

From Biblical Psalms to Catholic Religious Songs: Exploring the Role of Catholic Religious Music in Christian Spiritual Growth in Rwanda

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Abstract: Catholic religious music plays an important role in Christian worship and spiritual formation in Rwanda, where biblical faith is expressed through local languages, cultural values, and musical traditions. This study, entitled *From Biblical Psalms to Catholic Religious Songs: Exploring the Role of Catholic Religious Music in Christian Spiritual Growth in Rwanda*, examines the relationship between the biblical Psalms and Catholic religious songs and their contribution to Christian spiritual growth. The study asks: How does Catholic religious music contribute to prayer, faith formation, personal conversion, Christian identity, and participation in communal worship? It hypothesizes that Catholic religious music enhances Christian spiritual growth when its biblical and theological content is faithfully expressed through culturally meaningful forms. The objective is to examine this relationship and assess the role of Catholic religious music in Christian formation and evangelization. A descriptive mixed-methods design was employed among 70 undergraduate students of the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings indicate that 95.7% of respondents viewed religious music as an aid to prayer, 94.3% associated it with spiritual growth, 92.9% emphasized biblical foundations, 91.4% perceived it as effective for faith formation, and 90.0% reported increased participation in communal worship. The study concludes that Catholic religious music is a valuable instrument of Christian formation and evangelization.

Keywords: Biblical Psalms; Catholic Religious Music; Christian Spiritual Growth; Worship; Faith Formation; Evangelization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Music occupies a significant place in Christian worship because it enables believers to express faith, praise God, meditate on Scripture, and participate actively in the liturgical life of the Church. The biblical Psalms constitute one of the principal foundations of this tradition, providing language for praise, thanksgiving, lamentation, repentance, trust, and hope (Brueggemann, 2001). In Catholic worship, the Psalms remain integral to the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharistic celebration, demonstrating the enduring relationship between Scripture, prayer, and sacred song (Catholic Church, 1997). The Second Vatican Council (1963) further affirms the importance of sacred music in promoting the sanctification and active participation of the faithful. Benedict XVI (2006) likewise emphasizes the connection between the Psalms and the spiritual life of the Church. Despite this theological and liturgical foundation, however, the increasing use of Catholic religious songs raises questions about their biblical fidelity, theological depth, liturgical suitability, and contribution to genuine Christian spiritual growth. A religious song may be musically attractive and emotionally moving without necessarily communicating Scripture and Catholic teaching accurately. The central problem, therefore, is to determine whether contemporary Catholic religious music effectively preserves the biblical and theological richness of the Psalms while responding to the spiritual and pastoral needs of Christians.

The problem is particularly significant in Rwanda, where Catholic religious music has become an important component of liturgical celebrations, catechesis, prayer groups, youth ministry, and evangelization. Rwandan Christians express their faith through Kinyarwanda and through musical forms that are influenced by local cultural traditions. Music, poetry, and performance have historically played an important role in communicating values and preserving collective memory in Rwandan society (Whatley, 2019). The Church's theology of inculturation encourages the Gospel to take root within particular cultures while maintaining the integrity of Christian faith (John Paul II, 1990). Nevertheless, the interaction between biblical content, Catholic theology, local culture, and contemporary musical expression requires closer examination. There is a need to determine whether Catholic songs adequately balance cultural accessibility with doctrinal and biblical fidelity, particularly when they are used for Christian formation. Pope Francis (2013) emphasizes that evangelization requires communicating the Gospel in ways that can reach people within their concrete cultural contexts. The rationale for the present study consequently arises from the need to investigate how Catholic religious music can become both authentically Catholic and culturally

meaningful, while effectively supporting spiritual growth and evangelization in Rwanda.

This study, entitled "From Biblical Psalms to Catholic Religious Songs: Exploring the Role of Catholic Religious Music in Christian Spiritual Growth in Rwanda," addresses this problem through an empirical examination of the perceptions of 70 undergraduate students of the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). The choice of theology students is relevant because their academic formation exposes them to Scripture, Catholic doctrine, liturgy, spirituality, and Christian formation. Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) demonstrate that the Psalms provide a rich theological language through which believers interpret their relationship with God and their experiences of life. The study therefore examines students' perceptions of the spiritual value of Psalms and Catholic religious songs, their biblical and theological quality, and their contribution to prayer, faith formation, personal conversion, Christian identity, and communal worship. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) situates sacred song within the Church's broader tradition of prayer and worship, while the Second Vatican Council (1963) underscores its liturgical and formative significance. By identifying perceived strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement, the study seeks to provide a contextual basis for strengthening Catholic religious music as an instrument of Christian formation, spiritual growth, and evangelization in Rwanda.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods research design to examine the perceptions of theology students concerning the spiritual value, biblical and theological quality, and formative potential of Catholic religious music in Rwanda. The mixed-methods approach enabled the study to combine quantitative data on students' perceptions with qualitative information concerning their experiences, opinions, and suggestions. This approach was considered appropriate because the study sought not only to measure the extent to which students value Catholic religious music but also to understand how they perceive its contribution to Christian formation, spiritual growth, and evangelization.

