

Nina' Mba's Insider / Outsider's Account



Let's talk it over

"LETs talk it over" was the title of a programme on the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (later Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria) delivered by the Right Reverend Monsignor Pedro, Ayodele Martins. Before 1960, Martins had also broadcast talks for the Religious Department of the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. As part of its celebration of fifty years of broadcasting, FRCN recently aired a couple of Monsignor's talks. It also gave out its copyright to the committee of Monsignor's "children" who organized the publication of the one set scripts of Martin's talk, which, so far, has been retrieved from the disorganized and inadequate archives of the FRCN.

A selection of forty-six talks was edited by Irene Lynch, wife of the Irish ambassador to Nigeria, with an introduction and biographical profile of Monsignor Martins and the resultant book, titled, "Let's Talk It Over."

The book was presented to the public at St. Gregory's college Hall, on the 9th of August 2001, the 58th anniversary of the ordination of Pedro Ayodele Martins who turned 90 last year.

At the presentation, Monsignor Martins was showered with tributes from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, from the Chairperson; Dr Christopher Kolade, from the wife of the Vice president, from his former comrades-in-arms when Martins was the Chaplain to the Nigerian Army (Retired Generals Rotimi Abisoye and Johnson), distinguished fellow Lagosians (Yomi McGregor, Francesca Emmanuel. And Olabode Emmanuel (the generous chief presenter) eminent old boys of Monsignor's Old School, King's College and of St. Gregory's where he had been a science teacher in the 1950s and parishioners: Josephine Prest (NTA), Benedicta Molo-kwu (Institute of Directors), and Engineer Vincent Maduka, the behind-the-scenes organiser of the whole affair.

I had the honour of reviewing the book at the presentation and I would like to share it with you. The title of the talk/book "Let's Talk It Over" is indicative of Martin's approach. Rather than declare his programme, "Hear me out" or "My Stand," Martins invites his listeners (lets) to join (us) to talk (rather than pontificating) and discuss (over) in a Socratic dialogue. The talks were given by Martin in his persona "Uncle Pedro," not by the clergyman Rev/Monsignor Martins.

Martins was always very aware of his audience which he challenged, stimulated, criticized and reasoned with. As Uncle Pedro, he created intimate relationships with listeners in the finest tradition of radio, like Alistair Coat's "Letter from America" and Chinua Achebe's talks on NBC and Voice of Nigeria in the '50s and '60s.

In the introduction, Irene Lynch, the editor, explains that the talks were not religious as such but, as he defines them, very insightful "Philosophical and sociological commentaries on life and society." She rightly emphasizes "their topicality and relevance to Nigeria of 2001 and singles out for commendation their "Wisdom, entertainment, fun, intellect, learning and mastering of language."

These talks were not only a delight to listen to but also a pleasure to read. Some of you may remember that in English language lessons, you studied rhetoric, the art which teaches eloquence and composition-which teaches effective expression.

"Let's Talk It Over" is such a model of eloquence that it would make an excellent case study for teaching rhetoric and composition. Monsignor employs all the devices of emotive language to enrich and clarify his message. Similes, metaphors, alliterations, puns, epithet, hyperbole, double extenders, wit, irony, sarcasm, satire, rhetorical questions and antithesis of contrasted words. Clauses and ideas are generously sprinkled on the literary confection. Example of antithesis: "The adversity of colonialism discovers the best and virtue of being able to live together but the prosperity of oil best discovers the vice in us." What could be more eloquent than: "there is hardly any mortal in whose cupboard you will not find a macabre dance of skeletons and what about it if the dance is not gruesomely boisterous enough to wreck the peace of the rest of us. Dance of the skeletons is always on somewhere. Life has its seamy side."

The editor sensibly organized the selection of 46 talks around four main themes, namely: Society and governance, concern for women and youth, church and religion and philosophy.

In all the talks, Martins demonstrates an

intimidating erudition, a profound intellect, catholic interests (ring the wider alternative meaning of the word), an unflinching scientific curiosity and a keen historical perspective. Throughout, the talks are illuminated by Monsignor's deep spirituality, profound consciousness and compassionate understanding of the human condition. In that understanding, there is neither naivety nor idealization but a clear-sighted insight into the character and behavior of people.

May I share with you my favorite highlights from each of the themes, starting with Church and Religion. Monsignor is very much at ease with his God. He communicates directly, honestly and intimately with God in a series of dialogues represented in this book which reminded me of *Fiddler On The Roof*.

"Dear God, this is by no means my complete shopping list, but for the moment, it should do. Do I sound cheeky? Surely, you understand me. You know that is the last thing I want to be. I have always been free with you. I love you, and I am sure you too like me and my cheekiness."

