



Saint Nikolai, Bishop of Ohrid, and Mahatma Gandhi:

In Response to Some Unjust Critics

An Explanatory Note: Some years ago, Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna, then an Archimandrite and Visiting Scholar at the Harvard Divinity School, was asked by the editor of the periodical “Orthodox America” to review a popular movie at the time, “Gandhi,” which had just appeared. His Eminence praised the movie as a challenge to Orthodox Christians and noted that Gandhi preached many of the principles of Christianity and of the observant Orthodox life. He was immediately assailed, not just by Orthodox extremists on the right but by self-proclaimed Orthodox liberals on the left, with equal vehemence. He was accused, in characterizing Gandhi as he did, of denying Christ, advocating Hinduism, bowing to idols, and revealing the hypocrisy of traditionalist Orthodoxy in attempting to glorify a non-Christian religious figure while condemning the Orthodox ecumenists for their religious syncretism.

His Eminence did not, to the best of my recollection, respond to these accusations in print, if only because they were simply hyperbolic distortions of his claim that Gandhi stands as a challenge to us Orthodox and that we have much to learn, in our spiritual weakness, about that very weakness from individuals outside Orthodoxy who strive, without the many gifts given to us by our Faith, to live ideals that are immediately available to us and which we spurn.

Some days ago, I happened across a recent translation of a letter by Saint Nikolai (Velimirovich), addressing precisely the points that Archbishop Chrysostomos raised and expressing very much the same ideas that the Archbishop expressed. Since one hears even now, in the echo-chamber of Orthodox gossip, which is so dedicated to the “sweetness” of condemnation and the unveiling of the sins (real and supposed) of others, references to Archbishop Chrysostomos as a pseudo-traditionalist and a crypto-ecumenist for his views on Gandhi, I thought that I might post this letter from Saint Nikolai as a proper response to these unjust accusations. The inspiring comments of the Saint, addressed to a British noble (“Charles B.”), are in and of themselves worthy of our attention.

Bishop Auxentios

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE PERSON OF GANDHI THE INDIAN?”

As a man of faith, you are troubled by the thought—what will Providence do with Gandhi? And what is the meaning of the appearance of this strange person among the statesmen and politicians of our time?

A warning from God. That is surely the meaning of the leader of the great Indian nation. Through that person, Providence is showing politicians and the statesmen of the world, even Christian ones, that there are other methods in politics than skill, wiliness and violence. Gandhi's political method is very simple and obvious: he does not require anything except the man who cries out and the God Who hearkens. Against weapons, ammunition and army, Gandhi places fasting; against skill, wiliness and violence, prayer; and against political quarrel, silence. How puny and pathetic that looks in the eyes of modern men, right? In modern political textbooks, these three methods are not even mentioned in footnotes. Fasting, prayer and silence! There is hardly a statesman in Europe or America who would not ironically see these three secrets of the Indian statesmen as three dry twigs pointed on the battlefield against a heap of steel, lead, fire and poison. However, Gandhi succeeds with these three “spells” of his; he succeeds to the astonishment of the whole world. And whether they want to or not, political lawmakers in England and other countries will have to add a chapter into their textbooks: “Fasting, Prayer and Silence as Powerful Weapons in Politics.” Imagine, would it not be to the fortune of all mankind if these methods of the unbaptized Gandhi replaced the methods of the baptized Machiavelli in political science?

But it is not the Indian's method in itself that is such a surprise to the world, as it is the person using the method. The method is Christian, as old as the Christian faith, and yet new in this day and age. The example of fasting, prayer and silence was shown by Christ to His Disciples. They handed it down to the Church, along with their whole example, and the Church hands it to the faithful from generation to generation until this day. Fasting is a sacrifice, silence is inward examination of oneself, prayer is crying out to God. Those are

the three sources of great spiritual power which make man victorious in battle and excellent in life. Is there a man who cannot arm himself with these weapons? And which crude force in this world can defeat these weapons? Of course, these three things do not include all of the Christian faith, but are only a part of its rules, its supernatural mysteries. Sadly, in our time, among Christians, many of these principles are disregarded, and many wonder-working mysteries are forgotten. People have started thinking that one wins only by using steel, that the hailing clouds are dispersed only by cannons, that diseases are cured only by pills, and that everything in the world can be explained simply through electricity. Spiritual and moral energies are looked upon almost as working magic. I think that this is the reason why ever-active Providence has chosen Gandhi, an unbaptized man, to serve as a warning to the baptized, especially those baptized people who pile up one misfortune on another upon themselves and their peoples by using ruthless and harsh means. The Gospel also tells us that Providence sometimes uses such warnings for the good of the people. Your Grace will immediately realize that I am alluding to the Roman captain from Capernaum (Matt. ch. 8). On the one hand, you see the Elders of Israel who, as chosen monotheists of the time, boasted of their faith, meanwhile rejecting Christ, and, on the other hand, you see the despised Roman pagan who came to Christ with great faith and humility, asking Him to heal his servant. And when Jesus heard it, He was astonished and said to those who followed Him, "Truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found faith like this." The Christian world is the new, baptized Israel. Listen! Is Christ not telling the same words today to the consciences of the Christian Elders by pointing to today's captain of India?

Peace and health from the Lord to you.

Source: *Missionary Letters of Saint Nikolai Velimirovich: Letters 1-100*, trans. Hierodeacon Serafim (Baltic), Vol. vi in *A Treasury of Serbian Orthodox Spirituality* (Grayslake, IL: New Gracanica Monastery, 2008), pp. 171-173. I have made certain small emendations to the translation—*B.A.*