

## THE MAHATMA, IL DUCE AND THE CRUCIFIX Gandhi's Brief Encounter with Mussolini and its Consequences

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*Peter Gonsalves*

After the second Round Table Conference (RTC) in London,<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi had to embark at the Port of Brindisi in Southern Italy en route to India. He decided to spend a few days in Switzerland as a guest of Romain Rolland, and then stop in Rome on Saturday, December 12, 1931, in order to meet Pope Pius XI. The note in his diary of December 12, states:

Arrived in Rome at 8.30 in the morning. Received letter to the effect that the Pope could not receive me. Three of us stayed with General Morris, the others in a hotel. Went to see the Vatican [Museums] in the afternoon. At 6 o'clock Mussolini.<sup>2</sup>

Barely a year earlier, Gandhi had shot to international fame due to the extensive American press coverage of his Salt Satyagraha.<sup>3</sup> He was on the

<sup>1</sup> The second Round Table Conference was held from September 7 to December 1, 1931. There were three conferences that were organized by the British Empire to discuss constitutional reforms in India. It was the only Conference in which Gandhi, who represented the Congress, participated.

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi's diary entry of Saturday 12, 1931, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 48, 1958-1984, p. 466. (Henceforth *CW/MG*).

<sup>3</sup> An essential tactic of *satyagraha* is the diffusion of news about the atrocities commit-

cover of *Time Magazine* on two occasions within a span of ten months: first on March 31, 1930 and again as ‘Time’s Man of the Year’ on January 5, 1931.<sup>4</sup> His fame preceded him even in Europe. Whether at Villeneuve, Milan, Rome or Brindisi, people flocked to see ‘St. Gandhi’ in his strange attire.<sup>5</sup>

## Romain Rolland’s warning

In one of his discussions with Rolland before leaving for Rome, Gandhi rather matter-of-factly said: “[I]f the Pope wants to see me I shall go. As for Mussolini, I do not think he wants to see me, *but if he does I shall go without hesitation*. But it will not be in secret”.<sup>6</sup>

Rolland tried hard to convince Gandhi of the danger of meeting Mussolini, but Gandhi did not yield.<sup>7</sup> He preferred to trust his non-violent convictions and his truth-based instincts. Rolland surmised that the ‘demon of curiosity’<sup>8</sup> was to blame. He writes:

ted on the *satyagrahis* so as to stimulate the sympathies of the offender who, under pressure from enthusiastic sympathisers across the world, is constrained to relent. The American press played a significant role in news diffusion of atrocities against Indians under British rule, as was also vividly depicted in the 1980 film by Richard Attenborough.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *Time Archive*: <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19310105,00.html> (30-5-2011).

<sup>5</sup> The following entry in the diary of Romain Rolland attests the extent of Gandhi’s popularity in Europe. Rolland and his sister were exhausted by the “letters, telephone calls and requests of all sorts that were provoked by Gandhi’s announced arrival. Some of them are strange, some absurd, some completely crazy.” The list of visitors included a lady who wanted Gandhi to dictate the 10 winning numbers in the next *Lotto*, minstrels ready to perform under his window and Swiss German ‘nudists’ who wanted to corner him. The press agencies set up camp around the villa, the police authorities were worried and the Villeneuve hotels were booked by ‘undesirables’ eager to meet their strange guest. Cfr. R. ROLLAND – M. K. GANDHI, *Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence*, Publications Division, Government of India, 1976, p. 163. (Henceforth *R-G Correspondence*).

<sup>6</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 175. (italics mine).

<sup>7</sup> After Rolland insisted that Gandhi should set conditions to avoid being swindled, Gandhi said: “This subject is finished; shall we continue our conversation?” *R-G Correspondence*, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> Referring to Gandhi’s readiness to meet Mussolini, Rolland says: “the holy man has kept one little demon, that of curiosity; I understand and share it [...] but I resist it, and I could have wished Gandhi had resisted on this occasion.” *R-G Correspondence*, p. 234.

