

Humanist resolutions in crisis

By Edwin Madunagu

TWO weeks before last Christmas I received a telephone call from a former student of mine. He called to wish me "Merry Christmas" and to ask for advice and favour on behalf of his son. I believe the latter was the real purpose of his call. Shouting, "praise the Lord" down the phone, I asked the man at the other end to send the boy down to me. But he deflected the subject of the conversation and expressed happiness that I had now drawn "closer" to God. I asked what he meant and he replied that my "praise the Lord" was a sign that I was now nearer to God, going by the radical ideals I held and espoused when I was his teacher. I laughed and told him that all the ideas, beliefs and commitments I held while I was a university teacher are not only intact but also stronger and more robust having been fed by more knowledge, more experience and greater power of introspection. I asked how many people in Calabar he had presented his boy's problem. He replied that I was the only one. I exclaimed, "not even your pastor?" For the man and his family ardently wish to be seen as very religious; they literally worship the pastor, and would do anything the "man of God" commands. He replied: "No; that is not the type of problem I can take to him. We discuss only spiritual problems". I terminated the conversation but not before I reminded him to send the boy to me.

My response to my caller's problem was an instance of what I call "automatic and unconditional solidarity" with the oppressed, the cheated, the needy and the wretched of the earth. It had been one of my ideological canons for many years; and in the year 2002 I made it one of my New Year resolutions. But the whole discussion with the man was depressing. I refused, as I always do, to discuss my re-

ligious beliefs, if any. I discuss religious statements in secular contexts. I did not tell my former student that I made and repeated the exhortation "Praise the Lord" to bring out the hypocrisies and contradictions in his usually noisy profession of faith: Knowing where to go to obtain maximum material assistance even if the source is, according to his doctrine, not a son or daughter of God, and dancing round the town in religious processions shouting the need to be "born again" and the promise of "deliverance from seductive, but evil forces".

Here was a man who, without notice, presented me with a case of injustice whose resolution would demand time, energy, tenacity, material resources and above all, courage. Here was I automatically offering my assistance. And there was the man, again appearing to rejoice at what he believed was a departure from the radical orientation which made it possible for me to offer him automatic solidarity. Latter that day, I decided to go back to the resolutions which appeared a year ago in this column under the caption Three humanist resolution (The Guardian, January 17, 2002). They were: Love for all; uninhibited and fearless criticism and self-criticism; and automatic and unconditional solidarity with the oppressed the wretched of the earth, and victims of injustice.

On love, I quoted copiously from the thirteenth chapter of Apostle Paul's first letter to the Christian Congregation in Corinth: "I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand

all secretes; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains - but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt - but if I have no love, this does me no good... Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience never fail".

There is nothing really to add to Saint Paul's exposition, except to underline the fact that the apostle told us what love is as well as what it is not. And the critical point is what it is not: for a good understanding of what love is not will strengthen your understanding of what it is. In this regard, what strikes me most forcefully in this review is Paul's categorical statement that even if you give away everything you have, including your body, but have no love, your generosity is nothing. But then, love is generous. What Paul intended by this maximalist statement is that although generosity is an integral part of love, that alone does not constitute love. Put differently, even if I am generous up to the limit that is humanly possible there is still something I must possess to be able to claim that I love. This links up with my other two resolutions.

Solidarity is unconditional when its character and content are not shaped by the knowledge of the character of the recipient. In other words if someone who had treated you unjustly and unfairly, without apology, or whom you know not to be an entirely kind, or generous, or fair, person

becomes himself or herself a victim of injustice, you must forget about the past and extend solidarity to him or her. Similarly, solidarity is said to be automatic if a request or need for it does not meet with the response. "Okay, I shall think about it"; rather, it follows the maxim offered by an African leader about a decade ago: "if you see an injustice being done, you must try to stop it; if you don't have the power to stop it, then speak against it; if you cannot even do that then at least show your anger or dis-approval". In other words there is always something you can do, even if it is merely symbolic, whenever and wherever you meet with a situation requiring solidarity. My conception of automatic and unconditional solidarity is therefore consistent with love in the sense of Saint Paul. But this conception is not only humanist; it is also Marxist and communist.

My other resolution which is also Marxist, communist and humanist, relates to criticism and self-criticism. It is also consistent with Saint Paul's maximalist conception of love. Hear Saint Paul; "Love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth; love never gives up' and its faith, hope and patience never fail". And Karl Marx: "Since it is not for us to create a plan for the future that will hold for all time, all the most surely what we contemporaries have to do is the uncompromising evaluation of all that exists, uncompromising in the sense that our criticism fears neither its own results not the conflict with the powers that be". This is an aspect of what Marx called the categorical imperative for humanists, namely, "the struggle to overcome all circumstances in which the human being is hu-

miliated, enslaved, abandoned and despised". You should compare what Saint Paul said about 2,000 years ago and what Karl Marx said 1,800 years later.

In conclusion, I would ask all Christians to go back to the 13th chapter of Saint Paul's first letter to the people of Corinth. And most of my friends, comrades and colleagues, as well as my extended families and neighbours, are Christians. After reading Saint Paul, they should turn to The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Chapter 5 to 7. The three Chapters were a continuous public sermon delivered by Jesus Christ. It is commonly referred to as The Sermon on the Mount. After absorbing these two passages, Christians should reflect on the situation where a beneficiary of love (in the sense of Saint Paul) is hostile to criticism, talk less of self-criticism; think of a situation where some actual or potential beneficiaries of love believe it should be exclusive to them or their family or group; think of a situation where a beneficiary of love believes that he or she deserves it, but is not obliged to extend same, even in a modest form, to others; think of a situation where a beneficiary of love either sincerely believes, or hypocritically claims, that even if you possess all the attributes of love (in the sense of Saint Paul and Karl Marx) you are destined for hell unless you join a noisy religious gang or a mesmerised and docile religious congregation; and conversely regards a member of such congregation as eminently qualified for paradise even if he or she lacks all the attributes listed by Saint Paul and Karl Marx.

But the test of a resolution is in the crises its execution generates. In execution, the three humanist resolutions inevitably generate crises. They should emerge from these crises stronger, not weaker, purer, not compromised.