appropriate music within the liturgy. Some do not know the difference between liturgical and religious music. I believe it is only by creating the time and enabling environment and then adequately exposing choir members and their directors to basic Church theology and doctrines, shall we be able to achieve a required liturgical and spiritual formation.

But there remains the necessity of musical formation. I think it is time we begin to teach choristers in our local Church the principles of music in a bit more scientific way. That is why I would recommend that any diocese that does not have a music institute or academy should plan to have one - ASAP (as soon as possible). Such institute would serve to train future music directors and choirmasters by exposing them to the basic theory of music including principles of composition, keyboard playing and singing of *Gregorian* chant. Similarly, dioceses should set up a system by which choirmasters and music directors can get to update their knowledge through meeting with the diocesan chairman of the Liturgical Music Commission once or twice every year and also through annual seminars.

However, notice that the document we are examining chooses not talk about training, that is, musical training, liturgical training, or spiritual training. It speaks about formation to stress the human dimension of the activities involved. Dogs can and have been trained. Wild animals can be tamed; call it training if you like. Even machines can be trained - in the present age of artificial intelligence and deep learning - by way of programming. But only human beings endowed with a functional intellect can be formed. When members of the choir are diligently and integrally formed and "trained to perform their functions in a correct and orderly manner," they become "deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy" and are able "to discharge their office [or ministry] with the sincere piety and decorum demanded by so exalted a ministry and rightly expected of them by God's people" (Vatican II 1963, ¶29). In other words, through such formation, transformation will occur in the lives of the choir members thus educated: transformation of their musical knowledge, transformation of their spiritual life, as well as their growth in sound theological appreciation of the liturgy.

The Ministerial Relevance of the Choir in Today's Church

From the foregoing, it is clear that the choir has much liturgical relevance and it would be quite unfortunate to try to diminish or explain away this functionality. The Church defines the role of the choir as being "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" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶19). Thus, the ministerial relevance of the choir is primarily seen in two different but related roles assigned to the choir, namely: proper execution of parts belonging to the choir itself and then fostering the participation of the worshippers. It is liturgically unwise to create a mix-up between these two distinct but related choral functions or to deny that any such distinction exists.

The choir--in the first place --serves to ensure "the proper performance of the parts which belong to it." In other words, there are parts of the liturgy that specifically belong or should belong only to the choir. Notice that the Church speaks first of the parts of the liturgy belonging specifically to the choir as a way of emphasizing the truly ministerial function of the choir. In performing this ministerial duty, the choir, although it "is itself part of the community... sings for it in the sense of legitimately representing it or standing in for it" (Ratzinger 1997, p. 139 in Harnoncourt 1991, p. 17). Hehn, a professional music director, has some useful insights concerning this important aspect of the choral function:

There's lots of great music that needs to be sung that just cannot reasonably be done by a congregation. Whether it's too complex to be done by untrained musicians, or just too difficult to be done without extensive rehearsal, there's a lot of music that cannot or should not be done by a congregation. ... There are some texts set to challenging music that congregations need to hear, whether it's because it is comforting in times of

crises, praising in times of joy, or inspiring in times of apathy. By spending the time and effort to rehearse each week, the choir provides a great service to the congregation by opening up the amount of literature the congregation can be exposed to. Used appropriately, this has significant theological and musical implications, broadening the congregation's experience of the divine (2016).

By way of elucidating Hehn's statement concerning the congregation's experience of the divine, it would also be quite germane to invoke the theological reasoning of Ratzinger who indicates thus:

Through its [the choir's] singing everyone can be led into the great liturgy of the communion of saints and thus into that kind of praying which pulls our hearts upwards and lets us join, above and beyond all earthly realizations, the heavenly Jerusalem (Ratzinger 1997, p. 140).

It would therefore be very wrong to jettison this specifically "ministering" aspect of the choral function as a way of making the congregation sing everything in the liturgy that can possibly be sung. Indeed, the crux of the matter is that there are certain musical pieces the congregation has the right to hear—needs to hear and should listen to—sung only by the choir playing the vicarious role of expressing the deepest emotions in the hearts of the worshippers, whether joyful, painful or sorrowful, in a specialized and deeper ways the congregations just cannot. It would amount to aesthetic injustice to deprive worshippers of the opportunity of experiencing such intensely aesthetic-spiritual moments that come from listening to choral renditions that require higher artistic skills. Therefore, it is precisely incorrect to quench the performance of beautiful and sacred choral works in the liturgy in order to adopt cheap utility music or "songs, easy melodies, catchy tunes," (Ratzinger & Messori 1985, p. 128)--something

Ratzinger defines as setting the Church on the highway of uselessness! (Ratzinger n.d. p. 109 in Ratzinger & Messori 1985, p. 12)--as a way of arriving at or achieving an exaggerated and grotesque form of active liturgical participation that is in reality a form of liturgical hyper-activism.

