

Traveling Companion: Behind the Scenes at a Conclave

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Over the years, I have read many novels that have a church or religious theme. Years ago, I read "The Cardinal" by Henry Morton Robinson, published in 1950. Later, I read many of Morris West's novels, most notably, "The Shoes of the Fisherman." Then I read some of Colleen McCullough's books, especially "The Thorn Birds." I have always been fascinated by the way novelists portray the Catholic Church, its politics and its intrigue.

Recently, I finished reading, "Conclave" by Greg Tobin, a fascinating novel about the behind the scenes politicking that goes on in the election of a Pope. It is a novel of passion and the papacy. I'm not sure what drew me to such a novel. First of all, it was the fact that some time in the near future, our Catholic Church will be faced with the need to elect a successor to Pope John Paul II. Secondly, maybe it was because I wanted to see how an "outsider," a novelist would write about this mysterious process. Thirdly, because I am a writer, I like to know the twists and turns, the detours and surprises, the mystery and unknowns that a novelist uses to keep the reader turning the pages to the very end.

Greg Tobin had written a previous non-fiction work about the wisdom of St. Patrick. Presently, he is working on a sequel.

Timothy John Cardinal Mulrennan, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Newark, a personal friend of an ailing Pope, may be a possible candidate to succeed. The thought of an American born Pope, especially with his soiled past, makes for a novel filled with mystery and possibilities. Others have their own ideas of who might be the best candidate and will make sure, either through rumor or innuendo, to discredit Mulrennan. As the 430 page novel unfolds, the chess game of compromise and favoritism begin to play out. The Holy Spirit has to dance sprightly through the muddied waters of personal agendas and vendettas; of ego trips and sabotage; of poker faced players cutting deals behind the scene to troubadours who troubleshoot a better way for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Canadian Cardinal Vennholme, a supporter of the "Evangelium Christi" movement wants to make sure that "the wicked men who seek to corrupt Christ's teaching authority and change His words to suit their misguided, even socialistic view of man's needs will be stopped before they can do any real damage." He and his supporters seek "only a Church that honors our movement, our intentions. We seek fertile ground for the seed to grow. You see, we do not believe the Evangelium Christi to be some sort of secret fraternity, some political scheme. We believe we have been called by our Lord and that He alone has set us on our path." He supports Pietro Cardinal La Spina, the "Terror of Turin," as his candidate to be pope because he "was born to be Pope" and has been given "the strength of a bull."

The assembled cardinals discover an election that is intoxicated with politics and sexuality; that electing a Pope is a heavy chalice to lift; that it smacks of horse-trading. In the end, Vennholme wonders what wrong he has done to see his great plans in shambles.

The epic continues as dark horses become frontrunners; assassinations a possibility; smoke screens a reality and surprises become the norm.

In the end, the new Pope reflects on his journey to the Chair of St. Peter, saying, "so this is my vocation: to be a part of a great whole, not separate and distinct and alone. This is what it means to be a priest: to be a brother and friend, not master and superior."

Finally, one wonders if truth could ever be stranger than fiction, even at a Conclave!