



**MIROSŁAW SITARZ**

John Paul Second Catholic University  
of Lublin, Poland

*ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7596-8508*

**BARTOSZ ZYGMUNT**

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

*ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8939-9737*

## LIMITS TO THE PERMISSIBILITY OF ORGANIZING CONCERTS IN CHURCHES ACCORDING TO CANON LAW

## ABSTRACT

*The Catholic Church has highly regarded sacred music, considering it as an indispensable element of worship of God. Music that is used in liturgy and presented in sacred spaces should help people to deepen their faith and glorify God.*

*The aim of the article will be to analyse the permissibility of organising concerts in churches. It is necessary to preserve the sacred space inside a church, but people have a desire for hearing musical works in a building with excellent acoustics and an exquisite interior.*

*The article will use the sources of canon law – both common and particular – and available literature on the subject. Historical-legal and dogmatic-legal methods will be used in the paper.*

**KEYWORDS:** *concerts in churches, liturgy, sacred music, musical works, canon law*

## INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, the Catholic Church has highly regarded sacred music, considering it as an indispensable element of worship of God and *a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art* (Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, *Constitutio de sacra liturgia Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963, no. 112; cf. no. 114). Music that is used in liturgy and presented in sacred spaces should help people to deepen their faith and glorify God. Nowadays, however, it is becoming increasingly popular to organise concerts in churches in a non-liturgical setting. This begs questions about the permissibility of such events in sacred locations. On the one hand, it is necessary to preserve the sacred space inside a church, but on the other hand, people have a desire for hearing musical works (especially religious and classical pieces) in a building with excellent acoustics and an exquisite interior.

In the past, the issue of concerts organized inside churches was virtually non-existent in ecclesiastical legislation. Until the twentieth century, ecclesiastical documents on church music centred on liturgical music and the choice of instrumentation, without directly raising the subject of independent concerts in churches. J. Waloszek notes that *in the sacred space, there should be no room for music that makes us sink deeply into the realm of senses [...], as this does not bring the senses into the spiritual realm, but strives to entangle the spirit*

*in the realm of senses* (Waloszek, 2013, p. 35). In other words, music which is genuinely lay and focused solely on aesthetic experience or entertainment, is irreconcilable with the spiritual atmosphere of a sacred place. Historically, the use of lay music in churches was frowned upon only when it concerned liturgy. For example, papal documents from the early twentieth century banned the performance of opera style music or the use of some instruments considered inappropriate, such as the piano forte or an orchestra (Pius PP. X, *Motu proprio SSmi Pii PP. X de restauratione musicae sacrae* (I). *Tra le sollecitudini*, 1903, nos. 19-20). Concerts organised as independent artistic events in church interiors, however, were not separately regulated. Rather, they were treated as a rarity, which was due to various constraints, such as the lack of concert halls in the old times (Pawlak, 2001, p. 214).

Only the latter half of the twentieth century saw an increase in the number of concerts held in churches, especially performances of sacred music outside liturgy. This tendency grew stronger as a result of cultural and liturgical evolution occurring after the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II encouraged the congregation to take an active part in liturgy, thus restricting the performance of elaborate musical forms (e.g. extensive choral or oratorian compositions) during Holy Mass. However, the Council also strongly emphasised the value of the heritage of sacred music. In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the conciliar Fathers pointed out that church music has a *ministerial function* (no. 112), and should at the same time *be preserved and fostered with great care* (no. 114) as “the treasure of sacred music (no. 114). Following the Council, detailed instructions on music in religious worship were issued, for example the instruction *Musicam sacram* (Sacra Congregatio Rituum, *Instructio de musica in sacra liturgia Musicam sacram*, 1967, pp. 300-320), which emphasized the need for aligning old church music to reformed liturgy. The document mentions that some forms of sacred music, which on account of their artistic nature fall outside the scope of renewed liturgy, can be presented independently of the celebration itself – as musical services or concerts of a spiritual character (*Musicam sacram*, no. 50a).