His religion is fundamentally Catholic but not exclusively so, not 'dogmatic' in the original meaning of the word, that is, it goes beyond dogma to the profound spirituality of all religions. Martins deplores the expulsion of the illegal aliens in 1982 as "human tragedy. A humanist sees in the illegal alliance, which relates

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us to each other and to God ultimately. This is the teaching of all religions."

Youth and Women: "If I were president - I shall heed the clamor of petticoats to be in government. I believe they have the right to do so, and I believe too that our women can perform as well as the men."

Monsignor Martins is an emancipated man: "Men have tried to shepherd our country since our independence. Their effort leaves room for more to be desired. They have been tried and tested; the result cannot be described as an unqualified success. Why should this country not consider giving our women the chance to prove what they can do?"

Philosophy: Criticizing the commercialization of death, Martins conceives of the Cost of Dying Allowance, CODA for short, "CODA in the musical language is a passage added after the natural movement in order to have a final and definitive end to a piece. And what could be more final than death."

In his talks: Martins does not pull any of the punches which made him feared by his students at St. Gregory's. "A politician is like a monkey: the higher he climbs the more exposed is his bum." In one of his dialogues with God, Martins laments: "It must be sadly amusing to you, that despite the available intelligence in this country, we have yet to learn to count ourselves. Since 1964 we have been battling with this simple arithmetic. It is only in this country that anyone could have the ignorant rashness to hold the view that headcount is not arithmetical but political. I must return to

school to learn the politics of simple numbers." Martins issues a citizens charter "I like to feel that I am safe and secure in my own country. I like to believe that my safety is the concern of the authority in my country, that the services my country provides are safe, that my health is insured against illness, that my property is protected, that my political belief is respected, that the apparatus for securing my safety is reliable and assuring. This country has reached the stage where it should be protected against itself."

In all the talks, Martins reveals a deep appreciation of history, especially of his beloved Lagos. As he explains: "Lagos history is written in names of places. There was a Porto-Novo market reputed for tilapia and catfish. The existence of this market was evidence of the trade relationship between Lagos and Porto-Novo. It explains the presence of Beninois in Lagos. Bishop Street, Olowogbowo District of Lagos points to the Methodist Foundation. Broad Street reminds me of the fire, which devastated the palm oil depot of the Marina. Broad Street was a safety zone to ensure that other fire incidents would be confined to the Marina and would not spread to the many thatched houses of old Lagos."

Martins discusses the Lagos-based Nigerian Youth Movement: which I have studied and written about, but I never heard of the following jingle until I read in the Monsignor's talks "Potholes in the Road to Independence." Ayo is no joy. Jones is all bones. Moore is no more" which is an attack on Dr Adeniyi Jones and Barrister Eric Moore of Herbert Macaulay's UNDP.

The 1975 purge of the civil service, which Rev. Fr. Martins reviewed as head of a commission set up by our current head of state, is described as "that mighty national convulsion which overtook this country: it did more than killing the deadwood: it hacked down the deadwood: it shattered the sense of security of government employment."

Martins' description of General Ironsi's first press conference after the first coup is electrifying. "I remember the day in February 1966; he summoned the press to a briefing in the State House Marina. The choice of venue was deliberate. The massive hall by itself was overwhelming. The polish floor threatened to betray anyone who had ignored the courtesy of the huge foot mat generously offering its services. The shades of historical personalities of this country hung from the high walls of the hall to be silent witnesses of the historical event breathlessly awaited.

"The silence in the hall that morning was frightening, harrowing. No whispers, no murmur, no feet shuffling. All eyes were riveted to the door from which the commander of the armed forces and head of government would emerge. From behind, through an unsuspected small door, this six-footer man walked in, and as he did, everybody was petrified. It was, indeed, a situation of suspended animation. An officer in charge of the expected entrance door regained consciousness and barked in panic 'All rise.'

"The General took his seat at a large table and commanded us to sit. There was no apology for his lateness. The delay was deliberate. He did not wish us a good morning. He sat down there wearing an enigmatic smile. Then he proceeded to measure and assess some chosen individuals of the media world. Then after finishing this mysterious exercise, he just said 'Serious' and 'Good day, Gentlemen.'" That was the briefing.

I'm sure that Chuks Iloegunam, the author of the excellent biography of Ironsi, will gnash his teeth at not having read this vivid description before the publication of his book.

With the publication of *Let's Talk it Over*, at least some of Monsignor Martins' talks are preserved for posterity in an accessible form. The book, well-produced by Academy Press, is thanks to the labor of love by Irene Lynch, Josephine Prest and Vincent Maduka. However, it should have been published by FRCN; I believe the FRCN should publish its programmes and sell them in its shops, just like the BBC does. Monsignor Martins, thank you for enriching us with your eloquence, insight, and wit. May your talks be listened to properly, with open ears, and read with open minds.