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Looking at the Pope in the New Republic

Ken Briggs | Aug. 21, 2013 NCR Today

The accomplished writer Damon Linker provides a first rate cover story on Pope Francis for the New Republic, both sophisticated and notably charitable.

Linker frames the piece in terms of whether the Francis papacy is good or bad for Catholic progressives. While he echoes the broad view that Francis has the right stuff to raise hopes for church reform on such matters as birth control and women's ordination, he carefully cites the pope's record to dampen prospects that any major change will happen.

In so doing, however, he shuns opinion and relies on the glaring differences between Vatican politics and American style democracy that make it so unlikely that a pope will challenge the system. A turnabout in church theological directions would require an existing diversity of fundamental thought among the chief players, he notes, whereas in fact the leadership pool is made up of clerics molded into a relatively super-conformist monolith.

In that climate, though the pope exhibits empathy for gays, for example, nothing whatever indicates that warm feelings can possibly translate into a backing down from the "more or less intrinsically disordered" judgment leveled against active gay love by John Paul II.

And women's ordination? Linker reminds readers that Francis has already put the kibosh on that. If progressives expect confrontation, he also suggests that Francis' record of non-confrontation toward the junta that plagued human rights in Argentina is instructive.

At the same time, Linker praises the pope's demeanor and the gist of his message, and while he thinks progressives will be disappointed, he thinks the good vibes could initiate long range results, like the image of the butterfly's mild stirring causing a chain effect on the universe. There he invokes the traditional "thinking in centuries" fall back position that sustains Catholics for reasons seemingly other than empirical.

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