Seeing the growing number of concerts performed in churches, pastors of souls started to harbour doubts as to the legitimacy of and conditions for holding such events in sacred spaces. Using churches for concerts too widely

may have raised doubts of some of the faithful who were sensitive about the sacred character of church space. However, a complete denial of church space to musicians might be misinterpreted in cultural milieus and by artists themselves. So it became imperative to fine-tune norms that would specify the boundaries within which churches could be used as concert halls and protect the sacred character of those venues, without dismissing the musical form of prayer and evangelization.

In this article, we shall examine the current norms of canon law pertaining to the organisation of concerts in church space and indicate the limits of such a function stipulated by the ecclesiastical legislation in force. Our considerations will rely chiefly on the 1983 Code of Canon Law [CIC/83] (*Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus*, 1983, pp. 1-317) and interpretations found in the official documents of the Church, especially the 1987 letter of the Congregation for Divine Worship concerning concerts in churches. Also, guidelines issued by the Polish Bishops' Conference and the opinions of the doctrine of the canon will be taken into account.

## **THE SACRED CHARACTER OF CHURCHES AND PERMISSIBLE ACTIVITIES IN SACRED PLACES**

The boundary conditions for what can and what cannot be done in a church result from the general norm of canon law on the use of sacred places. Canon 1210 CIC/83 states that *only those things which serve the exercise or promotion of worship, piety, or religion are permitted in a sacred place; anything not consonant with the holiness of the place is forbidden*. This canon lays down the fundamental principle: a church – as a place dedicated to God – is designated for worship and any activities consistent with the character of a sacred place. Anything that violates the sacred nature of a church is forbidden within its walls.

In the second part of Canon 1210 CIC/83, we find an addition pertaining to concerts: *In an individual case, however, the ordinary can permit other uses which are not contrary to the holiness of the place*. This means that the diocesan bishop (or other competent ordinary) has the power of dispensation (Canon 85-93 CIC/83) from the general rule to let a church be used for

a purpose other than worship as long as this purpose is not contrary to the holiness of the church. This particular stipulation lays the groundwork for the organisation of concerts in churches: if a concert is deemed not contrary to the sacred character of the place, it can be permitted by ecclesiastical authority as an exception to the rule.

It should be underscored that the holiness of the church follows from its consecration or dedication, and its designation as a venue for the exercise of divine worship (Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar, 1978, chapter 2, no. 1; cf. Canon 1214 CIC/83). The church is not a public hall or a theatre – it is a house of God, in which God dwells and the faithful unite for prayer. Even outside its liturgical hours, the church retains its sacred character. The Second Vatican Council also recalls the meaning of the church being a sign of the People of God making their journey and the image of heavenly realm (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 8; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, nos. 1198-1199). Therefore, all that happens inside a church should respect the unique nature of the place that has been set aside for the glory of God. With respect to concerts, this means that the content, form and atmosphere of a musical event should be in keeping with the dignity of the church.

The notion of *other uses which are not contrary to the holiness of the place* (Canon 1210 CIC/83) requires a *sensu stricto* interpretation. This no doubt excludes events of a clearly secular, entertaining or commercial nature. Such undertakings, despite their artistic merit, are contrary to the sacred purpose of the church and should not take place therein. As argued by legal commentators, a church cannot be profaned by being used as a common concert hall or *rented* for non-religious events (Waloszek, 2013, p. 35). It is permissible, however, for a sacred place to host activities which are not liturgical but compatible with the spirit of devotion and indirectly serve the spiritual aims of the faithful. This category includes, among others, concerts of sacred or religious music, especially when their performance fosters the listeners' desire for prayer, contemplation of divine beauty, or deepens their faith.