The study was conducted among 70 undergraduate students of the Faculty of Theology at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR). The participants were selected because their theological formation provides them with relevant knowledge of Scripture, Catholic doctrine, liturgy, spirituality, and Christian formation. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions examined students' perceptions of the spiritual value of the biblical Psalms and Catholic religious songs, their biblical and theological foundations, and their contribution to prayer, faith formation, personal conversion,

Christian identity, and participation in communal worship. The open-ended questions explored the perceived strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improving Catholic religious music as an instrument of Christian formation and evangelization in Rwanda.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages. These statistics were used to present the distribution of students' responses and to identify the dominant perceptions within the study population. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically by identifying recurring ideas and organizing them into major themes related to spiritual formation, biblical and theological quality, cultural relevance, liturgical suitability, evangelization, and improvement of religious music. The quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently interpreted together to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' perceptions.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. The information collected was used exclusively for academic and research purposes. The methodology therefore provided an appropriate framework for examining how theology students understand the relationship between biblical Psalms, Catholic religious songs, and Christian spiritual growth in the Rwandan context.

3. CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN RWANDA

This study examines theology students' perceptions of the spiritual and formative value of Catholic religious music at the Catholic University of Rwanda. It considers how students assess the biblical foundations, theological quality, cultural relevance, and pastoral usefulness of Catholic songs. It also identifies perceived strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improving religious music as a means of Christian formation, evangelization, prayer, and participation in communal worship within the Rwandan Catholic context.

3.1. The Biblical and Theological Foundation of the Psalms in Christian Worship

The Book of Psalms occupies a distinctive place in biblical revelation because it is simultaneously Scripture, poetry, prayer, and worship. Comprising 150 inspired songs and prayers, the Psalter expresses the relationship between God and his people across a wide range of human experiences, including joy, suffering, trust, fear, gratitude, sin, and hope. Mays (1994) explains that the Psalms have a dual identity as both Scripture and liturgy, while Brueggemann (2001) emphasizes their capacity to articulate different stages of faith, including orientation, disorientation, and new

orientation. In Catholic theology, the Psalms are regarded as the "masterwork of prayer" in the Old Testament because they unite personal and communal prayer and continue to form the prayer of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1997, §§2585–2589). Pope Francis (2020) similarly describes them as a school in which believers learn the language of prayer. Their purpose, therefore, extends beyond artistic expression: they enable believers to respond to God through words inspired by Scripture and to interpret human existence in the light of divine revelation.

The Psalms provide a comprehensive vocabulary for Christian prayer because they encompass praise, thanksgiving, petition, lamentation, confession, and repentance. Psalms of praise proclaim God's greatness, sovereignty, holiness, mercy, and faithfulness; thanksgiving Psalms remember God's saving action and encourage believers to respond with gratitude. Mays (1994) notes that praise and prayer are fundamental to the Psalter's original liturgical function, while the Catechism emphasizes that the Psalms nourish both individual and communal prayer (CCC, 1997, §2586). Lamentation is equally important because it allows believers to bring suffering, fear, injustice, and apparent abandonment directly before God rather than excluding painful experiences from worship. Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) observe that the movement from lament and petition toward praise and thanksgiving represents an important dynamic within the Psalter. Similarly, Benedict XVI (2011) identifies supplication and praise as two closely related dimensions of Psalm prayer.

The responses of the 70 theology students at CUR further illustrate the perceived spiritual importance of these biblical functions. The descriptive results, presented below, indicate particularly strong recognition of the Psalms as resources for prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and spiritual formation.



The theological significance of the Psalms is consequently closely related to Christian spiritual growth. Their central themes include God's sovereignty, steadfast love, faithfulness, justice, mercy, creation, covenant, salvation, human dependence, repentance, and hope. Mays (1994) argues that the Psalms provide theological reflection on God, creation, humanity, and the life of faith. Through repeated meditation on these themes, believers are invited to develop trust in God and a deeper awareness of their dependence upon him. Brueggemann (2001) further shows that the Psalms give theological language to both suffering and renewed hope, making spiritual transformation possible through prayer. The Catechism teaches that the Psalms recall God's promises already fulfilled while directing believers toward their ultimate fulfillment in Christ (CCC, 1997, §2596). This Christological dimension is fundamental to Catholic worship because the Church reads and prays the Psalms in the light of Christ's Passion, Resurrection, and saving mission. Pope Francis (2024) likewise emphasizes that the Psalms remain a permanent element of Christian prayer and are integrated into the liturgical life of the Church.

In Christian worship, therefore, the Psalms function not merely as ancient religious songs but as a theological school of discipleship. They teach believers how to praise God in moments of joy, seek him during suffering, thank him for salvation, acknowledge sin, and hope in his mercy. Their movement from lament toward trust and praise can nurture perseverance and spiritual maturity (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014). The strong responses among CUR theology students—particularly the 95.7% who associated the Psalms with personal prayer and 94.3% who associated them with spiritual growth—suggest that their biblical and theological foundations remain highly relevant to contemporary Christian formation. In this perspective, Catholic religious songs inspired by the Psalms can become an important means of translating biblical prayer into accessible musical forms while preserving its theological substance.

