

To See God Face to Face: The Root of the Vocation Crisis

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

Recently I was driving to the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul in Rome. As I turned onto what I believed to be Viale SS. Pietro e Paolo, I glanced up at the street sign and it read, "Gandhi!" I looked back to the road, then looked up at the street sign again. This time it read, "Viale SS. Pietro e Paolo!"

After spending time at the Basilica, I walked back to the beginning of Viale SS. Pietro e Paolo and there it was! Two street signs were on the same pole at slightly different angles: one informing its readers they were about to enter Viale SS. Pietro e Paolo, the other telling readers they were about to enter Piazza Gandhi. It turned out that Viale SS. Pietro e Paolo crossed and overlapped Piazza Gandhi. All of this brought a sense of relief, knowing that I was not hallucinating a Gandhi street sign in Rome! Upon reflection a thought came to consciousness that I had never before analyzed. I realized how symbolically appropriate it was that these two signs be together, that these two places be intersecting, that these three people be perceived in one glance.

St. Peter and St. Paul are the major figures in the first generation of Christianity. St. Peter is indisputably the leader of the Apostles and the earliest Church. St. Paul is the Apostle of the Gentiles. Both are called personally by Christ to their respective missions. Both, after arduous spiritual labor, die as martyrs in Rome and enter into an eternal union with God.

Gandhi is born of Hindu parents on October 2, 1869 in India, where he spends most of his life. He is ordinarily called "Mahatma" (Great Soul) in the East and West. Like St. Peter he is married. During the second half of his life for spiritual reasons he lives under a voluntary vow of celibacy like St. Paul. Gandhi is never



Photo by Peter Goldsime

Rome: A "piazza" dedicated to Gandhi where Sts. Peter & Paul Blvd. crosses

baptized and is never a member of any Christian Church. He remains a Hindu all his life. On January 30, 1948 he is assassinated by N.V. Godse, a conservative Hindu fanatic who believes Gandhi is corrupting Hinduism.

Do these lives genuinely intersect as Piazza Gandhi and Viale SS. Pietro e Paolo do or do they only touch tangentially? Is there a reality in these three human existences that could honestly be considered a vital common denominator?

Peter and Paul are obviously united. In their personalities, tastes, levels of literacy and occupations they have little in common. But, the Spirit that abides in one is the Spirit that abides in the other and that Spirit is the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Because of this Spirit, Peter and Paul are closer to each other than each is to his own breath. So in determining whether the crossing and

overlapping of the Street and the Piazza is a valid spiritual symbol, the issue is whether Mahatma Gandhi is authentically united with St. Peter and with St. Paul by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Gandhi was better versed than most people in the Bible and in the history of Christianity. His first conceptual contact with the Christian Scriptures took place in 1889 when he met a Christian in a vegetarian boarding house in England while studying to be a lawyer. This man gave him a Bible and extracted from him a promise that he would read it. Gandhi in his autobiography, *My Experiment with Truth*, recollected that he "plodded through" the Old Testament, "but the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart." "The gentle figure of Christ," he later recounted, "so patient, so

kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek — it was a beautiful example of the perfect man.”

He finished his study of law in England and proceeded to South Africa in 1893 where he established a lucrative practice. During these years he often had discussions with Christians of various ilks. Some impressed him; some depressed him; all wished to convert him. In 1894 he received from a Mr. Coates, a Quaker, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. It “overwhelmed me,” he reported. “It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me by Mr. Coates seemed to pale into insignificance.” *The Kingdom of God is Within You* was Tolstoy's magnum opus on the nonviolent Jesus and His Sermon on the Mount. It was a profound turning point in Gandhi's life which he publicly acknowledged for the rest of his days. As Raghavan Iyer wrote in his classic, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*:

His early hesitations about nonviolence were overcome by reading Tolstoy's The Kingdom of God Is Within You and he became a firm believer in ahimsa (nonviolence).

“It was the New Testament which really awakened me to the rightness and value of passive resistance,” explained Gandhi. When I read in the Sermon on the Mount such passages as ‘Resist not him that is evil; but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also,’ and ‘Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you, that ye may be sons of your Father in Heaven,’ I was simply overjoyed and found my own opinion confirmed where I least expected it. The Bhagavad Gita deepened the impression, and Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* gave it permanent form.

In 1915 Mahatma Gandhi returned to India. Over the next thirty-three years he, like St. Peter and St. Paul, tried to live and teach the way of nonviolent love of friends and enemies as proclaimed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, he even went

so far as to declare, “If I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say: ‘Oh yes, I am a Christian! But I know that at the present moment if I said any such thing I would lay myself open to the gravest misinterpretation.’” Yet, despite his concerns about how people, e.g. politicians, journalists, professional religionists, might misuse his reverence for and unity with Christ, he continued to publicly declare the depths of his relationship with Jesus. After a 1931 trip to Rome he wrote:

There is nowhere, in the little world I have seen, anything to compare with the wonderful frescoes in the Sistine Chapel or the marvelous sculpture in the Vatican. Apart from the incomparable Michaelangelo's paintings in the Chapel, there is a statue of Jesus on the Cross which is capable of moving the stoniest heart.....(W)hat would not I have given to be able to bow my head before the living image at the Vatican of Christ Crucified.....The image of Jesus Christ which I saw in the Vatican at Rome is before my eyes at all times...Living Christ means a living Cross, without it life is a living death.

