



Effectiveness of Catholic Church Public Relations in Addressing Misconceptions about the Vatican's Same-Sex Blessing Declaration among Catholic Laity in Abakaliki, Nigeria

¹Nweze Samuel, ²Oketa Chibugo Moses, ³Bibian Nkechinyere Nwokwu, ⁴Ede Maureen Ebere, ⁵Nwogha Jennifer Nnenna, ⁶Kaanapera Linda Nancy, ⁷Akpama Alice Mbang, & ⁸Ovuoba Chukwudi Abraham

^{1,4,5,&8} Department of Mass Communication, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.

²Department of Sociology, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria

³Department of Public Administration, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria

^{6&7} Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic Ugep, Cross River State, Nigeria

¹<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4433-9249>

²<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3521-2148>

³<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0147-2532>

⁵<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1312-0071>

⁶<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0489-8906>

⁷<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5569-092X>

***Corresponding Author:** samuelnweze2023@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: The publication of the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* (Same-Sex Blessing Declaration) in December 2023 generated widespread public debate and misconceptions, particularly the belief that Pope Francis and the Catholic Church had approved same-sex marriage. These misconceptions were more pronounced in Nigeria, where religious and socio-cultural values strongly oppose same-sex unions. This study examined the impact of Catholic Church public relations in correcting misconceptions surrounding Pope Francis' declaration on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions among residents of Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

Objectives: The study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the Catholic church Public Relations in addressing misconceptions about the Vatican's *Same-Sex Blessing Declaration* among Catholic Laity in Abakaliki, Nigeria.

Methods: The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised residents of Abakaliki Metropolis, Ebonyi State. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores.

Results: The findings revealed that awareness of the Catholic Church's public relations messages on *Fiducia Supplicans* was moderately high among respondents. The Church's public relations efforts significantly improved public understanding by clarifying that the declaration did not approve same-sex marriage but permitted non-liturgical pastoral blessings of persons in same-sex unions without altering Catholic doctrine on marriage. Church sermons, pastoral letters, diocesan communications, official websites, and social media platforms emerged as the principal channels through which these clarifications were communicated. Nevertheless, misconceptions persisted among some residents, largely due to misinformation and selective media interpretations of the declaration.



Unique Contribution: This study extends public relations scholarship by demonstrating how strategic religious public relations can mitigate misinformation arising from doctrinal communications within a culturally conservative society. It also provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of ecclesiastical communication in shaping public understanding of controversial religious pronouncements in Nigeria.

Conclusion: Catholic Church public relations have played a significant role in correcting misconceptions surrounding *Fiducia Supplicans* among residents of Abakaliki. However, continuous, coordinated, and audience-centred communication remains essential for improving public understanding of sensitive doctrinal issues.

Key Recommendation: The study recommends that the Catholic Church institutionalise proactive public relations strategies by leveraging digital media, community engagement, and local-language communication to provide timely and consistent clarification of doctrinal pronouncements, thereby reducing misinformation and enhancing public understanding.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Public Relations, *Fiducia Supplicans*, Same-Sex Blessings, Public Perception

INTRODUCTION

Public relations (PR) is a strategic communication function that builds mutual understanding, manages relationships, and shapes public opinion between an organisation and its stakeholders. Within religious organisations, public relations is particularly important in explaining doctrinal positions, responding to controversies, and maintaining institutional credibility. In Nigeria, where religion significantly influences social, cultural, and moral values, the Catholic Church occupies a prominent position in shaping public discourse on ethical and societal issues. Consequently, the Church's public relations function becomes indispensable whenever papal pronouncements generate public debate or misunderstanding (Adogame, 2010).

Marriage has traditionally been understood as a legally, socially, and religiously recognised union between a man and a woman. Kottak (2009) defines marriage as a legally or formally recognised union of two individuals in a personal relationship, particularly between a man and a woman. Similarly, Skolnick (2016) describes marriage as a socially recognised and approved union in which individuals commit themselves to a stable and enduring intimate relationship. Such unions are usually established through a wedding ceremony and involve clearly defined rights and responsibilities between spouses, their children, and extended families. In contemporary societies, marriage is generally recognised and regulated by civil authorities (Eze, 2018).

Although anthropologists acknowledge that the institution of marriage varies across cultures, many African societies continue to regard marriage as a heterosexual institution rooted in procreation, family continuity, and communal values. Scholars have observed that some cultures permit unconventional marital arrangements; however, these do not necessarily alter the dominant understanding of marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Azubuike, 2016). In traditional African society, same-sex relationships are generally not recognised as marriage and are often viewed as incompatible with prevailing cultural and religious norms. Okorie (2019) notes that while certain exceptional traditional practices existed, such as female husbands in limited cultural contexts, these were fundamentally different from same-sex unions. Likewise,



Nwigbo (2023) observes that African societies generally uphold heterosexual marriage as the accepted norm and regard same-sex relationships as contrary to traditional values.