In the context of the norms of canon law, we should mention Canon 1213 CIC/83, which provides that *the ecclesiastical authority freely exercises its powers and functions in sacred places*. This entails that decisions on the use of a church belong, in a sovereign manner, to the competent ecclesiastical

authority (the bishop, the pastor or rector of the church according to their competence). No secular bodies or individuals are allowed to use a church for the purposes of, say, having a concert without the consent of the ecclesiastical authority. A church, as a holy place, is under special jurisdiction – in this case, the host is the Church, not secular institutions or third parties. With this principle at play, every time a concert is to be organised, it is necessary to obtain ecclesiastical consent, even if the event might seem beneficial or not incompatible with the sacred nature of the place.

The norms in question are complemented by Canon 1222 CIC/83, which regulates the cases where a church can be put to secular use. The legislator provides for the possibility of deconsecration – that is, a permanent exclusion of a church building from divine worship – when it is no longer possible to use a church for liturgical purposes or maintain it (Sitarz, 2013, p. 199). This can have indirect relevance for concerts: if a church is officially deconsecrated and relegated to a legitimate, secular use, having in it concerts (even of secular music) would no longer be a violation of canon law, even if the venue were no longer a sacred space. So long as a church is consecrated, it must be put to a reverent use. Although Canon 1222 § 2 mentions the possibility of using a church for a *profane but not sordid* purpose with the consent of the bishop, but this, essentially, involves a definitive change in the status of the place. In practice, there are situations where bishops make available liturgically defunct churches (e.g. historical buildings) for concerts, but still require that the repertoire and organization respect the old, sacred character of the place (Congregation for Divine Worship, *Concerts in churches*, 1987, no. 8; cf. no. 7).

In summary, canon law lays emphasis on the sacred character of the church, allowing only events that are in harmony with it or, at least, do not offend it. A concert in a church is permissible only by way of exception, granted by the ordinary, after specific conditions have been fulfilled in order to preserve the sacredness of the place. Specific guidelines on how to assess the kind of music and the form of a concert have been laid out in ecclesiastical documents, and they will be dealt with in what follows.

## INSTRUCTION OF THE CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP "CONCERTS IN CHURCHES" (1987)

In order to address the above-mentioned doubts and novel challenges in pastoral care, the Holy See issued special guidelines on holding concerts in churches. On November 5, 1987, the Congregation for Divine Worship published an instruction addressed to bishops' conferences, titled *Concerts in Churches*. It was the Church's first document that was dedicated in its entirety to issues related to the performance of non-liturgical music in sacred space. Note that the text was formally a pastoral letter offering guidelines, not an instruction in the strict sense (Canon 34 CIC/83), and it did not introduce new canonical regulations but interpreted existing norms (esp. Canon 1210 CIC/83) and recommended some practical solutions. Nonetheless, its authority was such that it gained the pope's approval and was promulgated. For bishops and pastors, the letter became the reference point for decisions made about the organization of concerts in churches (Sitarz, 2008, pp. 27-40).

On *Concerts in Churches* starts by outlining the context of the problem. In it, the Congregation notes an increased interest in music in contemporary culture and the increasing use of churches for concerts. A number of reasons for that are mentioned, including: good acoustics of churches, their aesthetic interiors, as well as the fact that many musical works (such as oratorios or organ compositions) were originally composed for the church setting, which offers the finest conditions for performing such music (cf. *Concerts in churches*, no. 1). At the same time, a new pastoral reality is indicated. After the liturgical reform, certain traditional choirs and ensembles (*scholae cantorum*) were not able to perform entire repertoires of polyphonic music during Holy Mass as often as they wished, hence the initiative of presenting such music in the form of *sacred concerts* outside liturgy. We even saw the emergence of so-called spiritual concerts – events which, although officially concerts, are accompanied by elements of prayer, readings of the Word of God or moments of silence, becoming an intermediate stage between concerts proper and church services (*Concerts in churches*, no. 9).