I take it upon myself to make him aware of the dangers awaiting him in Fascist Italy; not aggression, certainly, but underhand attempts to annexe him to their cause, as they did with Tagore. [...] I show him the face of true Fascism [...]. Against this Fascist Italy, I show him the picture of thousands of oppressed Italians, forced to be silent or to lie, and suffering bitterly from their moral degradation; I also show him the depressing effect which Gandhi's presence among their oppressors would have on them. Whatever Gandhi does, the Italian press, which is entirely in Fascist hands, is always sure to be able to exploit his presence, without him having any means of replying in Italy.<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi reassured Rolland that his decision was not a sudden whim. Already while in India he had received an invitation to visit Italy from a certain Consul Scarpa,<sup>10</sup> "a cultivated man, who knows the Indians and has business in India".<sup>11</sup> However, Gandhi admitted that he was suspicious of Scarpa's intentions.

I had forgotten Italy up till now [while at the RTC], but Scarpa did not forget; here is his latest letter. [...] Scarpa has also offered me two first-class compartments from the Italian frontier; I should prefer to travel third class, but I do not want to make a fuss about it. Scarpa wants me to tell him the date of my arrival at the frontier, and tells me that the time I want to stay is too short for the programme foreseen. He assures me that it is a private not an official visit and that the invitation is his own, but that is only form; the Italian Government is behind it and Scarpa is its instrument.<sup>12</sup>

Curiously, despite the underlying apprehension, Gandhi told Rolland that he was "obliged to take literally"<sup>13</sup> Scarpa's statement that he was acting as an individual and not on behalf of the government. Although Gandhi was invited by many friends in Italy, he was willing to spend only one day in Rome, contrary to Scarpa's expectations. He did yield to Scarpa's invitation, however, by accepting to visit the Istituto di Cultura on condition that he could speak freely in their presence.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Luigi Scarpa, according to newspapers, was an Italian ex-consul in India.

<sup>11</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> *Cfr. R-G Correspondence*, p. 177.

Rolland was more perplexed. It mattered not *what* Gandhi wanted to say, but *how* what he said would be reported. The Istituto, he believed, “is full of remarkable intellectuals, but they have no conscience and they are dangerous, for they lie”.<sup>15</sup> Seeing the danger Gandhi was letting himself into, Rolland insisted:

R.R.: Then demand that foreign reporters should be present to take down what you say. It seems very difficult to be sure that what you say won’t be covered up or deformed.

*Gandhi*: It’s against my nature to make arrangements in advance.

R.R.: You’ll be isolated and shut in. Everyone around you will be Fascists, even the foreign journalists.

*Gandhi*: I know, but that will not prevent me from breaking through the cordon... I shall make it a condition that I can speak freely, and it will not be about indifferent things; I shall say what I think. This is how I feel. I cannot act otherwise. [...]

R.R.: I don’t think anyone will stop you speaking; the problem is that it will be suppressed or deformed in the newspapers.

*Gandhi*: Let’s suppose it isn’t reproduced, or that it is deformed. Even in England this happened [...] What I said in Paris was deformed as well [...] But *Young India* will carry the full text of all I said [...]

R.R.: [...] There’s another danger. You’ll be speaking in English, and translated into Italian. Who will check it? The sense may be changed. You’ll have to ask for a typescript.

*Gandhi*: If I think it is my duty to speak, I shall do so and trust God. [...] It is impossible for me to take meticulous precautions.

R.R.: Mira and Desai should always be there when you are speaking.

*Gandhi*: There will never be any secret meetings. That said, let us consider whether or not it is in the interest of the cause that I should go to Rome! Sometimes an action has no immediate effect, but there may be a long-term effect. The immediate effect may be that the press deforms what I say, but the distant effect of a good thing must be good. I believe I must take the risk, as I am sure that I shall not succumb to temptation. Beyond that we can foresee nothing. We have to take a decision.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> R-G *Correspondence*, p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> R-G *Correspondence*, p. 177.

Gandhi's openness to 'the other' even in doubt; his refusal to be cautious even on the verge of peril; his *karmic* belief that the long term effect of a good decision ought to be good; his courage in trusting a possible enemy because he trusted in God first – all these attitudes would cost him dearly, and with him, the Indian people. History would soon prove how perfectly right Rolland's warning was and how daringly different Gandhi's 'experiment': to test the truth through personal experience, rather than the solicitude of an old friend whose knowledge of Italian affairs was far better than his own.

With Gandhi's mind made up, Rolland immediately sent a telegram to General Moris, a trusted friend in Rome. He requested him to host Gandhi during his stay there. To his disappointment, he received a reply from the General *thirty* hours later.

