

Vicar of Progress

The Collaborator

By Mitchell Hadley

Dallas: Throckmorton Press, 2015

214 pages, \$14.99 (also available

on Kindle for \$2.99)

Review by David Deavel

What to make of the mystery of Pope Francis? A friend asks whether he is a “gunslinger or a mad scientist.” That is, does he just continually shoot from the hip with his airplane press conference pronunciamentos and long documents filled with beauty, straight-up truth, and...ambiguous language concerning moral and theological matter? Or is there really a method to his madness, for good or for ill?

Some feel even asking such a question is somehow impious, but Catholic teaching never precluded bad or incompetent popes, and Catholic practice has not been so pious. Dante placed Pope Celestine V and his successor, Boniface VIII, in hell. Boniface, to be clear, was still alive at the time of Dante’s infernal “canonization.” More balanced historical judgments have also been given of “bad popes,” including many from the Borgia family. This is a book review, so I’m not going to give you my views on Francis, but let me say such a papacy is a gold mine not merely for Florentine poet-geniuses and future Church historians but for conspiracy theorists and thriller writers.

Whether Mitchell Hadley is a conspiracist, he has certainly made a thriller. *The Collaborator*’s Francis-esque pope, never named, is from an unnamed Latin American country, where “The Silent War” raged several decades ago; at the same time, the pope was returning from an exile into the hinterlands, handed to him by his unnamed religious order, to become archbishop of the capital city. Now he is trying to establish “the New Openness,” symbolized to all by his catchphrase—“Who am I to say?”—and his new ambiguously worded encyclical, “On Human Sexuality.” An advocate for social justice and a supporter of international

governmental agencies and left-wing national governments, he is popular in the world’s press, but a figure of division in the Church.

In fact, none of the characters is named, and the novel is, as a back-cover blurb puts it, a “parable for our times.” Written as a kind of combination of three-act play and movie treatment, the book comprises three acts, each of which has a Shakespeare quotation as a preface. Further, the narration includes directions for imagining the main speakers as if they were on a sparsely set stage production. Meanwhile, the action is described through the tales of others—thus, lots of monologues in which stories are told and dialogues with which to digest them. Does this kind of thing work?

In the case of Acts One and Two it does. The story centers on the pope’s chief faithful opposition, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Church’s main theological watchdog. This man, who has served the Church faithfully and has seen the confusion rendered by the Pontiff, is given papers in Act One by a mysterious stranger on behalf of a deceased journalist who had dug into the Pontiff’s past. Act One ends with the Prefect approaching the Pontiff in his chambers to confront him with the allegations and evidence. Act Two provides the alternation mentioned before: monologues involving the journalist’s accounts of his contacts and their stories, punctuated by brief, tense back-and-forths between the Pontiff and the Prefect. The stories are well-told, and the conversations are believably tense and cagey. I always think the test of a good book is how little I look at the page numbers. In the first two acts I barely noticed there were page numbers.

I will provide no spoilers on what exactly the evidence proved or what the Prefect was able to accomplish by his confrontation, but I think it’s safe to say, given the title, that the Pontiff did indeed collaborate on some bad things. And this is where the book did bog down a little. Act Three is largely a series of monologues by the Prefect with some intervening talk by the Pontiff. And while there is a certain

sense of resolution, the reader might just feel as if the Prefect is doing a bit too much pontificating himself.

I also wondered exactly how broad the audience for the book could be, since the liberal Pontiff does come off not just as naïve but as having lost his Christian faith. Would believing Catholics of somewhat more liberal political views find such a character to be just more conservative caricaturing of their positions as secularist at heart? I’m not saying that there aren’t many liberal Catholics who are secularists, but I think the story would have been stronger if the Pontiff turned out to be a religious man torn by conflicting but ultimately incompatible loyalties, rather than one who had internally given up any semblance of orthodox belief.

The same might be said of the setting for the Pontiff’s past. While I understand the need for compression in a parable like this, part of the drama of any papacy in the world right now is that the Catholic Church has been dealing with secularism and also the many Christians around the world who are Orthodox, Anglican, evangelical, and charismatic—not to mention heterodox groups like the Mormons. *The Collaborator* doesn’t have this as part of its picture. Having it would have made the tale that much richer.

Any criticisms aside, what makes *The Collaborator* worth reading is that Mitchell Hadley has made clear yet again that the Church is not dull. Inside her walls the battle between light and darkness can be and often is more intense than outside. ❧