Certainly we have arrived at a juncture where the lives of SS. Pietro e Paolo and Gandhi intersect. The precise place where they cross is the nonviolent Cross at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount which is made visible on Calvary.

How profoundly Gandhi experiences his union with Jesus can be seen when he proclaims, “Jesus is nonviolence par excellence.” Remember, nonviolence is the defining word, symbol and reality of Gandhi's life. The Indian word that he employs, which is translated into English as nonviolence, is *ahimsa*. It is a word that simultaneously describes the nature of God, the authentic nature of each human being and the Spirit in which people should always relate to each other and to all of God's creation. He explains it thusly:

Ahimsa requires deliberate self-suffering, not a deliberate injuring of the supposed wrong-doer...In its positive form, Ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of Ahimsa, I must love my enemy or a stranger to me as I would my wrong-doing father or son.....Ahimsa is love

in the Pauline sense and something more than the love defined by St. Paul, although I know St. Paul's beautiful definition is good enough for all practical purposes.

Can there be any doubt that the very same Spirit that guides the lives of Saints Peter and Paul until their ultimate martyrdom, saturates the life of Mahatma Gandhi until January 30, 1948?

On February 1, 1986, Pope John Paul II made the cremation site of Mahatma Gandhi at Rajghat his first stop in India. He opened his remarks that day by noting that, “It is entirely fitting that this pilgrimage should begin here, at Rajghat, dedicated to the memory of the illustrious Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation and apostle of nonviolence. The figure of Mahatma Gandhi and the meaning of his life's work have penetrated the consciousness of humanity.” John Paul then went on to note that, “Two days ago marked the thirty-eighth anniversary of his death. He who lived by nonviolence appeared to be defeated by violence. Yet, his teachings and the example of his life live on in the minds and hearts of millions of men and women...[T]he heritage of Mahatma Gandhi speaks to us still. And, today, as a pilgrim of peace, I have come to pay homage to Mahatma Gandhi, hero of humanity.” As if this were not enough, as if he wanted to insure that his words would be as unambiguous as humanly possible, the Successor of St. Peter declared that, “From this place which is forever bound to the memory of this extraordinary man, I wish to express to the people of India and of the world my profound conviction that the peace and justice of which contemporary society has such great need will only be achieved along the path which was the core of his teaching.”

It would be hard to overestimate the enormity of the spiritual and religious implications of what the Vicar of Christ said that day. Recognizing that this is the Pope speaking before the world's media about a universally known spiritual leader whose entire personal and public identity is grounded in nonviolent love as God's will and who says that Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of this nonviolent love should shock Christians in general and Catholics in particular into pondering why the Vicar of

Peter should publicly so endorse and so identify with this man. The New York Times and most other newspapers around the globe reported the next day that the official Vatican spokesman, Joaquin Navarro Valls said that John Paul's praise for Gandhi was extraordinary: "I haven't heard the Pope saying such things in relation to anyone, living or dead."

There are in the Church people of *realpolitik*. They are the ones who, with an indulgent smile toward those they consider "naïve," say that, "The Church will live by the Sermon on the Mount the day after the United States elects a President with the Sermon on the Mount as his platform." Perhaps they are right. To be baptized or to receive communion worthily or to be ordained deacon, priest or bishop, a person is not required to live according to the

Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, despite all the stellar talents that exist within the College of Cardinals, it can be fairly asked, "Where is the 'Gandhi' among them? Where is the one who is known for a lifetime of teaching that the Jesus Christians are to follow is 'nonviolence par excellence'? Where is the one of whom it is said, 'The Sermon on the Mount is the Magna Carta of his life?'" In fact today and for many centuries past, no one looks at the Church, whether it be the Church of Rome, the Church of Constantinople or the Church of Canterbury, and exclaims, "There is the communal incarnation of the Sermon on the Mount. There the Sermon on the Mount is taken seriously." It is as if Church leadership and membership have simply decided to bracket out the Sermon by praising it sumptuously in word while

ignoring it in deed. It is as if innumerable Christian worlds have been erected without any reference to it and now these worlds, out of fear of undermining their status quo, *modus operandi* or credibility, must abandon it operationally, claiming it to be utopian, unrealistic, a mere non-binding counsel of perfection for a spiritual elite who do not have to deal with the "real" world.

