News

Paul Ezegamba, left, leads the choir at St. Clement Pope Church in Queens in New York City on Sunday, May 25, 2025. (Michael Aromolaran)

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They wore native Nigerian attire, the men in senator shirts and the women in boubous and headgear fanning out like giant halos. The choir broke into an Igbo hymn, helmed by a sonorous voice belonging to a stout, dark-skinned man. Their voices melded with the piano's syncopated rhythms, the percussion of the conga drums, and the booming hum of the udu, an Igbo instrument shaped like a big pot.

This was at a recent Mass at St. Clement Pope Church, one of the few Catholic churches in New York offering Mass in Igbo, a language spoken by an ethnic group native to southeastern Nigeria. Every Sunday at noon, the Igbo faithful worship in this hunk of Romanesque architecture located on 123rd Avenue, Queens.

Living 6,000 miles away from Nigeria, they see the church as a proxy for home: a place where they can wear the full regalia of their Nigerian identities and their children can learn about their Igbo heritage.

Each year, thousands of Nigerians arrive in the United States, joining the estimated 500,000 other Nigerians making up the country's highest African immigrant population.

But many of them arrive in an America different from the version in their heads. They encounter an America where they struggle to find jobs, face housing problems, and experience racism, depression and feelings of alienation from having to adapt to a different culture. It's also an America with immigrant communities wrapped in a gauze of panic, with mass deportations and Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids defining the times, a result of the Trump administration's hard-knuckle stance on immigration.

Religious hubs, like St. Clement Pope, give Nigerian immigrants a handhold, a way to connect with home and negotiate present realities.

"We have hundreds of Igbo parishioners," said choir director Paul Ezegamba, the man with the sonorous voice.

Twelve years ago, when a 31-year-old Ezegamba came to America to study for a master's degree at St. John's University, Queens, he knew only a few people in the

country. He also met a place radically different from Nigeria. Unlike Lagos and Anambra, where he'd lived most of his life, Americans weren't communal, he thought. Seeking a semblance of home, he started attending a church in Queens, St. Anthony of Padua.

"My uncle, a priest, was one of the founders of the Igbo community there. I wanted a place where I could worship God in my own language." he said. Not long after, he started attending St. Clement Pope for the same reason.

Amarachi Obi at Church of the Blessed Sacrament in Queens, New York (Courtesy of Amarachi Obi)

At a recent Easter Mass, there was a newcomer, Amarachi Obi — a 31-year-old master's student at Ezegamba's alma mater. After arriving in New York last spring, she started attending Igbo Masses held at Church of the Blessed Sacrament, Valley Stream, because she wanted to connect to the Nigerian community. "The first two Sundays were exciting. I was making videos of the Mass and sending them to my parents in Nigeria," she said.

After someone at Church of the Blessed Sacrament told her about St. Clement Pope, which is closer to her apartment, she visited and equally found it "feeling like home." It felt that way, she said, because of the hymns, drawn from a wealth of Igbo Catholic music.

The church has gone to great trans-Atlantic lengths to create a musical environment redolent of home: The udu, for instance, was brought from Nigeria by a priest.

Also drawn to the music is Chinwendu Onianwa, a 24-year-old student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Manhattan, who's never visited Nigeria.

"English hymns speak to the soul but, not to be rude, they can be sad. You don't want to listen to them when you're down," said Chinwendu, who has attended the church with her sister and grandmother for over a decade. "Igbo songs have a step to them. Even when you don't understand the language, you connect with the instruments."

Linda Robinson, a 69-year-old African American woman who has attended the church since she was a "little girl," came to Igbo Mass once, five years ago. The experience, she said, was "enlightening." She was only there because she'd been late for the English Mass that takes place earlier.

"The Mass is more crowded and certainly longer — at least two hours longer. You hear more people sing, and they sing with such heart. We sing at English Mass too, but sometimes I feel people are afraid to open their mouths — they think they can't sing," Robinson said.

Linda Robinson at St. Clement Pope Church in New York City on Sunday, May 25, 2025 (Michael Aromolaran)

Igbo Masses are a legacy of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, which reformed the Roman Catholic Church, encouraging ecumenism and accommodating Masses in native languages, supplanting the Tridentine Mass in Latin. The council, as described by the initiator Pope John XXIII, was an effort to adapt the church to modern needs.

At the Easter Mass, Chinwendu sat beside her older sister Chioma Onianwa, a 29-year-old clinical associate. As a lector read the day's Scripture, the sisters read the

English translations from paperback missals. Neither speaks Igbo fluently, although the older sister understands it well.