### **Mussolini meets Gandhi**<sup>17</sup>

We have said that Gandhi arrived in Rome at 8.30 a.m. on Saturday, December 12. He stayed at Monte Mario, at the house of General Moris, a pioneer of Italian military aviation. In the afternoon he visited the Vatican Museums and met Mussolini at 6 p.m. in the Palazzo Venezia. It was Scarpa who arranged the encounter. Accompanying Gandhi were his disciple Mirabehn, his host General Moris and his secretary Mahadev Desai.

Mussolini crossed the room to meet him, and offered seats to him and Mira, but left the old General and Desai standing without seeming even to notice them. At one point, when Gandhi pointed to General Moris, Mussolini made a sharp gesture of indifference: "I know, I know..."<sup>18</sup>

Mirabehn recalls. When they were seated, Mussolini turned to speak to Bapu (Gandhi) in excellent English and asked a number of questions regarding India [...] When ten minutes were over, he rose from his chair, giving us the sign that the audience was over, and he accompanied us to the door at the end of the room.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed study of Gandhi and Mussolini see, Gianni SOFRI, *Gandhi in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988, pp. 87-108.

<sup>18</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 257. Mussolini felt slighted by the presence of the General because, as we shall see later in this article, Gandhi trusted the General who was a friend of Romain Rolland, refusing thereby the hospitality of the Italian Government.

<sup>19</sup> Gianni SOFRI, *Gandhi in Italia* (no details cited), quoted in Di Luigi CAPANO, "Gandhi

Desai recorded the entire conversation.<sup>20</sup>

*Question:* Did you like Italy?

*Answer:* I like your beautiful country.

*Q.* Did you meet the Pope?

*A.* I regret he was not able to give me an appointment. He sees no one on Sunday and this morning he has been too busy.

*Q.* The Round Table Conference is over?

*A.* Yes, though some work still remains to be done. One understands it is postponed for the moment. A working committee has been set up and its work will be continued.

*Q.* Have you got anything out of it?

*A.* No indeed. But I had not hoped I would get anything out of it.

*Q.* How does India stand economically?

*A.* India's economic condition is bad...there is the exploitation going on day after day and a large proportion of the country's revenue is spent on maintaining an army.

*Q.* What is your programme?

*A.* It seems I shall have to start a campaign of civil disobedience.

*Q.* What about the Hindu-Muslim question?

*A.* With perseverance we shall be able to find a solution to it. Then we have a number of Muslim leaders who truly represent Islam and who are working for the Congress. [...].

*Q.* Do you believe you can unite?

*A.* I have not the slightest doubt in that regard.

*Q.* Do you seek complete independence for India?

*A.* Yes, but it does not exclude partnership with England on equal terms. Today England is exploiting India. When she stops the exploitation there will be no obstacle to our entering into a partnership with Britain.

*Q.* You are thinking of a democratic constitution for your country?

*A.* Yes, definitely. We want a democratic set-up.

in *Italia per conoscere il Fascismo*”, 14-1-2007, in *Italia Sociale* website: <http://www.italia-sociale.net/storia07/storia140107-1.html>. (5-5-2011).

<sup>20</sup> Sushila NAYAR, *Mahatma Gandhi – Salt Satyagraha: the Watershed*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, pp. 402-404.

*Q.* Have you ever considered having one person ruling over all the constituent units?

*A.* No, the ruling body must have representation of all the interests.

*Q.* Do you believe communism can succeed in India?

*A.* No, I do not.

*Q.* How long were you in England – how many months?

Bapu said two months. Mirabehn, correcting him, said three. Mussolini looked towards her.

*Q.* What do you think of the situation in Europe?

*A.* Now you ask the question that I have been waiting for you to ask. Europe cannot go on the way it has been going on. The only alternative is for it to change the whole basis of its economic life, its whole value system. The edifice it has raised cannot be kept standing for long, however hard anyone may try.

*Q.* Can East and West not meet?

*A.* Why not? West has been exploiting East. The moment it stops the exploitation, the door will be opened for cooperation between the two.

Mussolini said that was his view too. Then he said he hoped Gandhiji had been favourably impressed by Italy and Rome.

