


These three books share one point of intersection which may be phrased as a question: Is John Paul II the last Pope? “No” says the first book. “Yes” says the second. “Don’t know” says the third.

On what grounds are these three answers based? The first is based on church history. Hebblethwaite is certain that there will be a successor to Pope John Paul II for the simple reason that 120 electing cardinals are now feverishly trying to narrow down the choices for nominating a successor, just as conclave after conclave in centuries of Church history always did. This gives Hebblethwaite a journalistic opportunity, in a style pleasing to secular tastes with geopolitical obsessions, to trace the colorful adventures of conclaves of the past two centuries. The process is described as a learning experience for hierarchs and for the whole Church from which nine “morals” are proposed to help avoid past mistakes. But make no mistake about it: John Paul II is not the last Pope.

How can the Virgin Mary be mistaken? Or rather, how can reports based on visions and inner locutions, clearly inspired by the Blessed Mother, be mistaken? This seems to be the tone of Yap’s book about forthcoming events of this decade. Among the many events described profusely in 20 alarming chapters, the Garabandal events are described in Chapter XI entitled “John Paul II — Our Last Pope?” The question is affirmatively answered on the basis of reports of Conchita Gonzales. Although the Garabandal reports have not been officially confirmed, they are seen to be sufficiently “coherent” with many other similar events, some of which have been recognized. Yap is open to the qualification that “end of times” does not mean the end of the world. He also accepts the interpretation that the Petrine office could be exercised by a college of patriarch after the “end of time.”

O’Brien portrays the end of time in a very thrilling novel. Like Yap, he uses materials based on reports of mystics and visionaries. Like Hebblethwaite, he delves into the geopolitical intrigues that seethe in the corridors of global power. As a veteran writer of fiction, he is unhampered by the need for textual analysis or documentary evidence
and freely uses his artistic imagination to create a very human and highly
gifted character in the person of a Carmelite contemplative fittingly
named Father Elijah. Elijah accepts a papal mission to communicate a
salutary message to the president of a supranational club that carefully
conceals its alliance with the world rulers of this present darkness. The
mission is not yet fully accomplished. The shepherds of the flock are
scattered, persecuted, hounded into exile in some mysterious wilder-
ness. Salvation history is revealed as a mystery of suffering and hope.
Readers familiar with the scriptural symbolism of Elijah will eagerly
welcome a sequel integrating the insights of these three authors.

Vicente Marasigan, S.J.

WITNESS TO FREEDOM: THE LETTERS OF THOMAS MERTON IN
TIMES OF CRISIS. Selected and edited by William H. Shannon. New

This 352-page collection of letters of Thomas Merton is a very rich
treasury of materials for researchers in communal discernment. I believe
that the 31 pages (200-30), forming a chapter entitled “Vocation Crisis:
1959-1960,” can be taken as one key with which to unlock this treasury.

The editor Shannon has good reasons for thematizing the collection
as a witnessing to freedom, for such indeed was Merton’s constant
desire insofar as he was conscious of this. But Merton knew that he
was freely choosing a vocation that would relativize his freedom with
a vow of obedience. And of celibacy. Whenever religious vows and
relativized freedom clash at certain points, crisis will necessarily arise.
There were many times of crisis in the period covered, 1946-68, of which
the vocation crisis was one.

Besides his vocation to contemplative solitude, Merton also had a
secular vocation as a writer. He was strongly attached to this activity
but he was not always sure whether this attachment was inordinate
or not. Much of his correspondence was with individuals requesting
advice about spiritual matters and this was perfectly harmless and often
inspiring. Others involved politics, whether national, global or ecclesi-
astical. In these matters, his Cistercian censors did not always discern
matters the way he did, and he judged, rightly or wrongly, that they
were excessively influenced by partisan concerns or personal bias. He
even wrote a letter to his friend Archbishop Paul Philippe, secretary of
the Vatican’s Congregation for Religious, to use his influence to obtain
permission for him to live in Cuernavaca in a primitive monastic group