3.2. The Development and Characteristics of Catholic Religious Music in Rwanda

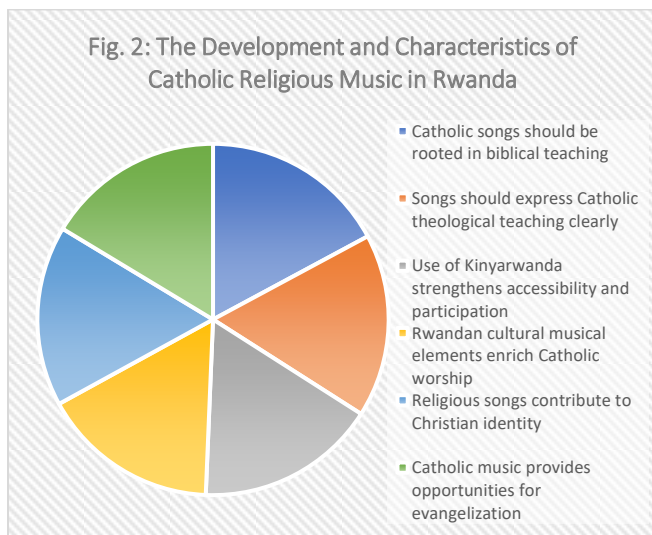
The development of Catholic religious music in Rwanda is closely connected with the history of evangelization and the gradual process of cultural adaptation within the Catholic Church. Catholic missionaries, particularly the White Fathers, established the first Catholic mission at Save in 1900, followed by other mission stations, including Zaza, Nyundo, Rwaza, Mibirizi, and Kabgayi. In the early period, Catholic worship was strongly influenced by European liturgical forms, languages, melodies, and ecclesiastical practices. However, the growth of an indigenous clergy progressively created opportunities for the incorporation of Kinyarwanda and Rwandan cultural expressions into Christian worship. Historical evidence indicates that by the

1940s music and cultural activities at the major seminaries were already contributing to a revival of Rwandan cultural expression, including the singing of Mass in Kinyarwanda, although Latin continued to be used liturgically until the reforms associated with the Second Vatican Council (Munyakayanza, 2013). The emergence of indigenous Catholic composers and choirs therefore represented an important transition from an externally introduced musical tradition toward a more locally rooted Catholic repertoire. The historical development of Catholic music in Rwanda can consequently be understood as a progressive interaction between missionary liturgical heritage, indigenous creativity, and the Church's growing concern for active participation and cultural adaptation.

A particularly significant characteristic of Rwandan Catholic religious music is its use of Kinyarwanda and its incorporation of elements associated with Rwandan musical culture. Traditional Rwandan musical expression has historically connected singing with poetry, dance, community identity, storytelling, and social celebration; the Kinyarwanda term *indirimbo* itself encompasses the idea of song or hymn (Whatley, 2019). The encounter between these traditions and Catholic worship enabled Christian messages to be communicated through forms that could be more readily understood and appropriated by local communities. This development corresponds with the broader Catholic theological principle of inculturation, according to which the Gospel is expressed through the cultural language and symbolic world of a particular people (Murwanashyaka & Carvajal Blanco, 2019). In Rwanda, the Commission Episcopale pour la Liturgie et la Musique Sacrée (CELMS) currently has responsibility for promoting liturgical music in harmony with local culture while maintaining the norms of Roman Catholic worship. Consequently, Rwandan Catholic songs frequently combine Kinyarwanda texts, accessible melodies, responsorial structures, rhythmic patterns, choral performance, and forms of communal participation. The continuing development of digital repositories also demonstrates the richness of this repertoire: a contemporary Rwandan Catholic sacred-music archive reports 908 songs, 154 composers, 7 publishers, and 10 editions.

The perceptions of the 70 undergraduate theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda reinforce the importance of biblical and cultural foundations in this musical development. The following descriptive results summarize selected perceptions relevant to the characteristics of Catholic religious music:

Fig. 2: The Development and Characteristics of Catholic Religious Music in Rwanda



These results correspond with the broader characteristics of contemporary Catholic religious music in Rwanda. The repertoire encompasses Eucharistic and Mass songs, Marian hymns, songs of praise and thanksgiving, penitential chants, songs associated with the liturgical seasons, Eucharistic adoration, funeral and memorial songs, devotional music, and songs intended for evangelization and Christian formation. Historical examples include Kinyarwanda Mass texts such as *Tubabarire Nyagasani*, *Imana nisingizwe mu ijuru*, *Ndemera ko Imana ari imwe*, *Nyir'ubutagatifu*, and *Ntama w'Imana*, which were associated with the development of Kinyarwanda Eucharistic celebration. Historical documentation also identifies *Mariya Nyina wa Yezu* as a song performed at Kabgayi as early as 1938. Contemporary collections continue this tradition while expanding the repertoire for liturgical and devotional contexts, as illustrated by the *Ni Muzima* collection published by the Emmanuel Community in Rwanda.

The major themes of Catholic religious songs in Rwanda consequently include praise of God, thanksgiving, repentance, divine mercy, the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary, Christ's Passion and Resurrection, faith, hope, love, discipleship, Christian community, and evangelization. These themes connect contemporary Catholic songs with the biblical Psalms, particularly where songs employ praise, supplication, thanksgiving, lamentation, and confidence in God's mercy. At the same time, the repertoire demonstrates an ongoing tension between preserving liturgical and theological integrity and responding to changing musical tastes. Contemporary discussions within Rwanda have noted that Catholic music is adapting to modern production techniques and musical styles, while some observers argue that traditional liturgical repertoire has not always developed at the same pace as popular music. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to modernize Catholic music but to ensure that musical innovation remains compatible with Scripture, Catholic doctrine, liturgical requirements, and authentic Rwandan cultural expression. In this respect, the 90.0% of CUR respondents who associated Kinyarwanda and cultural

expression with stronger participation, together with the 91.4% who emphasized theological clarity, illustrates the importance of maintaining both cultural accessibility and theological depth.