*A.* O yes, Italy is a beautiful country and Rome is a beautiful city. I thank you for putting a first-class saloon at my disposal.

Mussolini: Please think nothing of it.

General Moris thought it unusual that Mussolini raised his eyes when Gandhi entered and rose from his chair when it was time for Gandhi to leave. Certainly, he thought, *Mussolini had a personal interest in this visit.*<sup>21</sup> Gandhi was of the opinion that the presence of Mirabehn deterred Mussolini from prolonging the conversation, that he probably believed she was spying for the British. Recalling this encounter days later, Gandhi said to Mahadev: “His eyes are like those of a cat, did you notice?” “More like the eyes of Satan,” Mahadev replied. Gandhi did not object to this judgment.<sup>22</sup>

Later he had this to say about Mussolini: “In general he does not look a

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Di Luigi CAPANO, “Gandhi in Italia per conoscere il Fascismo” (14-1-2007), in *Italia Sociale* website: <http://www.italiasociale.org/storia07/storia140107-1.html> (5-9-2007).

<sup>22</sup> NAYAR, *Mahatma Gandhi*, 402-404.

man of humanity. But I must say that he was charming with me. And when I told him that the Pope couldn't receive me, I saw a glint of mischievous satisfaction".<sup>23</sup>

## Mussolini's Secret Plan

The night of December 12, might have been special. Having travelled from Milan to Rome under Fascist patronage and having met Mussolini in person, Gandhi's thoughts must have gone back to Rolland's repeated warnings about the ways of fascism. Gandhi now had his personal experience. But, to be fair to Il Duce, he decided not to let even his diary know.

Romain Rolland, on the other hand, wrote down every detail. He was informed of what happened nearly two months later, through Demetrio Helbig, a close friend of General Moris who visited him out of the blue on February 4, 1932.

Firstly, Rolland learned that his telegram requesting General Moris to host Gandhi was intercepted by the government of Italy and brought to the General later by a police spy. It therefore took thirty hours for the General to send back to Rolland a positive reply.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, the Government was well informed about the details of Gandhi's arrival in Milan from Switzerland. Rolland's diary documents what he heard from Helbig:

Gandhi arrives in Milan at night, in his third-class compartment. The station Master comes to greet him and tells him he is the guest of the Italian Government for the whole of his stay. A first-class carriage is placed at his disposal – or a third,

<sup>23</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, p. 235. Rolland wrote this account from his collection of letters received from Madame Privat in Rome and Mira in Brindisi.

<sup>24</sup> Rolland gives us this account of the delay as reported by Helbig: “[General Moris] seems to have been taken seriously aback when he opened my telegram (which, it seems, was brought to him by a police spy). He did not even know whether Gandhi would be a *persona non gradita* in Italy (not being aware that official advances had been made to the Mahatma so that he could be annexed, and that it was precisely for that reason that I was approaching him). In short I plunged the good man into fits of timorous perplexity of which I had no inkling. He went to ask H. [Helbig] what to do; H. told him to ask the advice of the head of his office. Moris did so, and his chief postponed his reply until the next day to give him a chance to confer with ‘the Master’. After a Council of State next morning, ‘the Master’ agrees.” *R-G Correspondence*, pp. 251-252.



whichever he prefers; Gandhi chooses the first “as he doesn’t have to pay”. [...] Not only was he given a magnificent carriage [...]; the whole train was a special one, which arrived in Rome twenty minutes before the ordinary express. Moris and H. [Helbig] going by the usual timetable, were late for the arrival, which, no doubt, the Fascist foxes were counting on to whisk Gandhi away from him. Gandhi was confronted at the door of his compartment by two ladies who told him they had come to take him by car to the palace of a certain person who would like him to accept his hospitality. This certain person was a big-business shark, a Fascist, and a friend and instrument of Scarpa, the Italian Consul in India, who was the man pulling the strings behind the whole affair.<sup>25</sup>

What happened next bears testimony to Gandhi’s acuity and determination, caught as he is in the trap set for him by the regime. Rolland continues:

Anyone else but Gandhi would have given in, in Moris’ prolonged absence, but the wily old man, put on his guard by me, refused to budge; he sat down squarely in the corner of his compartment and said he was to stay in Rome with Romain Rolland’s friend General Moris and he would not get out of the carriage until Moris arrived. This caused no mean embarrassment to the railway authorities, who did not dare move the train to another platform and the following trains were delayed.