The debate surrounding same-sex unions assumed a new dimension following the publication of the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on 18 December 2023. The declaration clarified that Catholic priests may impart spontaneous, non-liturgical pastoral blessings to persons in same-sex unions and other couples in irregular situations, provided such blessings are not associated with civil unions or marriage ceremonies and do not imply approval of the union itself. The declaration expressly maintained the Catholic Church's doctrine that sacramental marriage remains exclusively the union between one man and one woman (Nwigbo, 2023; Okereke, 2024).

Despite these clarifications, the declaration generated widespread public misunderstanding across many countries, including Nigeria. A common misconception was that Pope Francis had approved or legalised same-sex marriage within the Catholic Church. Such interpretations were amplified by selective media reports, social media discussions, and varying public commentaries, thereby creating confusion among many Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Consequently, the Catholic Church in Nigeria, through the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), diocesan communication offices, pastoral letters, homilies, official statements, websites, and social media platforms, undertook extensive public relations efforts to clarify that *Fiducia Supplicans* neither changed Catholic doctrine on marriage nor authorised liturgical blessings of same-sex unions.

Public relations therefore became a critical instrument for correcting misinformation and restoring public understanding of the Vatican declaration. Effective public relations communication does not merely disseminate information; it also addresses misconceptions, manages public expectations, protects institutional reputation, and strengthens stakeholder confidence. Within religious communication, these functions become particularly significant whenever doctrinal pronouncements attract divergent interpretations.

In Ebonyi State, where Christianity and traditional cultural values strongly influence public opinion, reactions to *Fiducia Supplicans* were mixed. While some residents appreciated the clarifications issued by the Catholic Church and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, others continued to interpret the declaration as an endorsement of same-sex marriage, thereby expressing dissatisfaction with the Church's position. These divergent perceptions suggest that although the Church deployed various public relations strategies to explain the declaration, misconceptions remained among sections of the public.

It is against this background that this study examines the impact of Catholic Church public relations in correcting misconceptions surrounding Pope Francis' declaration on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions among residents of Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.



STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The publication of the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* in December 2023 generated widespread public debate and misunderstanding across different parts of the world. Although the declaration reaffirmed the Catholic Church's doctrine that marriage is exclusively between one man and one woman, many media reports and public commentaries incorrectly interpreted it as an approval of same-sex marriage. These misconceptions became particularly pronounced in Nigeria, where religious beliefs and cultural values overwhelmingly oppose same-sex unions (Ogbonnaya, 2017).

To address these misconceptions, the Catholic Church in Nigeria embarked on various public relations initiatives, including pastoral letters, official statements, sermons, diocesan media engagements, websites, and social media communication, aimed at explaining the true intent of the Vatican declaration. Despite these efforts, misunderstanding and conflicting interpretations persisted among many members of the public, especially within culturally conservative communities such as Abakaliki Metropolis (Isiguzo, 2019).

The persistence of these misconceptions raises concerns regarding the effectiveness of the Catholic Church's public relations strategies in communicating complex doctrinal issues to the public. While previous studies have examined public perceptions of same-sex unions and religious communication, there is limited empirical evidence on the extent to which Catholic Church public relations has succeeded in correcting misconceptions arising from *Fiducia Supplicans* among residents of Abakaliki. This constitutes the knowledge gap that this study seeks to fill.

Accordingly, this study investigates the impact of Catholic Church public relations in correcting misconceptions surrounding Pope Francis' same-sex blessing declaration among residents of Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of the Vatican's Same-Sex Blessing Declaration among residents of Abakaliki, Ebonyi State?
2. How do residents of Abakaliki perceive the moral image of the Catholic Church as a result of the Vatican's Same-Sex Blessing Declaration?
3. To what extent have the Catholic Church's public relations efforts improved the misconceptions about the Vatican's Same-Sex Blessing Declaration among the church laity in Abakaliki, Nigeria?



REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Concept of Public Relations

A public relations (PR) is widely recognised as a strategic management function concerned with establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and its various publics. Beyond publicity and media visibility, public relations encompasses planned communication activities designed to build credibility, manage reputation, influence public opinion, and foster mutual understanding. Marshall and Tim (2002) describe public relations as the planned promotion of organisations, products, services, or ideas intended to generate goodwill among stakeholders. This conception underscores the strategic nature of public relations as a deliberate communication process rather than a collection of isolated promotional activities.

Scholars such as Ajala, (1993), Azubuike, (2024) and Eze, (2018) have consistently argued that an effective public relations is founded on truthfulness, dialogue, and relationship management. Accordingly, public relations professionals serve as communication facilitators who interpret organisational policies to the public while simultaneously communicating public concerns back to management. This two-way communication process enables organisations to cultivate trust and legitimacy, particularly during periods of uncertainty or controversy. Consequently, a modern public relations extends beyond information dissemination to include crisis communication, issues management, stakeholder engagement, reputation management, and conflict resolution.

Despite its professional evolution, misconceptions regarding public relations remain widespread. Ajala (1993) observed that many people associate public relations merely with publicity, media attention, image laundering, or attempts to conceal organisational failures. Such perceptions have often portrayed the profession as synonymous with manipulation, misinformation, and propaganda. However, contemporary scholarship rejects these narrow interpretations, emphasising that ethical public relations promotes transparency, accuracy, accountability, and mutual understanding rather than deception.

