Conclave, Priesthood Ordination, and God's Spirit in an Evangelizing Church: A Review Essay

Robert Harris. *Conclave: A Novel*. New York: Vintage, 2024. 304 pp. Paperback: $18.00. ISBN: 978-0593689585.

Reviewed by Gordon Shepherd

On May 7, 2025, the Roman Catholic Church's College of Cardinals sequestered themselves in conclave to elect a successor to deceased Pope Francis of Buenos Aires, Argentina. After only two days in conclave, white plumes of smoke billowed from a chimney atop Rome's Sistine Chapel, signaling the election of a new pope: *Habemus Papam!* Robert Francis Prevost, a dark horse American candidate, born in Chicago, had surprisingly become the conclave's choice as successor to Francis. Henceforth, he will be known to the world as Pope Leo XIV.

As fate would have it, two months before the succession of Pope Leo, the film *Conclave* was in competition for best motion picture at the 2024 Academy Awards. *Conclave* was based on a 2016 novel of the same name, written by British historical fiction author Robert Harris. Both the book and the movie have received well-deserved accolades, and both are worthy of review. My review essay here, however, is of the book, and it features my personal reflections on Mormonism's priesthood hierarchy, generationally sustained through missionary service and progressive lay advancements up the ecclesiastical ladder.

Historically situated at some unspecified moment of time in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, *Conclave* is a novel concerning the death of a pope and the election of his successor. In what ways is this subject matter relevant to *Dialogue*'s primarily Mormon readers? We could, of course, compare the venerated religious offices of the

Catholic pope and LDS president/prophet, assess the contrasting ways these offices are filled in their respective faith traditions, evaluate the analogous authority prerogatives they bestow in top-down priesthood organizations, and consider issues of advancing age among top echelon leaders. But these were not the first thoughts that jumped to mind when I began reading *Conclave.* Oddly, from the first few pages forward, I was stimulated instead to reflect on my youthful motivation and experience as a Mormon missionary in 1960s Mexico.

How does *Conclave* resonate with my motivation and experience over fifty years ago as a callow Mormon missionary? Most of the characters portrayed in *Conclave* are old men, professing ultimate obeisance to the mysteries of the faith, but they are also long inured to, and skillful at, negotiating the worldly and arcane politics of the Vatican. In stark contrast, my missionary companions and I, who also believed ourselves to be commissioned to perform God's holy work on earth, were barely past adolescence. But let us also remember, the old cardinals of the Universal Church who converge in *Conclave* were once young too, possessed of an idealistic religious vision—not unlike ours as Mormon missionaries—of building God's kingdom on earth. And, like us, as young men they too embraced what they believed was a sacred call to render sacrificial service in devotion to God's will for the salvation of humankind. Perhaps more accurately said, in chronological time, we youthful Mormon missionaries, much like the aging Roman prelates, commenced our religious assignments believing we were chosen by God to minister on his behalf. In my case, this meant accepting a proselyting assignment to go to Mexico and fall in love with its people who were looking for something that would bring hope to their lives.

In Mexico, my missionary companions and I did not, of course, expect to make religious ministry an occupational profession. Unlike Catholic priests, we were not trained, professional clergy. We expected to return home after two years of missionary service, recommence our secular education, get married, have children of our own, and support

them and ourselves by landing decent paying jobs. Vows of poverty and lifelong celibacy were absolutely not part of the deal. But we did expect to continue pursuing lay religious careers as adults in the organizational structure of the LDS Church—a hierarchical organization which, like Roman Catholicism, claims God's divine direction in promoting male religious advancements in ecclesiastical authority, both endorsing and sustaining a male gerontocracy. For us, like the Catholic prelates in *Conclave*, the Church—its doctrines, laws, traditions, and rituals—was a transcendent, reified entity that claimed our highest loyalty and devotion. The Church, we believed, was God's ecclesiastical instrument for disciplining and perfecting his children and, in turn, we were the Church's designated human instruments for bringing God's Truth to the people. To idealistic youth, there could be no higher calling or duty. Ask any novice Catholic priest.