Finally Moris appears, with H., and takes Gandhi in his car, with Mira and the English policeman. H. follows in another car with the other Indians. A swarm of police separates his car from that of Moris; he is unable to catch up before the foot of the Monte Mario, and he sees five or six other cars climbing the hill in a queue behind Moris’ car. H. decides to protect his friend’s villa from the rush of journalists and sight seers, and he manages to make up lost ground and position himself immediately behind Moris, in front of the others. Moris’ car turns into it, then H’s., and as soon as he is in it, he stops and blocks off the bottleneck. There are shouts behind, but H. sits tight. A squad of police rushes howling towards him, and he decides to move, but he has given Moris time to get ahead. They have hardly arrived when he sees the police enter the house; one installs himself by the telephone and another at the entrance to the drawing room, so not a word will be lost for the whole of Gandhi’s stay.<sup>26</sup>

Gandhi is aware of the tight security and at one point in the garden takes Helbig aside and forcefully says:

<sup>25</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, pp. 252-253.

<sup>26</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, pp. 253-254.

“Now you must tell me everything” H. is about to speak, and he sees Moris’ wife making desperate signals to him behind Gandhi. He finds it impossible to speak; he shows Gandhi the magnificent panorama of the landscape around the villa and says: “You see this beautiful sky, this admirable expanse of nature. This still belongs to us. This still is ours... It would be very sad if we had to be deprived of that too...”<sup>27</sup>

All lips were sealed for fear of further provoking the wrath of *Il Duce* who already felt slighted by Gandhi’s acceptance of the General’s hospitality rather than his own. Throughout his stay, Gandhi was told nothing and heard nothing.

And so, even though Gandhi’s first desire to come to Rome was to meet the Pope, he is given an afternoon tour of the Vatican Museums conducted by Commander Bartolmeo Nogara, the Director General of the museums.<sup>28</sup> And under Scarpa’s tutelage, he and his Indian entourage are shown some achievements of Mussolini’s Rome: schools, with gymnasia, maternity homes and free houses for the poor.<sup>29</sup> He is then led to the home of Contessa Carnevali where, according to Rolland, he meets the “cream of feminine stupidity and snobbery”<sup>30</sup> and where the Director of the *Giornale d’Italia* a personal friend of Mussolini, Virginio Gayda, “who knows not a word of English”,<sup>31</sup> is present. Gandhi visits Mussolini at 6 p.m. On the 13<sup>th</sup> he leaves Rome for Brindisi and boards the S. S. Pilsana for India the following day.

## ***Giornale d’Italia* and the consequences**

Romain Rolland had expressed the fear that in Rome Gandhi’s words might be suppressed or distorted. Something even worse happened. The newspaper, *Giornale d’Italia*, published an interview wherein it claimed that Virginio Gayda had interviewed Gandhi prior to his embarkation.

<sup>27</sup> R-G Correspondence, p. 254.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. *L’Osservatore Romano*, 15-12-1931, 2 and Archivio Storico dei Musei Vaticani, *Rapporti Mensili*, 1932, p. 1031.

<sup>29</sup> NAYAR, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 402.

<sup>30</sup> This is Helbig’s opinion. Cfr. R-G Correspondence, p. 256.

<sup>31</sup> R-G Correspondence, p. 255.

Sir Samuel Hoare, the Secretary of State for India, who had personally received Gandhi's assurance before leaving for India that "he would strain every nerve to avoid a breach with the Government",<sup>32</sup> was horrified to read the interview. He telegraphed Gandhi at once and asked him if the following statements were really his:

1. [The] Round Table Conference marked a definite rupture of relations between the Indian nation and [the] British Government.
2. You are returning to India in order to restart at once [a] struggle against England.
3. Boycott would now prove [to be] powerful means of rendering more acute [the] British crisis.
4. We will not pay taxes, we will not work for England in any way, we will completely isolate British authorities, their politics and their institutions, and we will totally boycott all British goods.<sup>33</sup>

On arrival at Port Said on December 17, Gandhi immediately cabled back to say that the *Giornale d'Italia* interview was "wholly false".<sup>34</sup> He had never given any interview to any journalist in Rome. He assured the British that he would "take no precipitate action" on his arrival in India, and he would make "ample previous entreaty [to the] authorities should direct action [in the form of civil disobedience] become unfortunately necessary".<sup>35</sup>