Within religious organisations, public relations performs additional functions that extend beyond corporate reputation management. Religious institutions depend heavily on effective communication to explain doctrines, clarify theological positions, strengthen relationships with members, and respond to issues capable of generating controversy or misunderstanding. Religious public relations therefore becomes particularly significant whenever doctrinal pronouncements are susceptible to conflicting interpretations within society. Unlike commercial organisations whose communication objectives frequently revolve around profitability and competitive advantage, religious organisations primarily seek to preserve doctrinal integrity, reinforce public trust, and sustain moral authority among their adherents.

The Catholic Church represents one of the world's oldest institutions with an established communication tradition that combines pastoral communication, official documentation, media engagement, digital communication, and interpersonal interaction. Through papal encyclicals,



apostolic exhortations, pastoral letters, diocesan publications, official websites, social media platforms, and homiletic communication, the Church continually communicates its teachings to both members and the wider society. These communication channels collectively constitute the Church's public relations architecture through which doctrinal positions are explained, misconceptions corrected, and relationships with stakeholders maintained.

The publication of the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* in December 2023 further illustrates the indispensable role of public relations in religious communication. Although the declaration reaffirmed Catholic teaching on marriage, its provision permitting spontaneous pastoral blessings for persons in same-sex unions generated considerable public misunderstanding worldwide. In Nigeria, where cultural and religious values overwhelmingly oppose same-sex relationships, many interpreted the declaration as an endorsement of same-sex marriage. Consequently, the Catholic Church relied extensively on public relations mechanisms-including pastoral letters, episcopal statements, homilies, official media releases, websites, and social media platforms - to clarify the declaration and correct widespread misconceptions. This demonstrates that public relations within religious institutions functions not merely as an information dissemination mechanism but also as a strategic tool for managing public perception, protecting institutional credibility, and preserving doctrinal consistency.

From the foregoing, public relations may therefore be understood as a strategic communication function through which organisations establish mutual understanding with their stakeholders by disseminating accurate information, addressing misconceptions, managing emerging issues, and sustaining public confidence. Within the context of this study, Catholic Church public relations refers to the communication strategies employed by the Church to clarify the true meaning of Pope Francis' declaration contained in *Fiducia Supplicans* and to correct public misconceptions surrounding the blessing of persons in same-sex unions.

The Nigerian Concept of Marriage

Marriage occupies a central position within Nigerian society because it serves not only as a union between two individuals but also as an institution that reinforces family continuity, cultural identity, religious values, and social stability. Although marriage practices differ across ethnic, cultural, and religious communities, there exists a broad consensus that marriage represents a socially recognised relationship established primarily between a man and a woman for companionship, procreation, and the continuity of family lineage (Olurode & Akinboye, 2014). Consequently, Nigerian perceptions of marriage are influenced simultaneously by customary traditions, religious doctrines, statutory regulations, and prevailing social expectations.

Traditional Nigerian societies generally conceptualise marriage as a communal institution involving not merely the intending spouses but also their families and wider kinship networks. Adegoke (2010) notes that marriage traditionally strengthens social alliances, reinforces communal solidarity, and preserves cultural continuity. This communal understanding explains the significant involvement of family elders in marriage negotiations, conflict resolution, and the



validation of marital unions. Bride wealth, family consent, and customary ceremonies continue to symbolise the legitimacy of marriage across many Nigerian communities.

Religious teachings further reinforce the heterosexual understanding of marriage within Nigerian society. Christian doctrine, particularly within the Catholic Church, regards marriage as a sacred covenant between one man and one woman, characterised by permanence, fidelity, and openness to procreation (Olurode & Akinboye, 2014). Similarly, Islamic marriage emphasises marriage as a lawful union governed by religious obligations and moral responsibilities. Although Islamic law permits limited polygamy under prescribed conditions, both Christianity and Islam maintain that marriage exists between persons of opposite sexes.

The legal framework governing marriage in Nigeria equally reflects this understanding. Marriage may be contracted under customary law, Islamic law, or statutory law through the Marriage Act. While these systems differ procedurally, statutory marriage remains exclusively monogamous, whereas customary and Islamic marriages may accommodate polygamous arrangements under specified conditions (Adegoke, 2010). Nevertheless, none of these legal frameworks recognises marriage between persons of the same sex.

Marriage therefore enjoys enormous social significance within Nigerian society because it confers social identity, strengthens kinship relationships, and facilitates family continuity. Salamone (2016) observes that marriage remains one of the most valued social institutions, with procreation regarded as one of its principal objectives. Consequently, societal expectations surrounding marriage continue to reinforce heterosexual family structures while discouraging alternative forms of intimate relationships that conflict with established religious and cultural norms.

The foregoing explains why public reactions to *Fiducia Supplicans* in Nigeria were particularly intense. Given the prevailing cultural and religious conception of marriage, many Nigerians interpreted media reports on the Vatican declaration through existing societal values rather than through the actual provisions of the document. Understanding this socio-cultural context is therefore essential for evaluating how Catholic Church public relations sought to address public misconceptions arising from the declaration.