Flowing from the above-mentioned function is the relevance of the choir as a group that adds the value of beauty to the liturgy. On this, Hehn (2016) argues that it is necessary that when the choir sings, it should "sing beautifully, because it touches people's souls." Apparently for him, the choir has every good reason to "work so hard to create a beautiful music together" so that it "can glorify God and help people experience a holy moment." In another essay, I have argued that "the demand for a high artistic quality of sacred music serves as a perfect guarantee of the beauty of the liturgy" (Orakwe 2019, p. 9). In this way, the liturgical

prayer is expressed in a more attractive way... minds are more easily raised to heavenly things by the beauty of the sacred rites, and the whole celebration more clearly prefigures that heavenly liturgy which is enacted in the holy city of Jerusalem (S.C.R. 1967, ¶15).

Now, there is the temptation to regard beauty as something that is accidental or incidental to liturgical worship. Quite the contrary! For Tveit (2017, p. 17), given the captivating character of beauty itself, it is incorrect to "...think of the beauty of sacred music merely as a means to an end. The implementation of beautiful sacred music in parishes is a good for its own sake." And this is because "beauty can be a way in for people, a way for them to come to faith. For this reason, beautiful liturgy is a *sine qua non* of the New Evangelization." In consequence, the role of the choir with regard to furnishing sacred worship with beauty is one that cannot be shied away from: "Beauty in sacred liturgy and sacred music is... not irrelevant to parish life" (Tveit 2017, p. 17).

But the function of the choir inexorably includes ensuring and leading the congregational singing. This must be understood in the sense that liturgical singing in general is meant to be an instrument of edification of the worshippers. This happens when "the faithful join their mind to what they pronounce or hear, and [thereby] cooperate with heavenly grace" (S.C.R. 1967, ¶15[b]). Hehn (2016) goes as far as saying that "when we take words and put them to music, it becomes part of who we are. Therefore, it becomes imperative that we put as much of the Word into the bodies of the congregation as possible." In other words, the congregation tends to listen--perhaps--more contemplatively to the words when it sings these words with the choir. Hehn (2016) therefore argues further: "if the congregation can sing it but we don't let them, we miss an opportunity to transform people's life in the most direct way possible."

The importance of the congregational singing is seen in the fact that what is sung—especially the liturgical chants—has catechetical value inasmuch as these songs and chants of the church serve to illuminate the doctrines of the church itself in a most pleasant way. In line with this, St. Augustine exclaimed in reference to the hymns of St. Ambrose: "How I wept, deeply moved by Your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through Your Church! ... A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face — tears that did me good" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1157). No one would doubt that this unique experience possibly played great role in the definitive conversion of St. Augustine to Christianity. Along the same line, the Church teaches that when she "prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God, so that they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive His grace" (Vatican II 1963, ¶33). Definitely, much of this would be lost if the choir would monopolize the singing.

Beyond the above well-known liturgical functions of the choir, we can further point to the ministry of the choir as a faith group. The principal issue here is the capacity of choristers to minister unto themselves, unto each other, whether in or out of the liturgical context. Churches—Catholic or even non-Catholic—have always felt the need of having smaller forums in which members of their congregations are formed in Christian faith and ministry. In some circles, there is talk of small or basic Christian communities. In the Catholic enclave, the reference is usually to lay apostolate groups which can be defined as

associations established for carrying on the apostolate³ in common. [These associations] sustain their members, form them for the apostolate, and rightly organize and regulate their apostolic work so that much better results can be expected than if each member were to act on his own (Vatican II 1965, ¶18).

The church choir is one of such associations where members are trained to live like brothers and sisters, serving God with all their hearts and also being of loving service to one another. Hehn (2016), already cited above, describes the rapport that ought to obtain within a choir in these glowing terms:

I imagine... choral groups taking care of each other or holding someone up in a time of need. When we sing together, a bond is created that unites us unlike any other activity. In a church setting, this function can be intentionally formed and nurtured. Because we meet together once a week to do work for the glory of God and benefit of neighbor, taking care of each other is no longer an option, it's a responsibility.