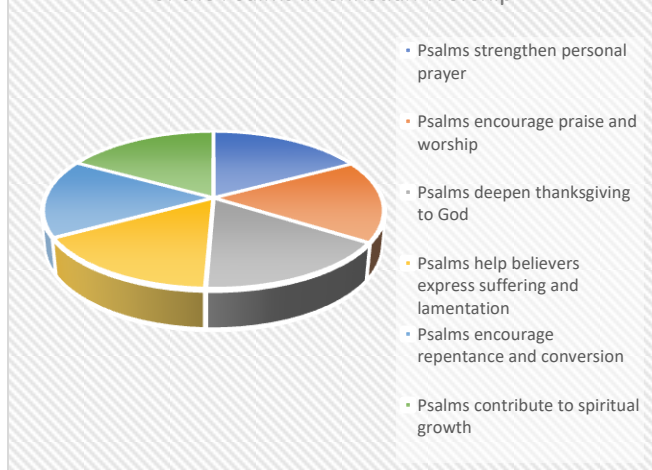
3.3. The Biblical and Theological Foundation of the Psalms in Christian Worship

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The responses of the 70 theology students at CUR further illustrate the perceived spiritual importance of these biblical functions. The descriptive results, presented below, indicate particularly strong recognition of the Psalms as resources for prayer, praise, thanksgiving, repentance, and spiritual formation.

Fig. 3: The Biblical and Theological Foundation of the Psalms in Christian Worship



The theological significance of the Psalms is consequently closely related to Christian spiritual growth. Their central themes include God's sovereignty, steadfast love, faithfulness, justice, mercy, creation, covenant, salvation, human dependence, repentance, and hope. Mays (1994) argues that the Psalms provide theological reflection on God, creation, humanity, and the life of faith. Through repeated meditation on these themes, believers are invited to develop trust in God and a deeper awareness of their dependence upon him. Brueggemann (2001) further shows that the Psalms give theological language to both suffering and renewed hope, making spiritual transformation possible through prayer. The Catechism teaches that the Psalms recall God's promises already fulfilled while directing believers toward their ultimate fulfillment in Christ (CCC, 1997, §2596). This Christological dimension is fundamental to Catholic worship because the Church reads and prays the Psalms in the light of Christ's Passion, Resurrection, and saving mission. Pope Francis (2024) likewise emphasizes that the Psalms remain a permanent element of Christian prayer and are integrated into the liturgical life of the Church.

In Christian worship, therefore, the Psalms function not merely as ancient religious songs but as a theological school of discipleship. They teach believers how to praise God in moments of joy, seek him during suffering, thank him for salvation, acknowledge sin, and hope in his mercy. Their movement from lament toward trust and praise can nurture perseverance and spiritual maturity (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014). The strong responses among CUR theology students—particularly the 95.7% who associated the Psalms with personal prayer and 94.3% who associated them with spiritual growth—suggest that their biblical and theological foundations remain highly relevant to contemporary Christian formation. In this perspective, Catholic religious songs inspired by the Psalms can become an important means of translating biblical prayer into

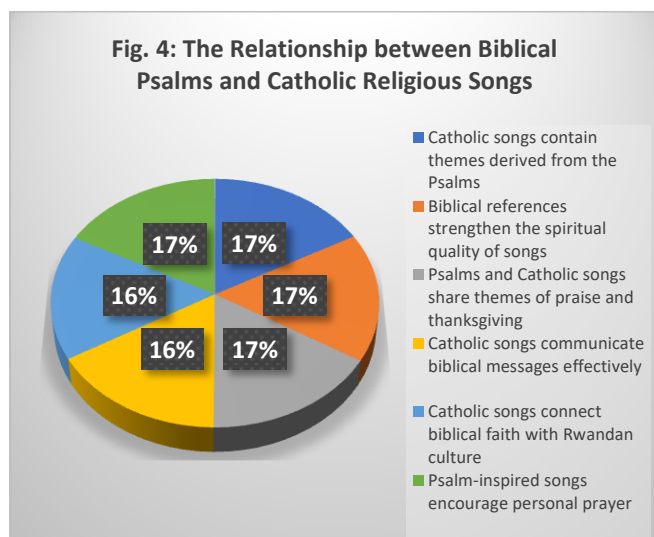
accessible musical forms while preserving its theological substance.

3.4. The Relationship between Biblical Psalms and Catholic Religious Songs

The relationship between the biblical Psalms and Catholic religious songs is fundamentally rooted in the Church's understanding of music as an expression of biblical faith and liturgical prayer. The Psalms constitute one of the principal biblical sources for Christian worship because they provide language for praise, thanksgiving, supplication, lamentation, repentance, and confidence in God. The Catholic tradition continues this biblical heritage through the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharistic liturgy, in which the Psalms remain an essential component of ecclesial prayer (Catholic Church, 1997). Catholic religious songs frequently reproduce Psalmic themes such as God's mercy, faithfulness, protection, kingship, salvation, and care for the poor. The Second Vatican Council encouraged the active participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations and recognized the importance of sacred music within worship (Second Vatican Council, 1963). Consequently, Catholic composers often transform biblical passages or Psalmic themes into songs that can be memorized, sung communally, and applied to contemporary Christian life. In this sense, Catholic religious songs do not merely imitate the literary form of the Psalms; they extend their spirituality into new linguistic, musical, and pastoral contexts. As Benedict XVI (2006) observes, the Psalms also acquire their fullest Christian meaning when interpreted in relation to Christ, whose prayer, suffering, death, and resurrection provide a central framework for Christian worship.