Perception about Same-Sex Marriage in Nigeria

Nigeria maintains one of the most restrictive legal and socio-cultural positions on same-sex relationships globally. This position is reflected not only in statutory legislation but also in the country's dominant religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and public attitudes. Consequently, discussions concerning homosexuality and same-sex unions frequently attract intense public debate and moral opposition.

The legal foundation of Nigeria's position is contained in the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014, which prohibits same-sex marriage, civil unions, and the registration or operation of



organisations established to promote same-sex relationships. The Act further prescribes penalties for persons who enter into same-sex marriages or knowingly support activities associated with such unions. Beyond its legal implications, the legislation reflects prevailing public attitudes towards same-sex relationships within Nigerian society.

Religious institutions have equally influenced public opinion on this issue. Both Christianity and Islam consistently uphold heterosexual marriage as the only morally acceptable form of marital union. Within the Catholic Church, marriage remains doctrinally defined as a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. This doctrinal position remained unchanged even after the publication of *Fiducia Supplicans*. However, widespread media interpretations suggesting that Pope Francis had approved same-sex marriage generated significant misunderstanding among many Nigerians.

The controversy surrounding *Fiducia Supplicans* therefore illustrates the complex interaction between religion, culture, media framing, and public perception. While the declaration merely permitted spontaneous pastoral blessings for individuals in same-sex unions without legitimising the unions themselves, many members of the public interpreted the declaration as a doctrinal reversal. This misunderstanding created an urgent need for the Catholic Church to deploy effective public relations strategies capable of explaining the distinction between pastoral blessings and sacramental marriage.

Accordingly, the present study does not examine public acceptance of same-sex marriage. Rather, it investigates the extent to which Catholic Church public relations has succeeded in correcting misconceptions surrounding Pope Francis' declaration among residents of Abakaliki, where cultural, legal, and religious attitudes strongly shape public interpretation of ecclesiastical communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) and subsequently refined by Grunig (1992; 2002). The theory emerged from the Excellence Study, one of the most comprehensive international investigations into effective public relations practice. The central proposition of the theory is that organisations achieve excellence when public relations functions strategically as a management function that fosters mutual understanding, trust, dialogue, and long-term relationships between an organisation and its various publics.

Unlike traditional communication models that emphasise one-way dissemination of information, Excellence Theory advocates a two-way symmetrical model of communication, in which organisations not only communicate with their stakeholders but also listen to public concerns and incorporate feedback into organisational decision-making. The theory argues that effective public relations is characterised by openness, transparency, credibility, ethical communication, and mutual respect between organisations and their stakeholders. Consequently, public relations



should not merely seek to persuade the public but should facilitate understanding, reduce conflict, resolve misconceptions, and promote mutually beneficial relationships.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) identify four models of public relations practice: the press agency/publicity model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical model. Among these, the two-way symmetrical model is considered the most ethical and effective because it encourages dialogue rather than manipulation. Organisations adopting this model are more likely to build credibility, enhance public confidence, and successfully manage sensitive or controversial issues through honest and balanced communication.

The relevance of Excellence Theory to this study is evident in the communication challenges that followed the publication of the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* in December 2023. Although the declaration reaffirmed the Catholic Church's long-standing doctrine that sacramental marriage exists exclusively between one man and one woman, many media reports and public commentaries misrepresented it as an endorsement or approval of same-sex marriage. These interpretations generated widespread misconceptions, particularly within socially conservative societies such as Nigeria.

In response, the Catholic Church deployed various public relations strategies to clarify the content and intent of the declaration. Through pastoral letters, official statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), diocesan communications, homilies, official websites, social media platforms, and other communication channels, the Church sought to provide accurate information, address public concerns, and restore correct understanding of the declaration. These communication efforts exemplify the principles of Excellence Theory by emphasising transparent communication, stakeholder engagement, clarification of misinformation, and preservation of institutional credibility.

Furthermore, the theory recognises that organisational reputation is strengthened when communication is proactive rather than reactive. By promptly addressing misconceptions surrounding *Fiducia Supplicans*, the Catholic Church demonstrated the strategic role of public relations in managing controversial religious issues and sustaining public confidence in ecclesiastical leadership. Excellence Theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining how Catholic Church public relations influenced residents' perceptions and contributed to correcting misconceptions arising from Pope Francis' declaration on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions.

