

PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES OF CHOIR COMPETITIONS

Umezinwa, Emmanuel C.

Introduction

We are used to having choral competitions among the people of God at different levels of the ecclesial structure. That may even be the problem, doing the same thing always without a mechanism to evaluate what it achieves. A discussion of this nature is a very fundamental appraisal of the relationship between 'what ought to be' and 'what is' in the general practice of liturgical music or sacred music. The relevance of the chosen title comes to the fore in the face of principles and objectives that can be misconceived or misconstrued and most improperly executed. When the competition is no longer healthy in the values it promotes, in the emotions it generates, in the rivalry it engineers, in the vanity it glamorizes, synergy it fails to provide in the musical life of a parish, yes in the faith it fails to deepen, then it has not only failed to serve as a sacred exercise, it may also lead to sins and ultimately away from God.

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A principle is a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning. An objective is an aim, intention, purpose, target, goal, intent, end or something aimed at or sought. A competition is an event or contest in which individuals or groups take part in order to establish superiority or supremacy in a particular area. It evokes the idea of a tournament, an encounter, a struggle or a battle. But what is the competition about?

Sacred Music Competition

It is important to understand that liturgical music competition is another way of referring to sacred music. The church has devoted so much time, teaching, writing and resources to sacred music because of its irreplaceable importance. Let us situate sacred music in the context of our local choir competitions. Sacred music is "that which being created for celebration of divine worship, is endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form". This is an official view of the church from the Sacred Congregation of Rites in its Instruction on Music and the Liturgy, *Musica Sacram*, (article 4, 1967). The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) had earlier said that the sacred music surpasses merely religious music when it is joined to the liturgical rite to become 'a necessary and integral part of the solemn liturgy' whose purpose is "the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful" (article 112). Pope Pius X's letter *Motu Proprio* on sacred music called *Tra le Sollecitudini* (1903), distinguished three characteristics of sacred music: "it must possess holiness and beauty of form; from these two qualities, a third will spontaneously arise-universality" art 2.

The *holiness* of sacred music means that it is a music set aside. It is not the everyday music. It is specially made to glorify God and sanctify the worshipping faithful. Given its nature, not every music is suitable for the worship of God. Suitability pertains to the text, the style of composition and the manner of performance or rendition. This form of sacredness goes beyond an individual's devotion; it is an objective reality.

About *beauty*, the church speaks of 'excellence of forms'. In this regard, pride of place is given to the Gregorian chant. It has a sublime simplicity and uncommon solemnity which covers a range of expressions.

Sacred music has to be *true art* according to Pope Pius "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".

The *universality* of sacred music is that it transcends borders and cultures. Despite the call of Vatican II fathers for local and indigenous content in the liturgy, these must be done with utmost creativity and the qualities of the Catholic sacred music in mind. Respect for the liturgy must be accompanied with good knowledge of sacred music.

It should be known that the liturgy has over time evolved its own stature and criteria. It is not about personal taste or choice. The erroneous sense of freedom and impudent liberalist attitude of some self-styled musicians or, worse still, church musicians, must be avoided. The liturgical music composer or even singer must not be one who has poor knowledge of the liturgy while being very knowledgeable in music. Pope John Paul II in his *Chirograph* on sacred music (2003) said, "If music - instrumental and vocal - does not possess at the same time a sense of prayer, dignity and beauty, entry into the sphere of the sacred and the religious is precluded". The truth that we all ought to serve is that certain musical forms are by their nature, unsuitable for the liturgy. The Pope again called on musicians to "make an examination of conscience so that the beauty of music and hymnody will return once again to the liturgy. It is necessary to purify worship of ugliness of style, careless forms of expression, ill-prepared music and texts, which are not worthy of the great act that is being celebrated" (February 26, 2003).

The Gregorian chant, according to Pope Pius X, is the "supreme model for sacred music" or music for the mass. The church has sustained this teaching. According to him, "the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple". This statement received a boost with the position of Pope Benedict XVI that "an authentic updating of sacred music can take place only in the lineage of the great tradition of the past, of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony.