The connection becomes particularly visible in the theological and spiritual similarities between Psalms and Catholic religious songs. Both emphasize praise, thanksgiving, trust in God, repentance, hope, divine mercy, and dependence upon God. The Psalms frequently move from human distress toward confidence and praise, providing believers with a pattern for interpreting their experiences through faith (Brueggemann, 2001). Catholic songs similarly enable worshippers to express personal and communal experiences of God's presence. However, differences also emerge because Catholic songs may incorporate explicitly Christological, Eucharistic, Marian, sacramental, and ecclesial themes that are not always directly expressed in individual Psalms. The Catechism explains that Christian prayer reads the Psalms in the light of Christ and the mystery of salvation (Catholic Church, 1997). Thus, while the Psalms constitute an important biblical foundation, Catholic religious songs can develop their themes according to New Testament revelation and Catholic liturgical theology. The following responses from the 70 CUR theology students illustrate their perceptions of this relationship:

Fig. 4: The Relationship between Biblical Psalms and Catholic Religious Songs



These findings suggest a strong perception among the respondents that Catholic religious music remains closely connected to biblical spirituality. In particular, 66 students (94.3%) perceived Catholic songs as containing themes derived from the Psalms, while 67 (95.7%) associated Psalm-inspired songs with personal prayer. This corresponds with the understanding of sacred music as a means through which biblical texts become prayer expressed communally through melody and rhythm (Pope Francis, 2020). Moreover, 64 respondents (91.4%) identified common themes of praise and thanksgiving in Psalms and Catholic songs, indicating continuity between biblical worship and contemporary Catholic musical expression. At the same time, the fact that 63 students (90.0%) recognized a connection between biblical faith and Rwandan culture demonstrates that contextualization is central to the development of religious music in Rwanda.

The translation of biblical messages into the Rwandan cultural context occurs particularly through Kinyarwanda, indigenous musical sensibilities, communal singing, poetic expression, rhythm, and culturally recognizable images. Rwandan musical traditions historically place considerable emphasis on collective participation, oral transmission, poetry, and the relationship between music and social identity (Whatley, 2019). Catholic composers and choirs can therefore communicate biblical themes through musical forms that are familiar to Rwandan worshippers while maintaining their Christian theological content. Such contextualization corresponds to the Catholic principle of inculturation, which seeks to express the Gospel within particular cultures without compromising its essential meaning (John Paul II, 1990). A Psalm concerning God's protection, for example, can be rendered through Kinyarwanda poetic vocabulary and musical patterns that communicate trust in God within the concrete experience of Rwandan communities. Similarly, songs of repentance can combine biblical themes of mercy with culturally understandable expressions of reconciliation and communal responsibility. This process makes Scripture accessible not

only intellectually but also emotionally, communally, and spiritually.

The relationship between Psalms and Catholic religious songs in Rwanda can therefore be understood as one of continuity, development, and contextualization. The Psalms provide biblical language and theological foundations, while Catholic religious songs extend these foundations through Christological, sacramental, Marian, ecclesial, and culturally contextualized expressions. The 92.9% of respondents who emphasized the importance of biblical foundations and the 90.0% who recognized the contribution of Rwandan cultural expression indicate the importance of maintaining both dimensions. As Pope Francis (2020) emphasizes, the Psalms teach believers to pray through the whole range of human experience, while Catholic worship places this prayer within the mystery of Christ. Consequently, Psalm-inspired Catholic songs can function as a bridge between Scripture, liturgy, culture, and daily Christian experience, contributing to prayer, faith formation, communal participation, and evangelization in Rwanda.

3.5. The Role of Catholic Religious Music in Christian Spiritual Growth

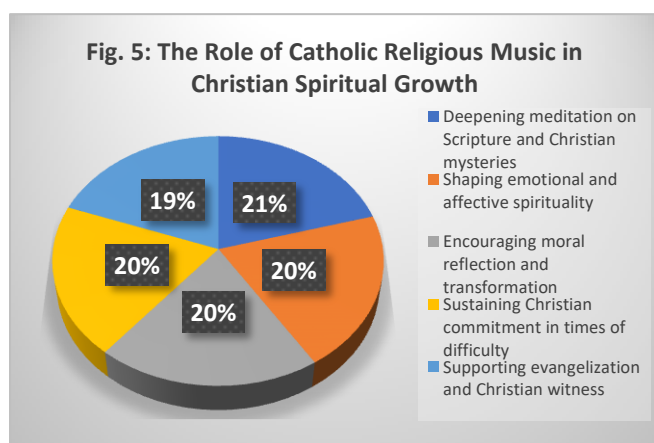
Catholic religious music contributes to Christian spiritual growth by transforming biblical and theological content into forms that can be heard, remembered, meditated upon, and integrated into everyday Christian life. Within Catholic worship, music is closely connected with the proclamation of the Word of God and the celebration of the mysteries of faith. The Second Vatican Council (1963) emphasizes that sacred music should contribute to the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful. Through melodies and lyrics, biblical narratives and theological teachings can become part of the believer's spiritual memory. Brueggemann (2001) observes that the Psalms provide language through which believers interpret their experiences before God, including joy, suffering, thanksgiving, and hope. Catholic religious songs continue this function when they transform biblical messages into accessible musical expressions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) also identifies the Psalms as a fundamental school of prayer and spiritual formation. In the Rwandan context, therefore, religious music can serve not only as an element of worship but also as a formative instrument through which Christians internalize Scripture, interpret their experiences in the light of faith, and develop a more conscious relationship with God.