The Congregation therefore asks: Can these new practices, and on what terms, be reconciled with the traditional notion of churches as places

reserved solely for prayer? In order to answer the question, the Congregation makes reference to the norms in force, first and foremost to Canon 1210, as well as indications found in post-conciliar documents on religious music (it mentions *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the 1967 instruction *Musicam sacram*, and the instruction *Liturgicae Instaurationes* from 1970). On this basis, the Congregation formulated a number of rules and directions to help diocesan bishops make prudent decisions.

The overriding principle recalled by the Instruction is the unique dignity and purpose of churches as sacred places. A church is a *house of God* and the *sign of the living Church* where *the Christian community unites to hear the word of God, to pray together, to receive the sacraments, to celebrate the Eucharist*. Therefore *churches cannot be considered simply as public places for any kind of meeting*. They are sacred places, that is, *set apart* in a permanent way for Divine Worship by their dedication and blessing (*Concerts in churches*, no. 5). It was indicated that an improper use of a church can weaken its identity and scandalize the faithful, according to the evangelical injunction: *My house is a house of prayer* (Lk 19:46).

Next, the Instruction goes on to appraise various types of music with respect to their admissibility in the church. The crucial distinction made by the Congregation is between religious (sacred) and secular music. The authors highlighted that even the most beautiful symphonic composition, for its part, will not become a religious piece unless its creation was inspired by faith or it was destined for a sacred setting. Secular music, regardless of its era, style or artistic merit, should not be performed in a church because (i) its presence would infringe on the holiness of the place and (ii) the work itself would be disrespected by being removed from its proper (secular) context and placed in a wrong setting. The Congregation articulated its position categorically, saying that the performance of non-religious compositions in a church is a misreading of the nature of this place and an affront to those works, too (Tyrała, 2022, pp. 24-26).

The opposite is true for sacred and religious music: its performance in a church outside its liturgical context can be beneficial spiritually and fully in keeping with the designation of the place. The Congregation in the Instruction defines two terms: *sacred music* – composed *ad honorem Dei*, for liturgical purposes (e.g. masses, motets, chants), which for objective reasons cannot

always be performed during Holy Mass (on account of, for example, its length or the elaborate form); *religious music* – works based on biblical or liturgical texts, or ones that refer to God, Mother of God, saints, or the Truths of the Christian Faith (*Concerts in churches*, no. 9). Both sacred music in the strict sense and religious music can be performed in churches outside rituals as their content and genesis are directed towards the spiritual sphere. The organization of such concerts – organ, choir, oratorio or cantata music – is part of the Church's mission to preserve and popularize the heritage of religious worship and can serve to promote piety. The Instruction mentions many positive functions that concerts of sacred music can have in churches:

1. to prepare the faithful for the main liturgical celebrations or to emphasize their festive character, aside from the proper liturgical rites (e.g. by performing a Christmas oratorio during the Christmas season so that the faithful can enjoy the atmosphere of the mystery;
2. to accentuate the character of the liturgical seasons (e.g. with a passion concert during Lent presenting music that embraces the spirit of penance);
3. to create an atmosphere of beauty and meditation in the church, which can even open the hearts of those far from the church to the sacred – in so doing, a concert becomes an element of evangelization through art;
4. to facilitate the proclamation of the Word of God – e.g. when a religious concert precedes the reading of the Gospel or accompanies a reflection on the Bible, it creates a context for embracing the message;
5. to keep alive the treasures of sacred music, which must not perish – this applies to both older liturgical pieces (rarely presented in full during services) and other generic forms such as oratorios or religious cantatas which are elements of the religious cultural heritage;
6. to assist visitors and tourists in better understanding the sacred character of the church – e.g. regular, short organ concerts can evoke prayerful atmosphere and show the visitors the spiritual dimension of the place (*Concerts in churches*, no. 9).