³ The word is synonymous with serving in the church or engaging in any of the Church's ministries.

Pastors of souls would therefore do well to see the formation and nurturing of choirs in their parishes as a wonderful opportunity for the Christian formation of parishioners in the life of Christian discipleship and service to the entire Christian community—by way of promotion of the beauty of the sacred liturgy through singing.

Another important role of the choir that very often is swept under the carpet, sometimes in the guise of humility or being modest is the ministry of healing exercised by choristers as they sing in the liturgy. Liturgical spirituality apart, fact is that music has and can have a chilling effect on a troubled soul and a soothing effect on the sick. This is verifiable, scientifically speaking. Outlining the importance of music for health, Kemper and Danhauer (2005, p. 282) give the following indications:

Music is widely used to enhance well-being, reduce stress, and distract patients from unpleasant symptoms. Although there are wide variations in individual preferences, music appears to exert direct physiologic effects through the autonomic nervous system. It also has indirect effects by modifying caregiver behavior. Music effectively reduces anxiety and improves mood for medical and surgical patients, for patients in intensive care units and patients undergoing procedures, and for children as well as adults. Music is a low-cost intervention that often reduces surgical, procedural, acute, and chronic pain. Music also improves the quality of life for patients receiving palliative care, enhancing a sense of comfort and relaxation.

On a practical note, the author conducted some fieldwork interviews in 2010 concerning the therapeutic effects of choral singing. It was with a church choir in Bloomington Indiana during his years as a student of Indiana University. The result was revealing. One of the respondents indicated that the music performance of their choir often fulfills the role of upliftment in moments of depression. Another indicated that a

member of the choir at a time had cancer but her singing in the choir every Sunday was for her a source of considerable emotional support in her pains:

She had cancer and she had chemotherapy and she was so sick with the chemotherapy but every week she came to church and she sang in the choir with a smile on her face and she said that this gets her from one day to the next with her treatment for her cancer and she is cured (Interview with Nancy Allerhand).

The lady being referred to equally told the author emphatically that she has sometimes received feedbacks concerning her singing having healing or therapeutic effects on some worshippers.

As already indicated above, the therapeutic force of music is a well-known in scientific circles. The insight of health science on this matter is quite relevant:

With regard to direct physiologic effects, in animals, music changes neuronal activity with entrainment to musical rhythms in the lateral temporal lobe and in cortical areas devoted to movement. Steady rhythms entrain respiratory patterns. Listening to classical music increases heart rate variability, a measure of cardiac autonomic balance (in which increased levels reflect less stress and greater resilience) (Kemper & Danhauer 2005, p. 282)

With the above scientific evidence, I think it is important I inform you, dear choristers: you never know the number of those you are giving healing every Sunday when you sing at the liturgy. Maybe you will come to know on the last day. Besides, you never know the amount of health tonic you are ministering or administering to yourselves and others by simply belonging to and singing in the choir. You save so many people from health challenges by simply continuing to remain in the choir.

Epilogue

In the preceding lines, I have striven to put forward the argument—to wit—that choral singing, far from being an incidental invention of Christian liturgy, is a ministry that has an important emplacement within the liturgy. Choristers are properly speaking liturgical ministers in the same way that other functionaries in the liturgy—the priest, deacon, altar servers, and lectors—are although the various liturgical ministries are hierarchically ordered. The liturgical function of the choir has an indispensability all its own, given its apposite collocation in the liturgy correctly understood—primarily—as “the work of God” and then, as “service in the name of [and] on behalf of the people.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1069-70; See Ratzinger 1997, p. 133). From the exposition above, I hope to have succeeded to demonstrate that the choir is still absolutely necessary and has a fundamental relevance in the context of Vatican II liturgical reform and actual worship praxis. Consequently, the idea that the dispositions of Vatican II liturgical reform have rendered the function of the choir superfluous—given the “the exaggerated and... completely unrealistic concept of congregation” which leads to the erroneous conclusion that “only the priest and congregation can be acknowledged as the legitimate singers of liturgical hymns” (Ratzinger 1997, p. 139)—is precisely false and lacks historical foundation or documentary proof.

It therefore becomes clear that diminishing or deemphasizing the ministerial role of the choir within the liturgy is a direct attempt at subjecting the liturgy to a subtle strangulation. In fact, that would amount to subjecting Christian worship to the dictatorship of some unjustifiable religious or liturgical ideology—one such ideology being defined by Cardinal Ratzinger as “primitive actionism” and the other as “prosaic pedagogical rationalism” (Ratzinger 1997, p. 139). This would often lead to the liturgy becoming something we craft for ourselves in

accordance with our personal whims and ideological preferences. In that case, the liturgy loses its status as something given.