One important contribution of Catholic religious music is its capacity to deepen meditation on Scripture and Christian mysteries. A religious song can condense a biblical passage, theological teaching, or liturgical mystery into a short text that can be repeated and contemplated over time. Benedict XVI (2006) emphasizes the close relationship between biblical prayer and the life of the Church, particularly

through the Psalms. When Catholic songs draw upon biblical themes, they enable worshippers to encounter Scripture not only through reading or proclamation but also through musical meditation. Pope Francis (2020) similarly presents the Psalms as a language through which the believer brings different dimensions of human existence before God. In the present study, 65 respondents out of 70, representing 92.9%, indicated that Catholic religious music deepens meditation on God's Word and Christian mysteries. This finding suggests that music may help transform biblical knowledge into reflective and personally meaningful religious experience. Repeated singing can reinforce particular biblical expressions and allow their meaning to continue developing in the believer's consciousness beyond the liturgical celebration.

A second dimension concerns the formation of emotional and affective spirituality. Christian spirituality involves not only intellectual understanding but also the emotions, imagination, memory, desires, and personal experiences of believers. Music is particularly significant in this regard because melody and rhythm can intensify the emotional reception of religious messages. The Second Vatican Council (1963) recognizes the importance of music in the liturgical life of the Church because sacred music can support the participation of the faithful in worship. Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) demonstrate that the Psalms themselves express a broad spectrum of human emotions, including gratitude, joy, fear, sorrow, lament, confidence, and hope. Catholic religious songs can similarly give believers a language for expressing emotions before God. In this study, 64 respondents (91.4%) perceived religious music as nurturing emotional and spiritual interiority. Such a result indicates that music can create an interior space in which believers reflect on their experiences and connect their emotions with their relationship with God. Rather than separating ordinary human emotions from spiritual life, religious music can help Christians interpret those emotions within a framework of faith, hope, trust, and divine mercy.

The quantitative findings concerning these dimensions are summarized in Table 1.



The third dimension is the capacity of Catholic religious music to encourage moral reflection and transformation of life. Christian songs frequently contain messages concerning forgiveness, charity, humility, justice, service, repentance, and commitment to the Gospel. Consequently, their formative value extends beyond emotional consolation toward reflection on how believers should live. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) connects Christian prayer with conversion of heart and a life oriented toward God's will. Pope Francis (2015) similarly emphasizes that Christian discipleship requires a transformation of relationships and a commitment to love, solidarity, and care for others. When such teachings are repeatedly expressed through religious songs, they can become reminders of Christian moral responsibilities. The survey results show that 63 respondents, equivalent to 90.0%, perceived Catholic religious music as encouraging moral reflection and transformation. This finding suggests that music may function as a form of informal catechesis by presenting moral and spiritual principles in memorable forms. Its effectiveness, however, depends on the theological quality of the lyrics and on the connection between singing, reflection, preaching, catechesis, and concrete Christian practice.

Another contribution of Catholic religious music is its capacity to sustain Christian commitment during periods of difficulty, suffering, and uncertainty. The biblical Psalms demonstrate that faith does not eliminate human suffering but provides believers with language through which they can continue addressing God in difficult circumstances. Brueggemann (2001) argues that the Psalms give expression to experiences of disorientation while also opening a path toward renewed confidence and hope. Catholic religious songs inspired by similar biblical themes can consequently encourage perseverance when believers experience personal, social, or spiritual challenges. In the present study, 62 respondents (88.6%) indicated that religious music strengthens perseverance in Christian life. This suggests that songs can become spiritual resources that believers recall during moments of discouragement or difficulty. A familiar hymn or biblical song may function as a reminder of God's promises and of the believer's commitment to remain faithful. The spiritual value of music is therefore not restricted to moments of celebration; it can also accompany Christians through suffering, uncertainty, repentance, and renewed hope.

Finally, Catholic religious music has an important relationship with evangelization and the transmission of Christian values. Because songs can communicate religious messages in memorable and culturally accessible forms, they may reach people beyond conventional catechetical settings. Whatley (2019) notes the historical importance of music, poetry, and performance in the transmission of cultural memory in Rwanda. This cultural dimension

provides an important context for understanding why music can also become a vehicle for communicating Christian messages. Catholic religious songs composed or performed in Kinyarwanda can connect biblical and theological content with familiar linguistic and cultural forms. In the present study, 61 respondents, representing 87.1%, considered religious music supportive of evangelization and Christian witness. This finding indicates that students perceive music as capable of extending Christian communication beyond the immediate liturgical setting. Pope Francis (2020) stresses that Christian proclamation must communicate the Gospel in ways that speak meaningfully to people's concrete lives. When Catholic music combines doctrinal fidelity, biblical grounding, cultural intelligibility, and artistic quality, it can contribute to the Church's evangelizing mission while simultaneously strengthening the religious identity of those who sing and hear it.