The aspects mentioned above demonstrate that the Church understands the positive potential of having religious concerts in church interiors. They

can keep alive the tradition of sacred music, enrich spiritual life, or even play a pastoral role – as a form of devotion or a path to liturgy. To achieve those ends, concerts must be properly organized and subject to conditions that ensure respect for the sacred. In its final part, the Congregation in the Instruction offers a number of practical indications and conditions necessary for the grant of consent to have a concert organized in a church. They can be summed up as follows.

1) **Consent of the ordinary of the place.** Every concert held in an active church requires consent of the diocesan bishop (granted on a case-by-case basis). No standing permit can be granted to a series of concerts (e.g. during a festival) – every application should be reviewed individually. If need be, the bishop can grant the necessary competences to a designated person or commission (e.g. the diocesan liturgical music commission), but the final decision belongs to him. The ecclesiastical authority is free to assess whether a particular event is in keeping with the church's intended use.

2) **Organizers' request.** Entities wishing to hold a concert in a church are to file a written request to the ordinary of the place at a reasonable notice. The request is to detail the proposed date and time, as well as the programme specifying the works and names of the composers. This allows the authority to evaluate the repertoire in terms of its religious character. After the ordinary grants permission, the pastor or rector of the church should arrange the details of organization as persons in charge of the place.

3) **Non-commercial character.** In order to ensure that the concert does not turn into a business-like event, the Instruction prescribes that admission to church concerts be free to all. Religious music must be free to all faithful, and the church must not be a place for gainful activities. (It should be noted that this requirement may be hard to meet, especially with professional artists performing for a fee. In practice, a compromise solution is sought; for example, the concert is free for the audience but the musicians are remunerated by a third party. It is very important that the faithful do not perceive the church as a paid concert hall.)

4) **Respect for the sanctuary.** The performers (orchestra, choir) should not be placed in the sanctuary, so that they can stay away from the altar, the president's chair and the ambo. These elements of the church's interior have

a central significance for liturgy and should be left unused during musical events. Artists should therefore perform elsewhere in the church (e.g. in the nave, choir gallery, or a side chapel if possible).

5) **The Blessed Sacrament.** If possible, the tabernacle containing the Blessed Sacrament should be transferred to a side chapel for the duration of a concert, or any other safe and dignified location, away from the concert area. The aim is to avoid a situation where the faithful are listening to music with the Eucharist placed at the altar, as this would give rise to a dissonance or even a lack of due reverence (this is because the presence of the Blessed Sacrament implies adoration, not applause, etc.). If the transfer is impossible, care should be taken to separate in a visible manner the concert area from the tabernacle.

6) **Dress code and behaviour.** Both the performers and the listeners are obliged to behave and dress properly, in keeping with the dignity of a sacred place, which means that provocative or inappropriate outfits should be avoided, and respectful silence should be kept during the event (no eating, improper comments, etc.). Holding a concert in a church does not suppress its sacred character, so norms pertaining to modest clothing and respectful behaviour remain in force.

7) **Commentary and lectures.** If an introduction, commentary or presentation are planned, they should not take place at the ambo. The ambo is a place for proclaiming Divine Word, so using it as a lectern for an artistic presentation would be inappropriate. It is recommended that a talk on the music performed be given from another location (e.g. at a lectern in the nave). What is more, commentary should go beyond purely technical or historical information; the speaker should allude to the spiritual meaning of music, so that the listeners can have a more profound experience of the presented works. The speaker can, for example, explain the religious import of a given piece, quote a pertinent excerpt from the Bible, or encourage meditation.

8) **Organizer's responsibility.** All organizers who wish to use church space are to accept in writing legal responsibility for any expenses incurred in connection with damage, cleaning and leaving the church in order after the concert. In other words, an appropriate agreement should be made whereby the organizer will undertake to show respect for the church property and bear the cost of electricity, heating, cleaning, and repairing any damage caused by

the preparations or during the concert. Thanks to that, the pastor or rector of the church enjoys the guarantee of proper care of the building.