The conviction of "primitive actionism," namely, that every participant in the liturgy must be active and alive with some form of external activity at all times, subjects the liturgy to a subtle spirit of anthropocentric showmanship—implying that the efficacy of the liturgy depends on the amount of external activity that the worshipping community engages in. This conviction is laden with theological flaw inasmuch as the liturgy—and indeed every prayer—constitutes an instantiation of the work of God (*opus Dei*). Besides, such attitude is contrary to the stipulation of Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that "each person, minister, or layman who has an office to perform... carry out all and **only** those parts which pertain to his office by nature of the rite and the norms of the liturgy" (Vatican II 1963, ¶28).⁴ Now, the choir has unique ministerial role that is both crucial and non-substitutable within the liturgy.

Finally, the idea that the contemporary liturgy is and must always be an arena for a classroom-like clarification of some catechetical points, such that every single liturgical item ought to be immediately linguistically comprehensible, is hardly realistic. This is the error of prosaic pedagogical rationalism—in Nigeria, usually directed against the choir singing either in Latin or even in English, the Nigerian lingua franca. In another essay, I sought to demonstrate that "the error here is built on a wrong conception of the liturgy as some kind of ordinary forum for exchange of information" (Orakwe 2019, p. 13). The liturgy as a concrete celebration of the paschal mystery requires more of experience than comprehension: "It is primarily meant to be apprehended, not just merely comprehended" (Orakwe 2019, p. 13).

⁴ Emphasis mine.

This 'apprehension' comes with all the senses: smell, hearing, touch, sight and taste. Thus, when the choir is singing in Latin or in English and/or does so with such level of musical skill that the ordinary faithful—as a genuinely conscious and active participant—is obliged only to listen, it is germane to remember that it is still the entire worshipping community giving quality praise to God through the ministering function of the choir. Even the absence of full linguistic intelligibility of what is sung can contribute—in some subtle way—to the positive outcome of the worship experience. Indeed, Rudolf Otto wrote—with regard to the use of liturgical Latin—about the advantage of “the only half intelligible or wholly unintelligible language of devotion, and . . . the unquestionably real enhancement of the awe of the worshiper which this produces” (Otto 1923, p. 67). It would be unjustified then to engage in a sort of liturgical leveling whereby only the easiest, simplest, cheapest and most banal forms of music are put forward in the service of the liturgy. In such circumstance, it is important to remember the wise advice of Ratzinger that a recourse to intelligibility as the only condition for liturgical effectiveness “does not really make liturgies more intelligible and more open but only poorer” (Ratzinger & Messori 1985, p. 35).

References

- Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, #1157.
<http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM>
- John Paul II, (2003). *Chirograph of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the centenary of the motu proprio "Tra le sollecitudini" on sacred music.*
- Harnoncourt, P. (1991). *Gesang und Musik im Gottesdienst. Die Messe: Ein kirchenmusikalisches Handbuch.* H. Schützeichel (Ed.). Düsseldorf.
- Hehn, B. (2016). The four functions of a choir. *American Choral Directors Association.* www.choralnet.org/2016/11/526739

- Sacred Congregation of Rites (1967). Instruction on music in the liturgy, *Musicam sacram*.
- Orakwe, J. (2019). Composing music for the liturgy: Basic requirements, *Sacred Music*, Vol. 146 (4), 6-18.
- Orakwe, J. (2009). Im Nigeria, Singen Alle Lateinisch? A critical review of the retention of spoken chanted liturgical Latin in the Nigerian local Church. *Sacred Music*, Vol. 146 (1), 9-14.
- Otto, R. (1923). *The idea of the holy*, tr. J. W. Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pius X (1903), *Motu proprio, Tra le sollecitudini*.
- Pius XI (1928), *Divini cultus*, on Divine worship.
- Pius XII (1955), Encyclical, *Musicae sacrae disciplina*, on sacred music.
- Ratzinger, J. (1997). *A new song for the Lord: Faith in Christ and liturgy today*, tr. M. M. Matesich. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Ratzinger, J. and Messori, V. (1985). *The Ratzinger's Report*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Second Vatican Council (1963). Constitution on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*.
- Second Vatican Council (1965). Decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*.
- Tveit, J. (2017). A pastoral plan for parochial music. *Sacred Music*, Vol. 144 (2), 16-22.