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Charity Sr. Philomena Nnaji: "Singing, dancing, and other body movements are ways I express myself and worship God." (Courtesy of Religious Sisters of Charity)



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Dance is part of me. I have always loved dancing. What draws me into it is something I cannot account for. I have fond memories of my dancing as a little girl.

When I was 6, I was already the co-leader of a dancing group. Being the center of attraction and having to dance in front of the others meant the world to me and, I can assure you, I wallowed in it.

This group came together during festive seasons. We assembled, did a two- or three-day practice and off we went in our brightly colored costumes, dancing to the homes in the neighborhood. Neighbors were sure to tell us how nice we looked and how well we danced.

At that stage, it was all child's play, but little did I know that I was laying a lifelong foundation. For it is often at this stage in childhood that one learns to dance, before the inhibitions of adolescence kick in.

African culture is full of singing, dancing and different body movements. Mothers sometimes do a few dance steps when they receive good news, and the children stand by with a shy smile on their faces. The situation is no different from what I experienced growing up as an Igbo girl in Nigeria. There are so many different kinds of dance — all of which express different feelings that can't be put into words.

In certain traditions within African society, mourning a deceased relative involves a particular kind of dance; in this way, we express deep sorrow as well as gratitude for the life lived by the deceased.

There are also various songs for worship, war, funerals, weddings and even sounds to announce the birth of a baby. Most of the sounds and songs would involve drumming, and this would give a rhythm that is impossible to miss.

Some sounds are for summoning the community to a meeting and special songs for royalty. There is also a local SOS or 911 sound that we all know.

I was born into a Catholic family and introduced to the faith as an infant. As I grew older, I began to raise questions about my faith and to find ways of worshiping God in a way that is uniquely me.

"It is safe to say an African cannot be separated from dance; it is in the very nature of our being." (Courtesy of Religious Sisters of Charity)

Singing, dancing, and other body movements are ways I express myself and worship God. Sometimes, I am so grateful to God that I just want my whole being to express

this. My whole being becomes consumed in the rhythm as drums roll out majestic sounds and the praise leader announces ancient titles by which our ancestors addressed God.

The atmosphere is electric and the sweat rolling down my face in the packed church is no deterrent to the call for movement/worship. At such times, this verse of Scriptures comes to mind: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." It is like being so full of something that you can't help but let it out.

The beauty about dancing in church is that one does not have to be a professional — no set rules apply. This dance is personal — it comes from somewhere deep within an individual. A simple waving of hands and moving back and forth is enough. For me, it is an expression of my relationship and connection with my creator. It liberates my body and frees my spirit for worship.

I am not alone in this dance. There are occasions, like New Year's Eve Mass, where the whole church erupts in one symphony of dance — some on their seats and others along the aisles. With backs bent low, rolling hips and wiggling waists, we praise God the African way.

Dance creates a unifying force that binds us together. It brings unprecedented joy because on such occasions you never see a gloomy face — we are all united in this dance of worship. One can feel the energy, the laughter and joy that run through the whole assembly. I get this feeling of "It is wonderful to be here," and sometimes I wonder what heaven could be like — a state of worship and praise of God.

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Not everyone believes in women dancing in church; they might think it is too expressive or distracting and hence should not be allowed. I believe the focus here is not on the body but on the praise and worship of God. With this in mind, one can dance in a way that glorifies God and is not offensive to others.

My parish church allows dancing and I am grateful for that. I have attended church gatherings where people did not get up to dance, either because they are being held back by their own inhibitions or the music has not moved them to a point of letting go to express that which is inside.

In a nutshell, it is safe to say an African cannot be separated from dance; it is in the very nature of our being. Singing and dancing will always remain an important aspect of our culture because it is our major way of expression and communication. It is little wonder that we are quick to inculcate dance into our worship and communication with God with so much enthusiasm.

The movement in dance releases our unspoken words. It is those unspoken words, the deep-seated feelings and emotions, that find their outlet in dance. It is for this reason that I appreciate women dancing in church, and enjoy a good, well-prepared, uplifting liturgy — for it creates an ambience to dance and express joy, faith, love and happiness in the presence of God and his people.