However, the damage was done. Anti-fascists in Europe were very hurt by Gandhi's visit to Mussolini and his ability to be tricked so easily. One paper used just one word to describe Gandhi's attitude: "*ingenuità*" (naiveté).<sup>36</sup>

The prejudices of some members of the British Government who were unfavourable to the idea of Indian independence were reinforced. They felt that the truce<sup>37</sup> with the Indian National Congress had been a big mis-

<sup>32</sup> B. R. NANDA, *Mahatma Gandhi, A Biography*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 331.

<sup>33</sup> *CWGMG*, vol. 48, 426. Gayada persisted in his claim that the interview was genuine. Gandhi repeated his disclaimer in 1934 when he was again asked about the interview.

<sup>34</sup> *CWGMG*, vol 48, pp. 426-427. Gandhi sent the cable on December 17, 1931.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> The newspaper was *La Libertà*, the mouthpiece of the Italian émigrés in Paris. Cfr. *R-G Correspondence*, 236.

<sup>37</sup> The truce refers to the Gandhi-Irwin Pact on March 4, 1930. It provided for the discontinuance of the civil disobedience on the part of the Congress, and the revocation

take. They were now given just the excuse they needed to tighten the grip on Gandhi and his followers – dragging the struggle on for fifteen more years.<sup>38</sup> Even Sir Samuel Hoare, who respected Gandhi, was overwhelmed by the wave of official opinion against India. “[A]lready he had approved plans of an offensive against the Congress; now he gave permission to press the button which was to unleash a *blitzkrieg* against the Congress”.<sup>39</sup>

While Gandhi was still on the high seas on his way back to India, an ordinance was promulgated for the United Provinces in India. Sweeping regulations were enacted that made all political or public activity impossible. It even provided for the punishment of parents and guardians for the sins of their children and wards.<sup>40</sup> Congress members were arrested and sent to jail. Nehru describes the experience in his *Autobiography*:

[The *Giornale d'Italia* interview] came as a surprise, as it was unlike him to give an interview of this kind casually in Rome. On closer examination we found many words and phrases in it which were quite foreign to him, and it was patent to us, even before the denial came, that the interview could not have been given as published. We thought that there had been a great deal of distortion of something that he had said. Then came his emphatic contradiction of it, and his statement that he had never given any interview at all in Rome. *It was evident to us that some one had played a trick on him. But to our amazement British newspapers and public men refused to believe him, and contemptuously referred to him as a liar.*<sup>41</sup>

When Gandhi returned to India on December 28, 1931, he immediately asked for an appointment with the Viceroy but he received a stiff reply: the Viceroy refused to see him “under the threat of resumption of civil disobedience”.<sup>42</sup> Gandhi continued to plead for a chance to explain, but his efforts were in vain. This was to be the first of many such refusals during

of the ordinances and the release of civil disobedience prisoners on the part of the Government. Cfr. NANDA, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 303.

<sup>38</sup> NANDA, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 321.

<sup>39</sup> Nanda dedicates a whole chapter to the events that follow and calls it ‘Total War’. Cfr. NANDA, *Mahatma Gandhi, A Biography*, p. 331.

<sup>40</sup> Jawaharlal NEHRU, *An Autobiography*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 330.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* (italics mine).

<sup>42</sup> K. P. GOSWAMI, January 2, 1931, in *Mahatma Gandhi, A Chronology*, New Delhi, Publications Division, 1994, p. 152.

the five years that followed.<sup>43</sup> On January 4 around 3 a.m., Gandhi was arrested at Manibhavan, Bombay, and interned at the Yerawada jail some 190 kms away.<sup>44</sup> On that day, four more ordinances were promulgated by the Government of India and the Congress organisation was banned.<sup>45</sup>

In Switzerland, Romain Rolland reflected on all that happened. He did not think Gandhi was ingenuous. He knew how Gandhi often countered situations more challenging than this with his calm ironic indifference. But he feared that Gandhi's decisions would have negative effects for the 300 powerless millions he represented.<sup>46</sup> On hearing the news of how Gandhi's words had been distorted by the Fascist media, Rolland lamented: "I have too much respect for the freedom of those I respect. After putting all the facts before [Gandhi], I let him decide himself; *I should have decided for him*".<sup>47</sup>

## **The Unexpected Encounter**

In his reply to Rolland's pleas for caution at Villeneuve, Gandhi gives us a clue to the conviction that sustained him through the Roman ordeal.

