

Father Elijah, An Apocalypse by Michael D. O'Brien (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 597 pages.

Reviewed by Christine Sunderland

I read *Father Elijah* ten years ago, and recalled how refreshing it was to read a story set in the late 20th century that was infused with the sacramental acts of God. I also recalled not being able to put it down. Would the book be as I remembered? Could I add this to my gift list for friends and family? Would this help or hinder their belief in the Christian God of love?

Our hero, Father Elijah, is a Carmelite monk, his past forged in the fires of brutal suffering. As David Schafer, a holocaust survivor and promising Israeli statesman-attorney, he experiences even more tragedy. But he finds redemption in Christianity, becoming a monk and priest. He takes the name Elijah and lives a life of prayer in a monastery near Jerusalem. As the story opens he is called out of his seclusion and into the world by the Pope. His mission? To convert the President of Europe, thought to be the Anti-Christ. Who could be better qualified for such a mission: A converted Jew pulled from the desert, a humble, prayerful soul who wrestles with God through the demons of his past, a man with a powerful intellect trained to argue and understand.

The plot twists and turns with suspense, and Michael O'Brien's clean prose adds to the pace. Yet we slow down in passages that recall Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* (an apt epic comparison) and these dialogues, while heavier in style, are theologically rewarding. Possibly a challenge to modern readers, they are profound essays on God's redemptive purposes and worth the thoughtful pace.

Along the way, the author has moments of rich poetry and profound metaphor, Scriptural allusions pulled together to form a whole, leaving the reader with glimpses of truth, as though windows suddenly open. He speaks of the power of God to work through lowly matter, through image and sacrament:

Images of her (Mary) were crowned in cathedrals throughout the world, icons painted by saints and statues carved by geniuses . . . And yet she did not spurn the lowliest images, for they too were signs lifted up in the darkness of history, without false glory or human pride of accomplishment, words made from the clay of the earth and painted with pigments wrung from the earth by gnarled hands that toiled in the earth and hoped for Paradise.

(In the Eucharist) There had been a burst of ecstasy, a brief parting of the veil that separated the human from the divine, that line of division and union running inexorably through the center of the heart.

He speaks of our broken world and the half-lies that twist our vision of reality, as good clashes with evil that is disguised as good,

Unity (of the Church, the world) can be authentic only if it is founded upon truth. We cannot pretend that there are two conflicting truths, both of which are right. This is madness. It destroys . . . the human person.

I thought that darkness had only one or two faces. It took me a long time to learn that it has many, and that its worst face masquerades as light.

And of the nature of sin:

Every sin is a choice to turn a miraculous being into an object for consumption. It flattens the human person, one's self and one's victim, into a one-dimensional universe.

In every person's soul there is an icon of what he is meant to be. An image of Love is hidden there... Our sins and faults, and those committed against us, bury this original image. We can no longer see ourselves as we really are.

Elijah's spiritual journey asks the big questions: Where was God during the Holocaust? What is truth? Are the Endtimes near? Indeed, twelve years after the publication of *Father Elijah*, it is chilling to see how our world mirrors the world described in this novel. Prophetic, to be sure, and as Elijah struggles with assassins and secrets and the demands of love, as he strives to win souls through logic and self-sacrifice, he glimpses darkness in his own heart:

Before his eyes was the fundamental problem of his soul: he had been given everything and it did not suffice. And yet . . . the ancient scar of Adam within his nature dragged him inexorably back, again and again, to his desire for certainty . . . *Not-knowing* was the way to ultimate union with the Love whose embrace was the filling of every doubt, the binding up of all wounds.

Characters, knowing and not-knowing, are sharply drawn: an old Franciscan with bleeding hands; a simple monk who is more than he seems; a lax priest who sacrifices all, a female judge who cannot believe. Scenes are vividly rendered as we climb to Tiberius' Leap on Capri, step back in time in the Warsaw ghetto, pray before the tomb of Saint Francis in Assisi, and walk the dark alleys of Rome and the bright halls of the Vatican.

Father Elijah is not only a good story, laced with danger and death, of a humble priest meeting a formidable adversary. It is not only a prophetic warning and a celebration of weakness over strength, the small over the great. It is a journey of the soul, indeed, the reader's soul, in a quest for God, as the universal becomes the particular. The Apocalypse of Scripture (and the author knows his Scripture) becomes our own apocalypse, as we face our own numbered days. This novel is a deep examination of the heart of man, what he is made of, where he has been, where he is going, and most importantly, the map he needs to get there.

I'm putting *Father Elijah* on my gift list. My precocious nephew and granddaughter, juniors in high school, as well as several adult friends, will not be able to put it down. And it might open their eyes to the past, the present, the future, and yes, the immense love of God.

And I might even read *Father Elijah* a third time, and a fourth, and a fifth . . . to catch all the levels and allusions I missed.

For more about Michael O'Brien, visit StudiObrien.com.