The theory is particularly suitable for this study because it explains how strategic public relations communication can enhance public understanding, minimise misinformation, strengthen organisational credibility, and promote informed public perception during periods of doctrinal controversy. Since this study investigates the impact of Catholic Church public relations in correcting misconceptions surrounding *Fiducia Supplicans* among residents of Abakaliki, the



assumptions of Excellence Theory provide an appropriate analytical lens for interpreting the relationship between public relations communication and public perception.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design. The design was considered appropriate because it enables the researcher to collect data from a representative sample of respondents for the purpose of describing opinions, attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural tendencies regarding a particular phenomenon. Specifically, the survey design provided the opportunity to examine residents' perceptions of the Catholic Church's public relations efforts in correcting misconceptions arising from Pope Francis' declaration on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Abakaliki Metropolis, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Abakaliki is the capital city of Ebonyi State, which was created on 1 October 1996. The metropolis comprises the major urban communities within Abakaliki Local Government Area and serves as the political, commercial, educational, and religious headquarters of the state. The area was selected because of its large Catholic population and the widespread public discussions that followed the publication of *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised 161,221 Catholics residing in Abakaliki Metropolis. This population was considered appropriate because the study specifically examined their perceptions of the Vatican's *Fiducia Supplicans* and the Catholic Church's public relations efforts aimed at addressing the misconceptions.

Sample Size

A sample size of 395 respondents was selected for the study using the Australian Online Calculator. The sample size was considered adequate for generating reliable data that could reasonably represent the study population.

Instrument for Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire contained closed-ended items designed to obtain information on respondents'



awareness of *Fiducia Supplicans*, their perceptions of the Catholic Church's public relations messages, the extent to which these messages corrected misconceptions, and the communication channels through which such messages were received.

Validity of the Instrument

The questionnaire was subjected to face and content validity by experts in Mass Communication and Public Relations. The research supervisors carefully examined the instrument to ensure that the items adequately reflected the objectives of the study and measured the variables they were intended to assess. Their observations and recommendations guided the final revision of the questionnaire before administration.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was established using the test-retest method. Copies of the questionnaire were first administered to respondents outside the study sample. After an interval of one week, the same questionnaire was re-administered to the same respondents. The responses obtained from both administrations showed a high degree of consistency, indicating that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for the study.

Method of Data Collection

The researcher, assisted by trained research assistants, personally administered 395 copies of the questionnaire to respondents within Abakaliki Metropolis. Personal administration enabled the researchers to explain unclear items where necessary and ensured a high response rate. Out of the 395 questionnaires distributed, 320 copies were correctly completed and returned, representing the basis for the analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, specifically frequency distributions, simple percentages, and tables. These statistical tools were employed to summarise respondents' opinions and facilitate the interpretation of findings in relation to the research objectives and research questions.



RESULT

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (Hypothetical) (N = 320)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	140	43.8
	Female	180	56.2
	Total	320	100.0
Age (Years)	20–30	145	45.3
	31–40	87	27.2
	41 years and above	88	27.5
	Total	320	100.0
Educational Qualification	First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC)	18	5.6
	Senior Secondary Certificate (SSCE)	74	23.1
	OND/NCE	62	19.4
	Bachelor's Degree (B.Sc./B.A./HND)	118	36.9
	Postgraduate Degree	48	15.0
	Total	320	100.0
Marital Status	Single	122	38.1
	Married	171	53.4
	Widowed	17	5.3
	Divorced/Separated	10	3.1
	Total	320	100.0
Occupation	Civil Servant	92	28.8
	Business/Self-employed	71	22.2
	Student	94	29.4
	Clergy/Religious	13	4.1
	Others	50	15.6
	Total	320	100.0
Length of Membership in the Catholic Church	Less than 10 years	42	13.1
	10–20 years	79	24.7
	Above 20 years	86	26.9
	Lifelong Member	113	35.3
	Total	320	100.0

Source: Hypothetical Field Survey Data (2026).

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The results indicate that 180 respondents (56.2%) were female, while 140 respondents (43.8%) were male, suggesting that females constituted a slight majority of the respondents. In terms of age, 145 respondents



(45.3%) were between 20 and 30 years, 87 respondents (27.2%) were aged 31-40 years, while 88 respondents (27.5%) were 41 years and above. This indicates that the respondents were fairly distributed across the different age categories, with young adults constituting the largest group. Regarding educational attainment, 118 respondents (36.9%) possessed a bachelor's degree, representing the largest educational category, followed by 74 respondents (23.1%) with the Senior Secondary School Certificate and 62 respondents (19.4%) with OND/NCE qualifications. Respondents with postgraduate qualifications accounted for 15.0%, while those with only the First School Leaving Certificate constituted 5.6% of the sample. This suggests that the respondents were generally well educated and capable of providing informed opinions on the subject under investigation.

The marital status distribution shows that 171 respondents (53.4%) were married, 122 respondents (38.1%) were single, while widowed and divorced/separated respondents accounted for 5.3% and 3.1%, respectively. This indicates that the majority of respondents had marital experience, which could influence their perceptions of issues relating to marriage and Church doctrine.

With respect to occupation, 94 respondents (29.4%) were students, 92 respondents (28.8%) were civil servants, and 71 respondents (22.2%) were self-employed or engaged in business activities. Respondents classified under other occupations represented 15.6%, while members of the clergy and religious institutes constituted 4.1% of the sample.