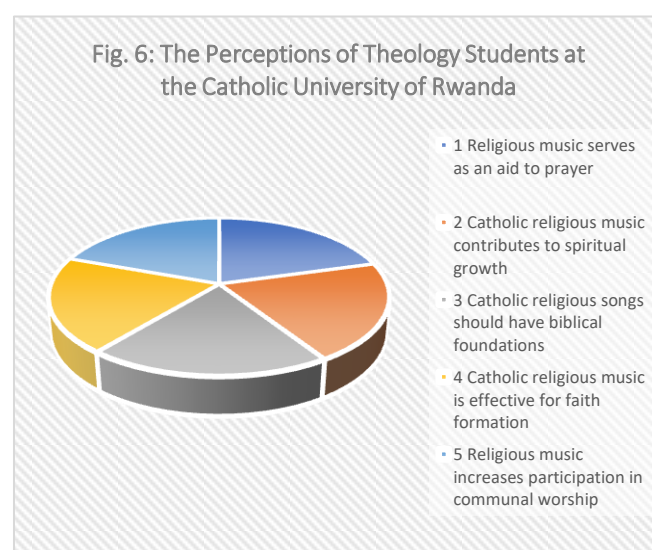
The five dimensions identified in this study (meditation on Scripture and Christian mysteries, emotional and affective spirituality, moral reflection and transformation, perseverance in Christian life, and evangelization and Christian witness) illustrate the multidimensional contribution of Catholic religious music to spiritual formation. The quantitative results show that these dimensions were strongly perceived among the 70 theology students, with 92.9% emphasizing meditation, 91.4% highlighting emotional and spiritual interiority, 90.0% identifying moral transformation, 88.6% recognizing support for perseverance, and 87.1% associating music with evangelization. These findings should be interpreted as perceptions within the specific study population rather than as proof of a causal relationship between religious music and spiritual development. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that Catholic religious music can function as a multidimensional instrument of Christian formation when its biblical, theological, cultural, and pastoral dimensions are appropriately integrated. As the Second Vatican Council (1963) affirms, sacred music has a legitimate place in the Church's liturgical and spiritual life, while the Catholic Church (1997) situates Christian prayer within a broader process of conversion and communion with God. In Rwanda, the continued development of biblically grounded and culturally meaningful Catholic religious music can therefore support deeper Christian formation, personal transformation, perseverance, and evangelizing witness.

3.6. The Perceptions of Theology Students at the Catholic University of Rwanda

The perceptions of theology students at the Catholic University of Rwanda (CUR) provide an important perspective on the spiritual and formative significance of biblical Psalms and Catholic religious songs. As students of theology, the respondents are exposed to Scripture, liturgy, spirituality, and Catholic doctrine, making their perceptions particularly relevant to understanding the relationship

between religious music and Christian formation. The Catholic tradition considers the Psalms an essential part of the Church's prayer because they unite the biblical Word with the lived experience of believers (Catholic Church, 1997). The Second Vatican Council (1963) similarly emphasizes that Scripture has a central place in the liturgy and that the Psalms and liturgical songs should contribute to the participation of the faithful. Brueggemann (2001) explains that the Psalms provide believers with language for expressing praise, thanksgiving, lament, confidence, and hope. In this context, Catholic religious songs can be understood as a contemporary extension of this biblical and liturgical tradition, particularly when they communicate Christian faith through culturally meaningful forms. Benedict XVI (2006) likewise describes the Psalms as a school of prayer in which believers learn to bring the different circumstances of human life before God. The perceptions of the 70 theology students therefore offer useful evidence concerning how religious music is experienced as a resource for spiritual growth, theological formation, and evangelization.

The students expressed a strong perception of the spiritual value of both Psalms and Catholic religious songs. In particular, 67 respondents, representing 95.7% of the sample, perceived religious music as an aid to prayer. This finding corresponds with the Catholic understanding of sacred music as an integral element of worship rather than merely an aesthetic accompaniment (Second Vatican Council, 1963). Similarly, 66 students, or 94.3%, associated Catholic religious music with spiritual growth, suggesting that respondents perceive singing and listening to sacred music as activities capable of influencing the interior life of Christians. Benedict XVI (2006) emphasizes that the Psalms enable believers to enter into a relationship with God through praise, petition, thanksgiving, and trust. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 1.



The distribution presented in figure 6 shows a consistently strong positive perception across the five dimensions

examined. The Catechism places psalmody within the Church's continuing tradition of prayer and identifies singing as an important expression of Christian worship (Catholic Church, 1997). These perceptions suggest that theology students recognize the spiritual value of religious music not simply because it creates an appropriate atmosphere for worship, but because it can help believers internalize biblical messages, express their faith, and sustain their relationship with God. Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) further demonstrate that the Psalms provide a rich theological language through which believers engage experiences of joy, suffering, thanksgiving, and hope. Consequently, sacred music can become a continuing spiritual resource that accompanies Christians in both communal worship and personal prayer.

The respondents also assessed the biblical and theological quality of Catholic religious songs. The findings indicate that 65 students, equivalent to 92.9%, emphasized the importance of biblical foundations in Catholic religious music. This perception is consistent with the Second Vatican Council's teaching that texts intended for sacred music should be drawn chiefly from Scripture and liturgical sources (Second Vatican Council, 1963). The students' responses therefore indicate an expectation that Catholic songs should communicate Christian doctrine accurately rather than merely provide emotionally attractive melodies. Benedict XVI (2006) connects Christian worship with the biblical tradition of prayer, while the Catechism explains that liturgical music belongs to the Church's broader transmission of faith (Catholic Church, 1997). In addition, Brueggemann (2001) stresses the formative character of the Psalms as theological speech that enables believers to interpret their experiences in relation to God. Consequently, the biblical quality of Catholic songs should be evaluated according to their fidelity to Scripture, consistency with Catholic teaching, appropriateness to the liturgical celebration, and capacity to communicate theological truth in language accessible to worshippers. For the theology students, this relationship between biblical fidelity and musical expression appears to be central to the credibility and formative effectiveness of Catholic religious music.