Whatever conclusions I may have come to in my life, I have not drawn them from history, which played a small part in my education. My method is empirical; all my conclusions are based on my personal experience. Certainly I recognize that there is a risk of illusion in this. I know madmen who believe in certain things and cannot be detached from them, since this is their experience. The dividing line between the experiences of such madmen and my own is a slender one. Nevertheless *I cannot but trust them. The sages of the past have noted their experiences based on intuition; everyone now believes that they were right and they have stood the test of history. I like to think that mine, too, are not without foundation.*<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Bipan CHANDRA, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, Penguin, 1988, p. 287.

<sup>44</sup> For a details of the arrest see Elwin Verrier's eyewitness account in NAYAR, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 414.

<sup>45</sup> See the events of January 4, 1932 in GOSWAMI, *Mahatma Gandhi - A Chronology*, p. 152.

<sup>46</sup> In 1901, the population of India was 300,000,000. Cfr. Dharma KUMAR, *The Cambridge Economic History of India, 1757-1970*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 1982, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> R-G *Correspondence*, p. 236.

<sup>48</sup> R-G *Correspondence*, p. 179.

Armed with the power of truth – clear, disciplined and without double meaning<sup>49</sup> – Gandhi believed in the principle of accepting people as they presented themselves to him, not as he would have liked them to be or as the world judged them. He preferred to trust people and appeal to the best in them through a sincere relationship on his side. Sometimes his trust was betrayed. Yet, he was able to enjoy interior peace on the basis of his belief that “God is Truth and Truth is God”.<sup>50</sup> For good to prevail, one had to live the truth in one’s own person: “all that is required is one man who will be *faith and non-violence incarnate*”.<sup>51</sup>

On Saturday, December 12, 1931, Gandhi had a strange encounter with one such man. It took place in the Vatican Museums. After being shown the masterpieces of some of the world’s greatest artists,<sup>52</sup> Gandhi was taken to the Sistine Chapel – the place where Popes have been elected since 1492; the place where Michelangelo’s paintings adorn the ceiling and Raphael’s tapestries decorate the sturdy walls alongside frescos of Perugino, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Rosselli.

Here, amidst the profusion of colour, symbols, tradition, and against the backdrop of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*, Gandhi’s eyes fell on a simple wooden crucifix at the centre of the high altar. A common tourist would normally have been transfixed by Michelangelo’s depiction of lost souls in contorted bodies behind it. But Gandhi was neither a commoner nor a tourist. He stopped before the crucifix for some time. He contemplated the

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Gandhi’s discourse on ‘Truth’ and how it can be attained. *R-G Correspondence*, pp. 188-190.

<sup>50</sup> At Lausanne, Gandhi gave a speech in which he shared this profound discovery: “If it is possible for human language to give its complete description of God, my conclusion is that for me, God is Truth. *But two years ago I made a step further, to say that Truth is God.* I came to this conclusion after an incessant search for truth which began about fifty years ago.” *R-G Correspondence*, p. 188.

<sup>51</sup> *R-G Correspondence*, 181. The original context of this quotation is Gandhi’s firm belief that Europe can be saved from self-destruction only through non-violence. For that to happen Europe must wait for that one man ‘who will be faith and non-violence incarnate.’ I find Gandhi’s words prophetic, transcending space and time in its applicability to all martyrs who have non-violently laid down their lives for a better world, among whom the crucified Christ remains a model par excellence.