Principles and Objectives of Choir Competition

The interest of the organizers of this seminar is for a reflection on the important exercise of diocesan competitions among parish choirs. There is no doubt that such a competition in this part of the country is common. It is an annual or bi-annual event. We understand too, that choral competition is possible among the different lay bodies of the church, the Rosary crusade, and other pious societies. However the attention now is more on the parish choir. But be it as it may, every choir competition is sustained by the abiding principles of the liturgy: glorification of God and the sanctification of the people. This can only be achieved through the immediate goal of the liturgy, the active participation of the faithful in all liturgical events. With this in mind, the diocesan liturgical music commission goes on to organize competitions to *improve liturgical singing and make choirs grow to the desired full stature that genuinely leads the worshipping community to a great musical experience of God*. What music does for us is to express what mere words cannot express. Words are often found to be inadequate before the awesome experience of God's presence and so, the human soul bursts out in songs. Certain objectives, therefore, guide the diocesan exercise of liturgical music competition. These pertain to the:

- *Time or Season for singing competition*: It is for the music commission to find out the pros and cons of having the competition every year or once in two years or any other arrangement that may be suitable especially for the singers. Such competitions involve a lot of movements, practices and rehearsals for choristers. Many of them have families and needs to attend to. It is important to remember this at every level of the arrangements.
- *Choice of Songs for the Competition*: There is need to understand that one of the key objectives of the competition is to make liturgical choirs grow. Care must be taken, therefore, that only songs that sustain this objective are chosen. Songs should not be chosen arbitrarily or so accommodate the compositions of members of the music commission. This

is banal and counter-productive. Songs that have very little or nothing to do with the liturgy should not be selected. Songs that are only complicated and lacks liturgical merit should be overlooked.

- *Own Choice Piece*: It is pertinent to say something about this. In some dioceses, texts are often taken from scripture or other liturgical sources and given to choirs to make their own compositions. It must be mentioned that some choirs and composers miss the reason for this. So, some of them go for compositions that are difficult to learn, sing and render. This is wild of the mark. The true objective of this exercise is to train choirs to understand how a liturgical song should be written. Two key elements stand out in the judgment parameters for the best own choice piece: they are simplicity and congregational friendliness. This means that it does not necessarily require the intricacies of fugal and contrapuntal forms. Again the song should be easy to follow, or catch or learn by the congregation. Songs that turn the congregation into an audience should be discouraged.
- *Songs that increase the liturgical repertoire*: Songs for competitions ought to find their way into the liturgy after the competition. Songs that cease to be heard after a competition are not healthy for the liturgical life of the diocese.
- *Areas of the Liturgy Covered*: Songs for the competition should cover all aspects of the mass (not necessarily in one competition), entrance, offertory, communion, dismissal, and the commons of mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei). Other areas include the Gregorian chants, the Psalms, hymns to the Blessed Virgin Mary and other areas of church life that the music commission may consider musically endangered.
- *Arbitration*: Those who are chosen to arbitrate for competitions of this nature must be above board and understand the holiness of their assignment. They must avoid personal and parochial interests. People who are known to have such tendency should be avoided even if their knowledge of liturgical music is impeccable. Arbitration must be fair and ought not to sow seeds of discord.

- *Choral Competition is a Holy thing:* This competition is not a do or die affair and the commission must emphasize this. Choristers should remind themselves that truth too. So, all foul plays and attempts to win at all cost by crook and sin should be abhorred and punished if discovered. The use of mercenary singers and choirmasters is offensive to the spirit of this competition.
- *High Financial Costs and Banality:* The competition must de-emphasize huge financial involvements especially in the areas of costume so as not to discourage singers and parishes that are less viable. The competition must be modest and sincere. There is no need to spend money on what is irrelevant or banal.
- *Principles:* Principles of learning like moving up from area of simplicity to areas of increasing complexity are observed. Principles of good singing, good directing, and congregational singing are usually upheld through choral competition.
- *Standard Choirs:* Diocesan music commissions should ensure, especially in a case where the same choir or choirs keep winning at the competition, that to avoid discouraging others, a higher level or category could be created for such standard choirs to do feature singing at such competitions. Such standard choirs may not need to be part of the regular competition unless they show signs of inability to remain standard choirs.
- *Festivals:* The music commission may decide to hold festivals where choirs are allowed to sing outside the confines of the liturgy. Art music is thereby encouraged and the cravings of choirs and choirmasters are equally satisfied so that the sanctity of liturgical songs is allowed to remain intact.
- *Redemption of Prizes Won:* Music commissions should endeavour to salvage or redeem prizes won by different choirs and people. It is the right thing.
- *Categories:* There is need to strengthen the different aspects of the choral enterprise. There is need to establish the best in singing, in

conducting, in Latin song, in own-choice music and other considerations they may deem fit. This will help distribute the pride of place among choirs and so, encourage them tremendously.