The above-mentioned conditions and practical indications were formulated by the Congregation to assist bishops and pastors of souls in their care to maintain the proper character of churches. It is worth noting that the document, despite its slightly severe tone (especially where the performance of secular music is prohibited), does not trivialize music. On the contrary, it underscores the tremendous importance of sacred music in culture and encourages Christian musicians to continue the tradition of religious music for the service of the faith (*Concerts in churches*, no. 11). This is a manifestation of balance: the Church values the beauty of music but always tries to use it for a higher spiritual goal.

Note that the directions laid down in the 1987 Instruction do not qualify as universal law *per se*, but they are disciplinary and pastoral guidelines. Nonetheless, the legislators of particular churches (especially diocesan bishops) are able to issue regulations of particular law, binding within the diocese or country under their jurisdiction. Notably, the Instruction advises bishops' conferences to consider promulgating their own norms based on their above-mentioned recommendations (*Concerts in churches*, no. 8). In the concrete, many diocesan bishops have issued ordinances or instructions for their dioceses drawing on the Instruction, defining the procedures for obtaining permission to organize concerts and the requirements as to their repertoires.

## **APPLICATION OF THE GUIDELINES IN POLAND: THE 2017 INSTRUCTION**

In Poland, the most relevant document regulating the issues in question is the Instruction of the Polish Bishops' Conference on Church Music, adopted on October 2017 [the 2017 Instruction]. Promulgated by the Conference [KEP] as the binding particular law, the document comprehensively regulates issues of liturgical and non-liturgical music in all dioceses in Poland. Among the many issues covered in the KEP Instruction, the document also provides

norms for organizing concerts in churches. They clearly replicate the guidelines of the letter of the Holy See of 1987, although the wording of some of them was adapted to the Polish conditions or supplemented.

The KEP Instruction reaffirms the general rule that only religious music can be performed in churches. It is explicitly stated that *it is unacceptable to organize in churches concerts of evidently popular music, even if highly artistic* (the 2017 Instruction, no. 44c-d). This phrasing dispels any doubts that may arise: there is no place in the church for compositions and events of a purely secular nature, intended to be a show or just entertainment. At the same time, the KEP recognises the value of religious music performed outside the liturgy: it reminds us that religious music can effectively enliven the piety of the faithful, so *in services celebrated outside the liturgy, these works can be used*. The text points to numerous considerations in favour of holding concerts of religious music in churches (mentioning aspects such as acoustics, interior design, the possibility of sharing the effects of the work of local choirs and organists) (the 2017 Instruction, no. 44).

The instruction in question also lays down concrete rules on having concerts in churches, consistently with the directives of the Congregation. For example, the decision to approve a concert in a church belongs to the diocesan bishop, who can appoint a commission or person in charge to receive applications (the 2017 Instruction, no. 49). The pastor (or rector of the church) is obliged to communicate the intention to organize a concert early enough, stating in writing the date, detailed programme and list of artists (no. 49). It is necessary to conclude a written agreement with the organizer, in which the organizer undertakes to cover any costs incurred, also those arising from damage (similarly to the 1987 Instruction) (no. 49). In the same paragraph, the KEP Instruction stipulates that these rules do not apply to concerts given by parish children choirs, choirs and organists (no. 49).

The recommendations concerning the way concerts should proceed are also replicated from the 1987 Instruction: artists should not perform within the sanctuary, the Blessed Sacrament should be placed in a separate chapel, the ambo is not to be used for lectures, whereas the purpose of a concert should be to direct people's hearts to God rather than promote artists (nos. 45-47). At the same time, it was emphasized that concerts in churches are meant to serve the spiritual well-being of the listeners, therefore they must not be

treated as a commercial activity – although the KEP Instruction allows the organizer to cover *certain costs* (e.g. fair fees), as long as the concert does not become commercial (no. 48).