<sup>52</sup> Gandhi was guided by Commander Bartolomeo Nogara, the Director of the Museums, through the rooms of Raphael, the Sistine Chapel and the Borgia apartment. Cfr. *Archivio Storico dei Musei Vaticani, Rapporti Mensili*, 1932, p. 1031.

dying Christ, half-naked, bleeding and suspended by nails in his hands and feet. He surveyed the image, moving to look at it from the rear of the altar, then from each side, “as if to perform a *pradakshina* of it”.<sup>53</sup> Mira noticed his moist eyes. He then whispered to Desai on his way out of the chapel, “One can’t help being moved to tears”.<sup>54</sup>

The Pope’s inability to grant him an audience and Mussolini’s sinister hospitality coalesced in this unexpected encounter with the Crucified – author of the ‘Beatitudes’ he loved so much.<sup>55</sup>

A few days later, homeward-bound on the S. S. Pilsna, he looked back at this experience with nostalgia, as he wrote:

[W]hat would not I have given to be able to bow my head before the living image at the Vatican of Christ Crucified! It was not without a wrench that I could tear myself away from that scene of living tragedy. I saw there at once that *nations like individuals could only be made through the agony of the Cross and in no other way*. Joy comes not out of infliction of pain on others, but out of pain voluntarily borne by oneself. I am, therefore, returning home not filled with disappointment but with hope enriched.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *The Examiner*, January 23, 1932, p. 41, quoted in Chandra MALLAMPALLI, *Christians and public life in colonial South India: 1863-1937 contending with marginality*, London, Routledge Curzon, 2004, p. 235. A *pradakshina* is an encircling of the object of worship by a devotee. It is a meditation on the Lord, the unmoving centre of all forms while taking the position of all forms that revolve around that centre.

<sup>54</sup> See the date December 12, 1931 in K. P. GOSWAMI, *Mahatma Gandhi. A Chronology*, New Delhi, Publications Division, p. 151.

<sup>55</sup> Gandhi was deeply inspired by Jesus’ ‘Beatitudes’ also called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’. He recalls his childhood: “All I had then been given to understand was that to be a Christian was to have a brandy bottle in one hand and beef in the other. The Sermon on the Mount, however, falsified the impression. As my contact with real Christians, i.e. men living in fear of God, increased, I saw that the Sermon on the Mount was the whole of Christianity for him who wanted to live a Christian life. It is that Sermon which has endeared Jesus to me.” *CWMG*, vol. 48, p. 438.

<sup>56</sup> *CWMG*, vol. 48, 434. (italics mine) Nayar adds: “One of his favourite hymns was ‘When I survey the Wondrous Cross’. He liked it so much that he made this author learn it from Mirabehn in the Aga Khan Palace detention camp and sing it for him. The lines – ‘See from His head, His hands, His feet / Sorrow and love flow mingling down. [...] Love so amazing, so divine / Demands my life, my soul, my all.’ – used so deeply to move him that his eyes became moist.” NAYAR, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 402.

It appears that the Cross spoke to him of a sacrificial oblation that had to be as generous as it was indispensable in the struggle for freedom. On reaching Bombay, his first speech<sup>57</sup> to a mammoth gathering at Azad Maidan (Freedom Park) aroused his listeners to prepare themselves for the final ordeal in the *spirit* of the Crucified – an ordeal that was to last for sixteen years till India finally got its freedom.

Our fight is based on love. Even if we fight the government, it is with the weapon of love and there can be no room for hatred in it. [...] It is a fight to court sufferings. It is a struggle to give life and not to take life. [...] Last year we faced lathis [batons], but this time we must be prepared to face bullets. I believe that we must get rid of the fear of death, and when we have to court death we must embrace it as we embrace a friend. But in spite of our readiness to offer our lives, we must see to it that not even a hair of an Englishman is hurt. [...] I believe that non-violence has the power to melt the stoniest heart.<sup>58</sup>

Gandhi's visit to Rome did not turn out as he had expected. But the unexpected empowered him with a hope so strong that he even dared to say: "Living Christ means a living Cross. Without it life is a living death".<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> He spoke to the mammoth gathering at Azad Maidan, perhaps "the biggest that any public speaker in Bombay had ever dreamt of." *CWMG*, vol. 48, p. 446.

<sup>58</sup> *CWMG*, vol. 48, pp. 447-448.

<sup>59</sup> This is the conclusion of Gandhi's talk to Christians on board the S. S. Pilsna on the morning of Christmas Day, 1931. The final paragraph reads as follows: "[A]s the miraculous birth is an eternal event, so is the Cross an eternal event in this stormy life. Therefore, we dare not think of birth without death on the Cross. Living Christ means a living Cross. Without it life is a living death." *CWMG*, vol. 48, pp. 438-439.