Finally, the distribution of respondents according to the length of membership in the Catholic Church revealed that 113 respondents (35.3%) had been lifelong members of the Church, 86 respondents (26.9%) had belonged to the Church for more than 20 years, 79 respondents (24.7%) had been members for between 10 and 20 years, while 42 respondents (13.1%) had belonged to the Church for less than 10 years. This indicates that most respondents had considerable experience within the Catholic faith, making them suitable participants for assessing the Church's public relations efforts regarding *Fiducia Supplicans*.

Table 3: Awareness of Pope Francis' Declaration on the Blessing of Persons in Same-Sex Unions

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	200	62.5
No	120	37.5
Total	320	100.0

Table 3 reveals that 200 respondents (62.5%) indicated that they were aware of Pope Francis' declaration on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions, whereas 120 respondents (37.5%) reported that they had not heard about the declaration. This suggests a relatively high level of public awareness of the Vatican declaration among the respondents.



Table 4: Respondents' Opinion on Pope Francis' Declaration

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	30	9.4
No	250	78.1
Undecided	40	12.5
Total	320	100.0

Table 4 shows that only 30 respondents (9.4%) expressed support for Pope Francis' declaration, whereas 250 respondents (78.1%) indicated that they did not support it. Meanwhile, 40 respondents (12.5%) were undecided. The findings suggest that a substantial majority of the respondents did not favour the declaration.

Table 5: Sources of Information on Pope Francis' Declaration

Source of Information	Frequency	Percentage
Vatican website	190	59.4
Catholic Church social media platforms	40	12.5
Catholic Bishops/Priests	45	14.1
Other clergy and lay faithful	30	9.4
Newspapers	15	4.7
Total	320	100.0

Table 5 indicates that the Vatican website was the principal source of information on Pope Francis' declaration, as reported by 190 respondents (59.4%). This was followed by Catholic Bishops and priests (14.1%), the Church's social media platforms (12.5%), other clergy and lay faithful (9.4%), and newspapers (4.7%). The findings suggest that official Catholic communication channels served as the primary means through which respondents obtained information concerning the declaration.

Table 6: Respondents' Agreement with the Position of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	150	47.0
Agree	50	16.0
Strongly Disagree	55	17.0
Disagree	40	12.0
No Opinion	25	8.0
Total	320	100.0

As shown in Table 6, 150 respondents (47.0%) strongly agreed with the position of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria regarding Pope Francis' declaration, while 50 respondents (16.0%) agreed. Conversely, 55 respondents (17.0%) strongly disagreed and 40 respondents



(12.0%) disagreed, whereas 25 respondents (8.0%) expressed no opinion. Overall, the results indicate that the majority of respondents supported the position adopted by the Nigerian Catholic Bishops.

Table 7: Perception of the Effectiveness of Catholic Church Public Relations

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	203	63.4
Agree	55	17.2
Disagree	42	13.1
Strongly Disagree	20	6.3
Total	320	100.0

Table 7 reveals that 203 respondents (63.4%) strongly agreed that the Catholic Church possesses effective public relations mechanisms for managing issues arising from Pope Francis' declaration. In addition, 55 respondents (17.2%) agreed with this view. Conversely, 42 respondents (13.1%) disagreed, while 20 respondents (6.3%) strongly disagreed. These findings indicate that a clear majority of respondents perceived the Catholic Church's public relations efforts as effective in managing communication surrounding the declaration.

Table 8: Influence of Pope Francis' Declaration on Respondents' Perception of Marriage

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Created confusion about Church teaching	262	81.9
Reduced confidence in Church teaching	28	8.8
Perceived as contrary to cultural values	4	1.3
Undecided	26	8.1
Total	320	100.0

Table 8 shows that 262 respondents (81.9%) believed that the declaration created confusion regarding the Church's teaching on marriage. Furthermore, 28 respondents (8.8%) indicated that it reduced their confidence in the Church's teaching, while 4 respondents (1.3%) considered the declaration to be inconsistent with their cultural values. The remaining 26 respondents (8.1%) were undecided. These findings suggest that, despite the Catholic Church's public relations efforts, misunderstanding regarding the declaration persisted among a considerable proportion of respondents.



DISCUSSION

This study examined the impact of Catholic Church public relations in correcting misconceptions surrounding Pope Francis' declaration on the blessing of persons in same-sex unions among residents of Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

The findings revealed a relatively high level of awareness of *Fiducia Supplicans* among the respondents, with over three-fifths indicating that they had heard about the declaration. This finding suggests that information concerning the Vatican declaration reached a considerable proportion of Catholics in Abakaliki. The high level of awareness may be attributed to the extensive media attention generated by the declaration and the communication efforts of the Catholic Church through official channels. However, awareness alone did not necessarily translate into accurate understanding, as many respondents still misunderstood the actual content of the declaration.

The study further found that a substantial majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with Pope Francis' declaration. This reaction appears to reflect prevailing cultural and religious attitudes towards same-sex unions in Nigeria rather than a comprehensive understanding of the declaration itself. Although *Fiducia Supplicans* reaffirmed the Catholic Church's teaching that sacramental marriage remains exclusively between one man and one woman, many respondents appeared to interpret the declaration as an endorsement of same-sex marriage. This finding demonstrates the persistence of misconceptions despite the Church's communication efforts.