The KEP instruction goes even further, recommending that concerts of religious music be promoted as an expression of Christian culture. The document recommends that such events be co-organized by cultural institutions and carefully prepared (no. 50). It is said that the Conference considers concerts of sacred music as a valuable pastoral instrument – on condition that established rules are respected. However, the Conference makes it clear that extremely secular music or popular music must not be allowed within church walls, so that churches do not lose their character as places of divine worship and prayer.

## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS: ARTISTIC INSPIRATION VERSUS THE SACRED

Our discussion on the permissibility of concerts in churches should benefit from a theological reflection concerning the very nature of music and art vis à vis the sacred, because there arises the inevitable question: Is the distinction between *religious* and *secular* music always clear? Are there works of art which – while secular to all intents and purposes – are so profoundly beautiful and full of import that they can be considered consistent with the sacred?

This question was raised by Pope John Paul II in regard to music. During his famous, cultural meeting in Milan's La Scala on May 21, 1983, he spoke his noteworthy words: *Every great work of art [...] is rooted in and inspired by religion* (Jan Paweł II, 1986, p. 217). By saying so, he pointed out that authentic beauty, which is present in masterpieces of art, is ultimately given by God – even if the artist's intention was not strictly religious. This broad view of artistic inspiration suggests that the boundary between the sacred and the profane in art is sometimes blurred. From John Paul II's perspective, grand classical music (e.g. symphonies, instrumental concerts) contains, as it were, a grain of spirituality because it embraces the fundamental dimensions of human spirit, such as loftiness, harmony, tragedy or longing for the Absolute.

If we adopt such optics, it can be argued that performing some outstanding works of classical music (formally secular) can be permissible as long as this promotes the contemplation of beauty and directs our thoughts to the Creator of all good and beautiful things. It is sometimes argued, for example, that Baroque did not know a sharp distinction between sacred and secular music. Composers like Antonio Vivaldi composed typically instrumental works (e.g. violin concertos), but often gave them religious dedications or spiritual mottoes. Vivaldi would affix the acronym L.D.B.M.D.A, meaning *Laus Deo Beataeque Mariae Deiparae, Amen* (Glory to God and the Blessed Mother of God, Amen) (Hinz, 2005, p. 77). This proved that all musical compositions were believed to serve and glorify God, regardless of their form.

Nevertheless, a great deal of caution must be exercised when applying canon law in pastoral practice. The ecclesiastical legislator – both at the level of the Holy See and conferences of bishops – has clearly come in favour of maintaining discipline with respect to music: only music with a clearly religious provenance may be performed in sacred places. Granted, John Paul II's vision of the *religious roots* of all beauty has a theological appeal, but it does not automatically mean changes to disciplinary norms. In practice, church authorities adhere to the rule that if a musical piece does not carry objectively religious content or context, its performance is alien to sacred space. The adoption of a more liberal criterion (*beauty as such is God's glory*) could lead to abuse and bias – it is difficult to draw a line between where a *grand work of art* inspires prayer and where it evokes an aesthetic experience. On this account, the current Code of Canon Law and instructions opt for a safe and unambiguous solution: permit only sacred and church music while excluding secular repertoire, even if classical.

Such a stance by no means demonstrates the Church's aversion to culture; rather, it manifests concern for sacred places. As the Congregation for Divine Worship noted in its Instruction of 1987, what matters is that churches always retain their unique character as places of liturgy, prayer and concentration. A religious concert is fitting in such a setting, but a secular concert, however great it may be, entails the risk of turning a church into a place perceived as an ordinary *concert hall*, where the sense of the sacred may be lost. In other words, the Church wants to avoid *desacralization through*

*trivialization* – if a church becomes a venue for any cultural events, we can hardly expect people to enter it with faith and reverence due to a house of God.