Did *we* really believe this? Yes, but not quite. Not quite because our inherited missionary faith was untested. While we righteously testified to the authenticity of our inherited beliefs, most of us simply parroted what we had been taught in church and by our parents growing up, and assumed it must all be true. We were reassured by admired adult religious role models that through self-purification and sincerity of purpose, we would merit a personal witness bestowed by God's spirit, which would sustain us through our missionary trials and seal our own faithful adult service to the Church for the remainder of our lives. Many of us—some more quickly than others—professed a spiritual witness that this too was true and cast aside our doubts to faithfully serve the Lord by conforming to the sacrificial requirements of missionary life. Others of us failed to obtain any supernatural confirmation but continued learning and performing our missionary roles anyway, with varying levels of effectiveness.

Even though I was in the latter group, I never became a cynical or disillusioned missionary in the field. The Church and its message of the restored gospel still seemed entirely plausible to me and I took

righteous pride in continuing to diligently perform my missionary duties without a spiritually burning witness or testimony to sustain me. I assumed the latter would eventually be bestowed but, in the meantime, I had already committed myself to do my best. On the threshold of adulthood, I was determined to reverse my adolescent aimlessness. At that turning point in my life, serving a mission to Mexico seemed the right way, the right place, and the right time to do so. And indeed, that turned out to be the case. Even without a confirming spiritual witness, the mission's organized structure, the professions of faith and commitment of other missionaries whom I admired, the efforts of investigators to change their lives, the good will and support of Mexican Mormons, and my own development of language and leadership skills gave me a sustaining sense of purpose throughout my mission.

I speak here about expecting the sealing power of God's spirit to inspire and anoint the performance of one's religious duty because of the way this is regularly emphasized in Harris's *Conclave* novel. Even though the most ambitious among them undisguisedly connive and politic against one another to assume the Papal throne, virtually all of the assembled Cardinals believe that through strict compliance with the esoteric electoral rules and rituals of their society in conclave, it will be God's Spirit that ultimately signals St. Peter's successor as bishop of Rome.

In my old age cynicism and unbelief, this secretly surprised me and led me as a reader to appreciate the fidelity with which Harris portrays the story's religious protagonists. He portrays them with unflinching realism. Although they represent an elect college of the most eminent churchmen of a worldwide religious organization that claims divine moral authority over a billion souls, we plainly see the familiar spectrum of humanity present in virtually all human communities: the truly selfless and humble, the bombastic and self-serving, the mean-spirited and narrow-minded, the magnanimous and forgiving, progressives and traditionalists, optimists and pessimists, and even mendacious

liars in pursuit of their own ambitions in concert with self-reproaching doubters.

As a novelist, Harris renders a realistic portrait of the range of individuals to be encountered in almost all societies, including the holy orders of God. But he does not write satirically or judgmentally or with the ultimate objective of producing a ridiculing exposé of organized religious nonsense and folly. Instead, he writes with verisimilitude, in a way that instructs readers' understanding of the protagonists' own understanding of themselves, what they are doing, and why it matters to them. Notwithstanding the revelation of human failings and shameful secrets among the Church's spiritual elite as the story of a transformational election unfolds, readers must also appreciate the shaping constraints and guidance that the ecclesiastical institutions of the Holy See impose on the religious aspirations of these ambitiously powerful men. Whatever else organized religion is, it is a human system that depends on rules that both prescribe and proscribe the actions of religious adherents. When organizational rules become institutionalized and historically maintained by religious authorities in a religious tradition, they are imbued with a sacred character that demands of believers their unquestioned personal submission and paramount devotion. System rules also provide for organizational oversight, reinforcing rituals and official standards for maintaining individual compliance.

It is these kinds of organizational and ritual mechanisms that Harris competently describes, giving arcane credibility and heightening knowledgeable readers' interest in the unfolding of his story's plot. LDS general authorities are presumably no less human than their Vatican counterparts, and the hierarchical structure of the LDS Church and its organizational rules and institutions no less guiding and constraining on the personal ambitions of its leaders.

For me in Mexico the mission organization was a microcosm of the larger ecclesiastical priesthood structure of the Church. Mormon missions not only function to recruit new members but also serve to

preserve the lay priesthood organization of the LDS Church by socializing youthful missionaries in the performance of adult callings and encouraging leadership skills and advancements up the ecclesiastical ladder. In my own missionary experience, hard work and proselyting success were rewarded by leadership advancement that stimulated personal ambition in compliance with mission norms and rules. This is the basic template for generational replacement of religious leadership in a missionary church.