So, perhaps the believers in ecclesial *realpolitik* are accurate in their assessment. Gandhi thinks so when he notes that, "Much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount." But, if they are correct, one of the questions that must be asked is whether Church structures, which do not permit men in leadership to live according to the Sermon on the Mount, should be structures in the Church? Or alternatively, if Church structures do permit men in leadership ministries to abide by Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, then should not men be selected to work in these structures who possess the spiritual acumen and creativity to so operate? And, above all else, the master question posed by those who wish the Church to operate on secular notions of reality and power, on non-Sermon on the Mount notions of reality and power is this: What is it, that the institutional Church needs to do in order to fully accomplish the mission assigned to Her by Christ, that cannot be done by fidelity to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount?

It has long been accepted by those who study the communication of values that, "the medium is the message." Dissonance between content and the means of communicating it subverts content. For a group to raise money in order to teach that pornography is evil, by selling pornography, not only invalidates the anti-pornography message but also affirms a pro-pornography position. Recruiting workers for such an organization from among anti-pornography advocates would be uphill work at best, if not borderline impossible.

The structures, the means and the media through which a content is made accessible must communicate the truth of that content as clearly as the rhetoric. If

Fr. McCarthy at Piazza Gandhi in Rome.



they do not, then the structures, means and media become a self-evident denial of the very truth they are meant to convey. Said starkly, the Sermon on the Mount cannot be taught nor can Jesus be proclaimed effectively, if at all, by structures, means and methods of operation that are deprecatory, dismissive or hostile to His Sermon on the Mount. For Church leadership then, the establishment and maintenance of a consistency between the ends for which the Church exists and the means chosen to achieve these ends is a paramount pastoral and moral obligation because of the immensity of what is at stake: eternal life.

The solemn corollary of the previously posed “master question” is this: “What is it that can be done by fidelity to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount?” Are there unimaginable miracles lying dormant in the Sermon on the Mount? Is there within fidelity to the Sermon a hidden power that can conquer evil, destroy death, illuminate a wisdom more fundamental than human conjecture, banish all that makes the universe ceaselessly groan for redemption, empty tombs and make dry bones come to life?

There is an axial self-disclosure in the opening of Gandhi’s autobiography that is pertinent here. It is seldom referred to, even by those who are familiar with his life and writings. However, John Paul II did not overlook it when speaking in India. The passage exposes the overriding desire that rules Gandhi’s life, indeed, it is the pivotal text for making sense of his life:

What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realization, to see God face to face. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do in way of speaking and writing and all my ventures in the political field are directed to this same end.

It adds infinite gravity to Gandhi’s decision to unconditionally walk in the way of the nonviolent Jesus and His Sermon on the Mount once it is recognized that he chose this path not because it would liberate India from the British, not because it was easy or hard, not because it was culturally or religiously acceptable, but



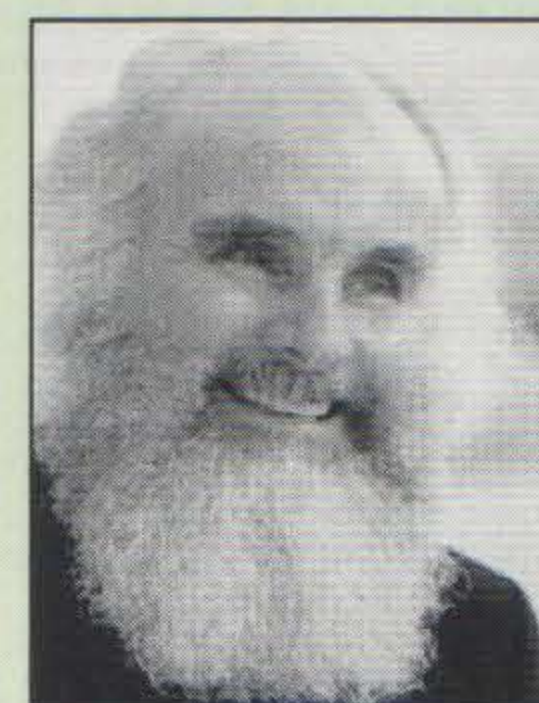
Monument of Gandhi in Goa, India

simply because he saw it to be the way to eternal union with God.

Gandhi’s choice is in accord with the teaching of Jesus, who reveals an intimate connection between the Sermon on the Mount and salvation when, at the conclusion of the Sermon, He states, “It is not those who say, ‘Lord, Lord’ who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven but those who do the will of my Father in heaven. (Mt 7:21) It is the will of the Father that Jesus is making known in His Sermon. For those who have “minds to understand,” Jesus is declaring that the work of God, opus Dei, cannot be accomplished by adopting and “baptizing” the mentalities and mechanizations of this world of realpolitik. To the contrary, He is explicitly announcing that the Sermon on the Mount is the opus Dei unto eternal salvation. SS.

Pietro e Paolo and Mahatma Gandhi concur. Their crossing and overlapping lives serve, now and forever, as resplendent and corroborating signs. These signs point to the Way of Jesus as the Way to the Kingdom of Heaven, as the Way to accomplish all that needs to be accomplished in order to conquer evil, to empty tombs, and to see God in an eternal face to face. ■

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