## CONCLUSION

Taking the foregoing considerations into account, we can easily draw the limits to the permissibility of holding concerts in churches in the light of canon law in force. The 1983 Code of Canon Law lays down the norm concerning the sacred purpose of churches and the requirement that all activities respect the holiness of the place. Particular law (the instructions of the Holy See and conferences of bishops) elaborates on that vis-à-vis the special case of concerts. This implies the following:

It is forbidden to organize concerts and musical events in churches, entertaining or any other kind that is not related to worship and religion. A church cannot serve as a place for performing music, however valuable it may be, if it is not religiously inspired.

It is permitted (conditionally) to perform sacred and church music in a church outside liturgy, subject to the approval of the competent ecclesiastical authority and the observance of certain standards of conduct. The purpose of such a concert should be consistent with the spiritual mission of the Church – it should glorify God, revive the faith, celebrate the tradition of church music, or benefit the audience spiritually. Its purpose should not be solely aesthetic.

The diocesan bishop is competent to issue decisions. Guided by universal norms and the guidance of the Holy See, he assesses each case and may grant or refuse permission for a concert in a church. Pastors and rectors of churches are to comply with the bishop's directions, taking care that no concert is held without requisite permission.

Conditions for the organization of a concert (the repertoire, venue, appropriate behaviour, etc.) are necessary to guarantee the inviolability of the sacred space. Their observance is an integral part of an event's permissibility; breaking them would be equal to offending church law and profaning a sacred place.

## REFERENCES

- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (1994). Accessed 19 October 2025 from [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM)
- Codex Iuris Canonici auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus*. (1983). AAS 75 (1983), pars II, pp. 1-317.
- Congregation for Divine Worship, *Concerts in Churches*. (1987). Accessed 19 October 2025 from <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/concerts-in-churches-2164>
- Hinz, E. (2005). *Nurt religijny w muzyce różnych epok*. Bernardinum.
- Jan Paweł II. (1986). *Wiara i kultura*. Fundacja Jana Pawła II. Polski Instytut Kultury Chrześcijańskiej.
- Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, *Instrukcja o muzyce kościelnej*. (2017). *Anamnesis. Biuletyn Komisji ds. Kultu Bożego i Dyscypliny Sakramentów* 92 (2018), pp. 25-42.
- Pawlak, I. (2001). *Muzyka liturgiczna po Soborze Watykańskim II w świetle dokumentów Kościoła*. Polihymnia.
- Pius PP. X, *Motu proprio SSmi Pii PP. X de restauratione musicae sacrae (I). Tra le sollecitudini*. (1903). ASS 36 (1903-1904), pp. 329-339.
- Rite of Dedication of a Church and an Altar. 1978. Accessed 19 October 2025 from <https://abliturgy.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/rite-of-dedication-of-a-church-and-an-altar-missal-prayers1.pdf>
- Sacra Congregatio Rituum, *Instructio de musica in sacra liturgia Musicam sacram*. (1967). AAS 59 (1967), pp. 300-320.
- Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, *Constitutio de sacra liturgia Sacrosanctum Concilium*. (1963). AAS 56 (1964), pp. 97-138.
- Sitarz, M. (2013). *Competences of Collegial Organs in a Particular Church in the Exercise of Executive Power According to the Code of Canon Law of 1983*. Wydawnictwo KUL.
- Sitarz, M. (2008). Miejsce instrukcji w hierarchii aktów normatywnych. In: W. Bar (ed.), L. Fiejdasz (ed.), *O Sanctorum Mater*, 27-40. Katedra Prawa Kanonizacyjnego, Stowarzyszenie Kanonistów Polskich.
- Tyrała, R. (2022). *Koncerty w świątyniach – kwestią liturgiczną czy estetyczną?* 17, 21-32. *Musica Ecclesiastica*.
- Włoszek, J. (2013). *Istota sakralności pieśni kościelnej*. 8 (35), 33-37. *De Cantu Sacro*. Biuletyn Stowarzyszenia Polskich Muzyków Kościelnych.