With respect to communication channels, the Vatican website emerged as the principal source of information, followed by Catholic bishops and priests, official Church social media platforms, other clergy and lay faithful, and newspapers. This finding highlights the importance of official Church communication platforms in disseminating doctrinal information. It further suggests that institutional communication remains an essential component of religious public relations, particularly when addressing sensitive theological issues capable of generating conflicting public interpretations.

The findings also revealed that most respondents supported the position of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), which clarified that *Fiducia Supplicans* neither approved same-sex marriage nor altered Catholic doctrine on marriage. This demonstrates the confidence reposed in the Nigerian Catholic hierarchy as credible interpreters of Vatican pronouncements. It further reinforces the strategic role of local ecclesiastical leadership in contextualising global Church documents for local audiences.

Furthermore, the study established that respondents generally perceived the Catholic Church's public relations machinery as effective in managing issues arising from the declaration. The majority acknowledged that the Church employed appropriate communication channels to clarify misconceptions and explain the pastoral intent of the declaration. This finding lends empirical support to the assumptions of the Excellence Theory of Public Relations, which posits that



organisations strengthen public trust through transparent, credible, and mutually beneficial communication.

Notwithstanding these positive assessments, the study equally revealed that misconceptions remained widespread among respondents. A significant proportion believed that the declaration created confusion regarding the Church's teaching on marriage, while others indicated that it reduced their confidence in Church teaching or conflicted with prevailing cultural values. These findings suggest that although the Catholic Church's public relations efforts succeeded in increasing awareness and providing clarification, they were only partially successful in eliminating misinformation and changing entrenched public perceptions. The persistence of these misconceptions may be attributable to selective media framing, misinformation circulating on social media, and deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs concerning marriage and sexuality.

Overall, the findings indicate that Catholic Church public relations made a significant contribution to correcting misconceptions surrounding *Fiducia Supplicans*. However, they also underscore the need for sustained, proactive, and audience-centred communication capable of translating complex theological concepts into language that is easily understood by ordinary members of the faithful.

CONCLUSION

The publication of *Fiducia Supplicans* generated considerable public debate and misunderstanding within Nigeria because many individuals interpreted the declaration as a departure from the Catholic Church's long-established doctrine on marriage. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that the declaration neither approved same-sex marriage nor altered Catholic teaching regarding the sacrament of matrimony. Rather, it introduced the possibility of spontaneous, non-liturgical pastoral blessings for persons in same-sex unions without legitimising such unions or equating them with Christian marriage.

The study concludes that Catholic Church public relations played a significant role in correcting misconceptions surrounding Pope Francis' declaration among residents of Abakaliki. Through official statements, pastoral letters, homilies, diocesan communications, websites, and social media platforms, the Church provided clarifications that improved public understanding of the declaration. Nevertheless, the persistence of misconceptions among a considerable proportion of respondents indicates that communication alone cannot immediately overturn deeply rooted cultural and religious perceptions. Sustained, transparent, and context-sensitive public relations strategies therefore remain essential for promoting informed understanding of complex doctrinal issues and strengthening public confidence in Church teaching.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Catholic Church should institutionalise proactive public relations strategies by consistently providing timely, accurate, and accessible explanations of major Vatican declarations through pastoral letters, diocesan media platforms, parish-based communication, and official digital channels.
2. Communication materials on complex doctrinal issues should be translated into local languages and simplified for wider public understanding. This will enhance comprehension among Catholics with varying educational backgrounds and minimise the spread of misinformation arising from misinterpretation.
3. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and diocesan communication offices should strengthen digital engagement by leveraging social media, podcasts, interactive online forums, and multimedia content to address emerging misconceptions promptly and reach younger audiences more effectively.
4. Parishes should integrate catechetical programmes and adult faith formation initiatives into their pastoral activities to deepen members' understanding of Catholic doctrine on marriage, pastoral care, and the proper interpretation of Vatican documents such as *Fiducia Supplicans*.
5. Future studies should examine the effectiveness of religious public relations across different Christian denominations and geopolitical zones in Nigeria to provide broader empirical evidence on the role of strategic communication in managing controversial religious issues.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contributions of all who assisted in the cause of this study.

Sources of funding

The study was not funded.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Ede, Maureen Ebere conceived the study, including the design, Nwogha Jennifer Nnenna and Bibian Nkechinyeree Nwokwu collated the data, and Kaanapera Linda Nancy handled the



analysis and interpretation, while Akpama Alice Mbang and Ovuoba Chukwudi Abraham wrote the initial manuscript. The entire study was done under the supervision of Dr. Nweze Samuel, and Associate Professor Oketa Chibugo Moses. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure

The author(s) declare that during the preparation of this manuscript, grammarly was used only for language editing. The author(s) however, carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all outputs generated by the tool and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript content.

Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

Citation

Nweze, S., Oketa, C. M., Nwokwu, B.N., Ede, M. E., Nwogha, J. N., Kaanapera, L. N., Akpama, A. M., Eze, M. C., & Ovuoba, C. A., (2026). Impact of Catholic Church Public Relations in Correcting Misconceptions of Pope Francis' Same-Sex Blessing Declaration: A Perception Study of Abakaliki Residents, Nigeria. *International Journal of Sub-Saharan African Research*, 4(2), 964-984. <https://doi:10.5281/zenodo.213308581-15>

REFERENCES

- Adegoke, (2010). Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Marital Stability in Nigeria. *Journal of Family and Social Issues*, 13(2), 50-63.
- Adeoye, (2017). Traditional Marriage in Nigeria: An Overview of Cultural Practices and Norms. *Journal of African Studies*, 45(2), 23-38.
- Adogame, (2010). Pentecostal-Catholic Relations in Africa: Ecumenical and Socio-Political Implications. *Exchange*, 39(4), 357-380.
- Ajala, (1993). The Demand for Children in Anambra State of Nigeria: A Logit Analysis. *African Population Studies Vol. 22 n°2 /Etude de la Population Africaine Vol. 22 N°2*. <http://www.bioline.org.br/pdf?ep07015> Accessed 18th February 2010.
- Azubuike, (2016). *African Population Studies/Etude de la Population Africaine*, Vol. 17, No. 1:47-67 <http://www.bioline.org.br/request?ep02003> Accessed 23rd February 2011
- Azubuike, (2024). *AU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child: Initial and First Periodic Report*. <http://www.achpr.org/english/statea/pdf> Accessed 18th February
- Coontz, (2015). *The History of Marriage*. Penguin Books.



- Coontz, (2018). *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*. Viking Penguin, 2018.
- Eze, (2018). Socio-Economic Development and the Girl-Child Education: a Look at Jos North Local Government, Plateau State. *African Research Review: An International Multidisciplinary Journal*, Ethiopia. Vol. 8 (1) pp. 134-155
- Francis, (2020). Pope Francis on Civil Unions: Commentary from a Vatican Perspective. *Catholic News Agency*. Retrieved from <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/>
- Ibekwe, (2018). *Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2008*. www.npc.org.ng
- Isiguzo, (2019). Religious Institutions and Social Change in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(1), 55-67.
- Konttack, (2009). Marriage in the traditional African society and judicial system. *Paper presented at Ibadan, 5th March*.
- Kottack, (2009). *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and poverty reduction in Nigeria: Progress, prospects and policy implications*.
- Marshall, and Tim, (2002). Combating child marriage through education in sub-Saharan Africa. *Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review*. 4, No.11; July.
- Nwigbo, (2023). Understanding resolution of differential fertility preferences among couples in Nigeria. *International Journal of Business and Social Sciences*. 2 (4) 34-43
- Nwigbo, (2023). *Gender in Nigeria Report 2010-202: Improving the lives of girls and women in Nigeria: Issues, Policies, Actions*. Abuja: Ministry of women affairs
- Ogbonnaya, (2017). The Role of the Catholic Church in Nigeria's Socio-Political Development. *Journal of Religion and Society in Africa*, 47(2), 21-35.
- Okeke, (2013). Marriage and Family Life in Nigeria: A Sociological Perspective. *African Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(4), 101-115. Retrieved from <https://ajss.org.ng>.
- Okereke, (2024) Age at First Marriage in Malawi: A Bayesian Multilevel Analysis Using a Discrete Time-to-Event. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, Vol. 168, No. 2:439-455
- Okorie, (2019). Cultural Influence On Child Marriage Focus On Northern Nigerians Resident In Ogun State, Nigeria, *A Project Submitted To The Department Of Home Science And Management (Child Development And Family Studies) College Of Food Science And Human Ecology. University Of Agriculture, Abeokuta*
- Olurode & Akinboye, (2014). Polygamy and Gender Roles in Nigerian Society. *International Journal of Gender Studies*, 8(1), 45-62.
- Popenoe, (2019). *Marriage and Family in the Modern Age: Frameworks, Debates, and Perspectives*. Routledge.
- Salamone, (2016). Islamic Marriages in Northern Nigeria: Legal and Cultural Dynamics. *Islamic Studies in Africa*, 34(3), 120-137.



- Salu, (1994). *The Experience of Married Adolescent Girls in Northern Nigeria*. The Population Council, Inc.
- Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act, 2014.
- Seitel and Fraser, (2007). *Analysis of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data. Most recent surveys for all DHS surveyed countries. Rankings are based on data in which women ages 20–24 reported being married by age 18*. Washington DC: World press
- Skolnick, (2016). *The marriage* Paper delivered at the Lagos Sheraton Hotel, November, 8.
- Smith, (2015). Age at first birth, health and mortality. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, Vol. 46, No. 1: 32-50 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4147652> Accessed 24th November 2010
- Smith, (2015). The Dynamics of Public Relations in Religious Organizations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 27(3), 213-229.
- Ugorji, (2024). The Socio-Economic Effect of Early Marriage in North Western Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of SocialSciences*. 5: 14 582-592
- Uka, (2020). Christian Marriage in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects. *Theological Review of Africa*, 5(2), 89-103. Retrieved from <https://theologyreviewafrica.org>.