"I hear enough of what is said," said Chioma, who is taking Igbo classes online, a slight Nigerian pitch accenting her voice. Until age 2, she lived in Lagos, before moving to New York. "Even if the priest uses words I'm not familiar with, I don't feel like I've lost out since I've done my personal Bible study," she said.

In 2006, UNESCO looked at the declining rates of Igbo speakers, especially among the younger generation, and made a grim forecast: that the language totters toward extinction.

Today, the rates of speakers plummet still, especially in Nigerian urban areas, where English is a marker of high social ranking and a tool for upward mobility, a consequence of British colonialism from the late 1800s to the mid-20th century. Most at risk of this linguistic loss are Nigerians raised abroad.

Ezegamba, none of whose children speak Igbo fluently, believes that the church is helping to pass down the language to the younger generation.

"It's why we have the children's Mass once a month, so the kids can read and sing in Igbo," he said. His children partake in the Mass as choristers, and though they speak only half of the language, Ezegamba believes "they will pick it up with time."

Some instruments used at St. Clement Pope Church, including the udu, an implosive aerophone originating in Igbo traditional music and a staple in Nigerian Catholic churches (Michael Aromolaran)

Many of the parishioners are migrants from two Catholic churches: St. Anthony of Padua, Queens, and St. Fortunata, Brooklyn. Although these churches held Igbo Masses, they were not Igbo parishes. "The Igbo people were more of an attachment there," Ezegamba said.

Tired of being an appendage, they asked the then-bishop of the Brooklyn Diocese, Nicholas DiMarzio, for their own turf.

Heeding their appeal, the bishop apportioned them St. Clement Pope in 2013 — a church that, with its dwindling, aging population, could benefit from the numbers and energy of its new Igbo occupants.

"What was different this time was that we now had an Igbo pastor," said one parishioner. "Many Igbo people stayed back in those churches, though," he said.

Since 2013, St. Clement Pope — the only Catholic Church in New York with an Igbo parish priest — has seen many Igbo pastors and is currently led by Fr. Christogonus Iwunze, or, as he is fondly called, Father Chris. He is assisted by Fr. Eric Ugochukwu, the parochial vicar.

Chioma remembers being surprised by the church's layout when she, coming from St. Anthony, first arrived here.

"It had an old design and didn't look good. It was carpeted, and the altar was in the center of the church, with the chairs surrounding it. The decorations also looked old," she said.

In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic nudged the world into inactivity, the congregation — Igbo and English sides — thought it was the perfect time to renovate the church. Between March and September of that year, armed with about $250,000, St. Clement Pope rebuilt the altar and moved it to the center front of the sanctuary; changed the seating arrangement; installed a new tile floor and lectern; and refurbished the mural on the altar wall, which had been flaking off due to years of water damage.

But in the old church, Ezegamba found a new beginning. One day, years after moving to St. Clement Pope, he sighted a young woman who would become his wife. "It happens often. One man, Kingsley, engaged his wife in the church before me," Ezegamba said.

Choir director Paul Ezegamba after Mass at St. Clement Pope Church in New York City on May 25, 2025 (Michael Aromolaran)

Ezegamba believes these personal relationships are helpful to the church's aged population, including his 69-year-old mother, who lives with him.

"The church has prevented a lot of elderly people from getting depressed as it's a space where they meet people who speak their language," he said. "In Nigeria, my mom goes out a lot, but here she's confined to the house. The church is the only place she goes, and she looks forward to it every week."

Occasionally, newly arrived Nigerians come to the church seeking help with settling into the city.

"I remember a woman who came to the church for financial assistance. She had, like, three little children and nowhere to stay. Church members volunteered to help her. I remember my family also donated some clothes," Chinwendu said.

"There are people who came to the church for help with employment and got it," said one parishioner. "We've had situations where Igbo people died and their relatives cannot afford the burial costs. They come for help and get it. We also have church members who are lawyers and help people with immigration problems pro bono."

The Sunday after Easter, just before Mass, a nun led down the aisle around a dozen children, silently and with hands clasped. Behind the altar, a mural with saintly figures is painted around three Franz Mayer stained glass windows, on which the body of a crucified Jesus glistened with refracted sunlight.

Ezegamba singled out a girl in a leather jacket. "That's my daughter."

The next Sunday, the children will receive their first Communion, and this session, called faith formation, is one of many teaching them the sacrament's spiritual import.

"We do this to teach them the ways of the church. It's important to pass that down," said Ezegamba, sitting on his conductor's chair. He returned his gaze to the music sheets in front of him, scrawled with symbols legible only to a trained musical eye. He studied them, preparing, as he does every Sunday, to make the church come alive.