A Word on the Parish Choir

A Parish is a community of Christ's faithful under the responsibility of a Priest who represents the Bishop of the Diocese. A choir is a group of people who volunteer to sing together in the liturgical and devotional activities of the church. The Catholic Church is the first of all churches, founded by Jesus Christ. The word 'catholic' refers to one of the four marks of the church - it is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It means universal. The liturgy is the public worship of God by the church. It is a sacred duty which is offered to the triune God through Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Discipline is the virtue that makes people obey rules and orders. It is also a controlled situation. Discipline equally means punishment for not obeying rules. An abuse is the use of something in a way that it should not be used. It also means using or treating something so badly that one starts destroying it. A parish choir may have something in common with other choirs in the parish following the above simple definitions. Consequently, the Parish Choir will better be defined by its position and functions since it may not be the only choir in a parish.

- A parish choir sings sacred hymns at liturgical and devotional functions
- It leads the congregation of worshippers in liturgical singing.
- It is established by the church and sustained by the parish council.
- A parish choir, therefore, operates under the authority, control and supervision of the parish council.
- It abides by the instructions and directives of the Diocesan Liturgical Music Commission set up by the Diocesan Bishop.
- A parish choir must have two active representatives in the Parish Liturgy Committee.

- It belongs actively to the Association of Catholic Choirs in the Diocese at the deanery, regional and diocesan levels).
- A member must belong to that Parish (by faith or birth or residence)
- At every Mass, the Parish choir sings alleluia at the "Alleluia Verse" and Sanctus

These are stated as obtainable in Awka Diocese.

Why the Insistence on a Parish Choir?

The Parish Choir belongs to the Parish completely. It operates under the control, supervision and discipline of the Parish Council and the Diocesan Liturgy Music Commission. It is a significant part of a whole congregation. It must fulfill its special roles which are:

- i. To lead the congregation in singing
- ii. To teach hymns to the congregation

Every member may be "able to participate easily in Mass, that is to say, by sacramental participation". The holy people of God are "United under and directed by the Bishop or Priest, who should be devoutly listened to by all". This Parish Choir, because of its special position and functions cannot and dares not show disrespect for lawful authorities especially in liturgy. Other choirs may for one reason or the other grow and break up: but the parish choir maintains continuity through re-enforcement of the membership from the faithful (youth & old). Any parishioner, laity, religious or clergy, young and old is free to belong to parish choir at any time. Other choirs, within or visiting the parish do not displace by a parish choir, rather they co-operate by co-singing the liturgy. This is the proper way to encourage and sustain a committed parish choir which must endeavour to excel satisfactorily in good discipline and performance. Parish Choirs NEVER GO ON STRIKE. They never protest against the Church (Christ).

On Discipline

Good discipline enhances cohesion, consistent, positive growth and enviable achievement of goals. The opposite is decay and destruction which may attract curse rather than blessings. Discipline seems to elude some Parish choirs where some Priests "avoid or side-track them." This work is interested in choir discipline and not choral discipline and it begins with **genuine membership**. A genuine member must be a believing Catholic belonging to that Parish, by birth or residence. Every new member is recruited and registered following due process as stated in the choir constitution. A good record of membership and attendance ought to be properly kept for easy reference. Although membership is often voluntary, qualified mandatory membership is un-avoidable where the Parish Council is compelled to help recruit trainable parishioners; owing to the fewness or inadequacy of volunteers. During registration, sufficient briefing will be backed with a copy of the rules and regulations of the choir given to every new member.

Conclusion

Music serves the liturgy. It is not the other way round. The teachings of the church on music and liturgy should be borne in mind when we organize competitions for liturgical singers. If this is not understood, then everything is lost and everything becomes a collateral damage. Composers too must know that the spirit of the liturgy should supersede personal and subjective interests which may inadvertently derail our liturgical music philosophy. Commissions must therefore know this and be firm about what they promote in liturgical music and among singers. The liturgy we serve is above us because God is involved. We need to put the requirement of the church beyond our individual idiosyncrasies if we must realize the goal of both the liturgy and music.

Flannery, (ed) Sacrosanctum concillium, Constitution on the Liturgy, Vatican Council II

Umezinwa, Emmanuel C.

Department of Music

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: ec.umezinwa@unizik.edu.ng