The students' perceptions also reveal important strengths of Catholic religious music as an instrument of Christian formation and evangelization. Approximately 64 respondents, or 91.4%, perceived Catholic religious songs as effective for faith formation, while 63 respondents, representing 90.0%, associated religious music with increased participation in communal worship. These results suggest that students recognize the ability of music to connect theological knowledge with lived Christian experience. The Second Vatican Council (1963) explicitly associates sacred music with the active participation of the faithful, while the Catholic Church understands liturgical music as serving the glory of God and the sanctification and

edification of the faithful (Catholic Church, 1997). The cultural accessibility of songs in Kinyarwanda may further enhance their formative potential by communicating biblical and theological content through familiar linguistic and musical forms. Whatley (2019) highlights the broader importance of music, poetry, and performance in the transmission of cultural memory in Rwanda. Catholic religious music can consequently become an effective medium through which Christian doctrine, biblical narratives, moral teaching, and Catholic identity are communicated within both liturgical and pastoral settings.

At the same time, the perceptions of the theology students point indirectly toward several challenges that may limit the effectiveness of Catholic religious music. Although the quantitative results demonstrate generally positive perceptions, the emphasis placed on biblical foundations and theological quality indicates that not every religious song can automatically be considered appropriate for Christian formation. The Second Vatican Council (1963) requires sacred music to be consistent with the dignity and purpose of the liturgy and calls for suitable formation of composers, singers, and musicians. The Catechism similarly emphasizes that sacred music should be closely connected with liturgical action and should contribute to the prayer of the Church (Catholic Church, 1997). Benedict XVI (2006) links liturgical participation with a deeper awareness of the mystery being celebrated. These principles suggest challenges related to inadequate theological preparation of composers and choir members, insufficient biblical grounding of some lyrics, excessive emphasis on performance, and possible tension between musical popularity and liturgical appropriateness. For Catholic religious music to function effectively as a means of formation, therefore, musical creativity needs to remain connected to Scripture, Catholic doctrine, liturgical norms, and pastoral objectives.

The findings also reveal significant opportunities for improving Catholic religious music in Rwanda. The high proportion of respondents who emphasized biblical foundations provides a strong basis for developing a repertoire that is more systematically rooted in Scripture and Catholic theological tradition. The strong perception that music is effective for faith formation similarly indicates an opportunity to integrate religious songs more deliberately into catechesis, theological education, youth ministry, and evangelization. The Second Vatican Council (1963) specifically calls for appropriate formation in sacred music and encourages the promotion of genuine sacred art within the Church. The Catechism also stresses the importance of the musical heritage of the Church as part of its liturgical life (Catholic Church, 1997). In the Rwandan context, this could include training composers and choir leaders in biblical interpretation, Catholic theology, liturgical norms, music theory, and culturally appropriate composition.

Whatley (2019) further demonstrates the significance of local musical traditions for cultural communication. Combining this cultural heritage with biblical and theological formation could enable the Church in Rwanda to develop songs that are simultaneously authentically Catholic, culturally meaningful, musically accessible, and suitable for evangelization.

Overall, the perceptions of the 70 theology students indicate that Catholic religious music is widely regarded as an important resource for Christian spiritual formation and evangelization. The results show particularly strong perceptions concerning prayer, spiritual growth, biblical foundations, faith formation, and participation in communal worship. These figures should be understood as perceptions within the specific study population rather than as evidence establishing a causal relationship between religious music and spiritual growth. Nevertheless, they provide a coherent picture of how theology students perceive the value of Catholic music in Christian life. The Catholic Church (1997) situates sacred song within the broader tradition of Christian prayer, while Brueggemann (2001) demonstrates the formative richness of the Psalms as a language of faith. The Second Vatican Council (1963) connects sacred music with Scripture, liturgy, and active participation, and Benedict XVI (2006) emphasizes the Psalms' capacity to lead believers into deeper prayer. In Rwanda, the findings therefore support continued efforts to strengthen the biblical and theological quality of Catholic religious songs while developing culturally meaningful musical forms capable of serving Christian formation, communal worship, and evangelization.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between biblical Psalms and Catholic religious songs and their contribution to Christian spiritual growth in Rwanda. The findings indicate that Catholic religious music is widely perceived as an important instrument of prayer, spiritual formation, evangelization, and participation in communal worship. Most theology students recognized its capacity to deepen prayer, support spiritual growth, strengthen faith formation, and encourage participation in Christian community life. The findings also emphasize the importance of biblical and theological foundations in ensuring the spiritual value and credibility of Catholic religious songs.

The study further shows that culturally meaningful expressions, particularly through the Kinyarwanda language and appropriate Rwandan musical traditions, can make Christian messages more accessible and participatory. Catholic religious music therefore provides an important connection between Scripture, Catholic teaching, Rwandan culture, and Christian experience.

Catholic dioceses and parishes should strengthen the formation of composers, choir directors, cantors, and

musicians in Scripture, theology, liturgy, and sacred music. Newly composed songs should receive appropriate biblical, theological, and liturgical review before widespread use. Composers should integrate suitable Rwandan cultural expressions while maintaining doctrinal fidelity. Parishes should use religious music more intentionally in catechesis, youth formation, retreats, family prayer, and evangelization. Finally, universities and theological institutions should conduct further research with larger and more diverse populations to examine the contribution of Catholic religious music to prayer, Christian identity, moral transformation, and participation in Church life.

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