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The Good Cop

Ken Briggs | Apr. 3, 2013 NCR Today

The eruption of hope sparked by the election of Pope Francis is a wonder to behold. Long suppressed joy has burst forth from under a thick layer of gloom. It is spontaneous and infectious, freeing and invigorating.

Francis has released this spirit by loving those in his midst and through them the world. Only Nelson Mandela's serene walk out of prison comes to mind as anything close to it.

To the world at large, this is a surprise and welcome gift, a messenger of kindness and acceptance to counter the avalanche of strife and enmity. Everyone who cares about humanity loves what they see.

To many Catholics who feel they have a lot at stake in what popes do, hope is also tempered, I believe, by the question of whether Francis as the Good Cop will eventually also play Bad Cop.

What would that Bad Cop be? He could be one who capitalizes on the Good Cop's popularity and good will to win approval of unpopular teachings. One who plays exclusivist to the Good Cop's inclusivism.

Francis may not have a Bad Cop side but in order to stay on his present course, he must be willing to stretch rules or, in his capacity as Chief of Police, change them. He will need to do more than assure the poor that he's on their side by sacrificiing the church's security to add muscle to their cause. To continue hope among his fellow Catholics, he will probably need to welcome women into official church leadership in addition to washing their feet. Otherwise, the Good Cop will only have put a good face on a broken, conflict-ridden, arthritic church. While he can attain stature and influence in the wider world for his humanity and advocacy of human rights, he will likely be measure inside the church by whether the compassionate visage he has shown is matched by deeds befitting that compassion in the minds of so many Catholics.

Good Cops offer promise, understanding and acceptance beyond the letter of the law. Bad Cops appear on the scene to stress conformity to that law and its finality. Papal history has a host of variations on this mixture, but the rule is that one way or another no pope will overturn the basic policies of his predecessors. The pope is, of course, a creature of the papacy.

Francis has walked into the life of the world as a benevolent, humble Good Cop who has won hearts and engaged loyalties many Catholics had thought they'd lost. He seems at times a free spirit. To the extent that his spirit is free, he won't be bound. Meanwhile, the specter of a Bad Cop lurks; let's hope it never materializes but fades into the shadows.

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