Determined to reform my heretofore lackadaisical approach to adulthood, I gratefully flourished in the LDS missionary system without the supportive benefit of a personal, spiritual witness. It wasn't until I left the affirming plausibility structure of the mission organization in Mexico and began pursuing an academic career that my taken-for-granted Mormon faith eventually evaporated. As a university student, I fell in love with sociology, an academic discipline whose explanatory concepts for understanding the world made more sense to me than dogmatic religious teachings. With this switch in my thinking, I felt neither the need to regain or strengthen my religious faith, nor disillusionment in losing it. I have always regarded my missionary days as a positive learning experience that acquainted me with Mexico and its people, contributing in a major way to my eventual career as an academic sociologist.

Conclave is a novel about religion, but it is not, strictly speaking, a religious book. It is not written with the purpose of inspiring young readers to pursue sacrificial lives of religious devotion or of ascending ecclesiastical ranks to assume the burdens of guiding God's work on earth. Its fantastical conclusion concerning the fulfillment of God's will through the politicking and rituals of the conclave may appeal to nonorthodox readers while simultaneously offending the religious sensibilities of many orthodox Catholics (as well as many Mormons and other orthodox Christians). At the same time, true believers and experienced advocates of clerical religion—whether Catholics or

Mormons—may plausibly interpret Harris's novel as an implicit testament to the way God always works through fallible human beings to achieve his ultimate purposes on earth.

This conclusion, of course, requires a religious leap of faith. It's just as plausible (and much simpler) to argue that Harris's story merely depicts human actors performing their religiously mandated duties in predictable ways in the context of personal ambition and constraining rules in a humanly constructed organization. But for liberal readers, the story's ending also offers an unanticipated spark of hope. Hope is the mysterious essence of religious belief, but humanists traffic in hope as well. One need not be a religious believer to harbor idealistic hopes for making the world a better place.

Without knowing what Robert Harris's personal beliefs are, I would call *Conclave* a novel that humanizes its religious protagonists and the ecclesiastical structures that shape their motives and actions, while optimistically projecting a kind of humanistic faith in the reformative possibilities of transforming even our most conservative institutions. Maybe this is one of the reasons why *Conclave* strangely resonated and appealed to me. This appeal leads to an interesting question for religious believers, if not for humanists: Can conservative religions—like Roman Catholicism and the LDS Church—be changed for the better without God's help? For example, with or without God's help, will either the Catholic or LDS Churches ever admit women into their orders of the priesthood, potentially setting the stage for a woman pope or Latter-day Saint prophet, seer, and revelator?

Certainly not in my lifetime, it's safe to say (I'm eighty-two), but there are still many younger Latter-day Saints, both women and men, who retain hope that the Church and its elderly hierarchy of male leaders will eventually be inspired, or otherwise acknowledge the twenty-first century wisdom of ordaining women to the LDS priesthood. By way of comparison, the Community of Christ has already taken this step by ordaining women since 1984 and, forty years later in 2024, by elevating

Stassi D. Cramm to the office of Church president. Though sharing overlapping historical origins, the developing doctrinal and ecclesiastical differences between the Community of Christ and LDS Church are significant. Many disillusioned Mormons and detached scholars are not optimistic that the much more conservative LDS Church will ever surrender its theological premise of an all-male priesthood. Unhappily, I'm inclined to agree with the pessimists. But, as many of my Mexican investigators liked to say, *solo Diós sabe*.

I have premised my review of Harris's *Conclave* novel by saying it stimulated me to reflect on my youthful motivation and experience as a Mormon missionary in 1960s Mexico. Looking back, it's fair to say that I gained as much hope for my own youthful future as any of my proselyting efforts may have done for the hopes of Mexicans seeking a better life by investigating and joining the LDS Church. When I left Mexico, I went home prepared to become a responsible adult. For this—and in spite of my subsequent loss of religious faith and rejection of the Church's theological claims—I remain appreciative of a religion which, like Roman Catholicism in Robert Harris's hopeful novel about the election of a pope, provided idealistic youth like me an ecclesiastical organization that imposed requirements of self-discipline in pursuit of causes greater than oneself.

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