

TO CHANGE THE CHURCH: POPE FRANCIS AND THE FUTURE OF CATHOLICISM

(ROSS DOUTHAT)

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Ross Douthat has a job that is, I would guess, either enviable or unpleasant, depending on the day—that of being the only regular conservative contributor to the *New York Times*. A frequent focus of Douthat's is that most counter-cultural of doctrines, orthodox Roman Catholicism. If you want to suffer, you need only visit the comments section in the *Times* for any Douthat column, especially one on Catholicism. Exposing yourself to the firehose of bile and stupidity there will show you what Purgatory will be like, although perhaps Purgatory will be an improvement. Undaunted, Douthat now offers a full-length book on the changes being brought about by Pope Francis.

In some ways I am ideally situated to review this book. I am not a Roman Catholic, so I do not necessarily have a dog in the fight, and I bear no necessary loyalty to the papacy as an institution or to any particular Pope, nor do I feel constrained from criticizing. On the other hand, I am intimately familiar with not only the subtleties of Catholic doctrine, having been raised Catholic and attended a Calvinist elementary school (thus learning point-counterpoint), but also with some of its higher level theology, and I have been accused, with much justice, of being a crypto-Catholic. Really, Douthat and I are quite similar in our views—he is merely inside the formally Catholic side of the line, and I am outside it. Like Douthat, I have “a strong interest in religious questions but relatively little natural piety,” so we both tend to an intellectual approach to religious questions. But he is a practicing Catholic and I am an ambiguous fellow traveler (for now, at least). This frees me to say what I really think, which is more negative about all involved in current Church disputes than Douthat would have it.

Douthat begins by explaining his own religious background—that he was not a cradle Catholic, but his entire family converted while he was a teenager, so he embodies aspects of both a childhood Catholic and of an adult convert. He is not a traditionalist, but his sympathies skew conservative, in the John Paul II sense—someone who sees the virtues of modernity, and the need for some adaptation, just as Karol

Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger did during Vatican II, but not too much adaptation. Then we get into the analysis. Douthat incisively outlines the basic splits in the Church today, dividing around various issues relating to modernity, many (though not all) touching on sexuality, but underlain by deeper arguments about the authority of Scripture and, critically, the permanence of moral teachings. He also shows how “conservative” and “liberal” are defined in the modern Church, in a way that does not necessarily align with American use of those terms, but revolves primarily around the flexibility of Church teaching, as well as around what matters should be today emphasized by the Church. Throughout the book, Douthat does a good job of explaining these issues to non-experts, avoiding getting bogged down in minutiae, but accurately conveying the substance of the debates in a way calculated not to prejudice the reader one way or the other. This is particularly true in his chapter explaining Vatican II, where he separately writes sections from the liberal view and the conservative view, showing how Vatican II often could be read to support either side—and was so read in the subsequent decades, by both sides.

And so in those decades, under two popes, conservatives were able to tell themselves that they were on the right side of history. Yes, there were still liberals hanging around, and yes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI did not purge liberals or push a truly conservative structural agenda—quite the contrary, even if many new cardinals and bishops were fairly conservative. Doctrinally, those two popes taught forcefully that no moral teaching could change, whether that related to sexual morals, or euthanasia, or, for that matter, the moral implications of economics. Mostly, they functionally steered a middle ground, and since conservatives dominated the rising (smaller) generation of priests and religious, conservatives figured things would continue to swing their way. Complacency as far as the Church’s internal structure and governance was largely the order of the day; energy was focused on combating the evils of the world without, and of avoiding the fate of mainline Protestantism, implosion viewed as caused by liberalization. Liberals, meanwhile, bemoaned these papacies and called for “engagement with the modern world” and “collegiality,” code words for doctrinal flexibility and change, without much hope that the Church as a whole would move further in that direction. Therefore, they mostly redirected local

Church practice in the few areas they controlled, really only Northern Europe (where the Church was enormously wealthy but dying fast) and some areas in North and South America, in the direction of liberal practice and emphasis, while they still held the upper echelons of the hierarchy in those areas. But this seemed like a rearguard, or at best a holding action. Until Benedict, one fine day in 2013, chose to resign.

Douthat plainly thinks this was the wrong choice. Not only did it make the office of Pope seem like that of a CEO, rather than the heir of Peter, it (in hindsight) opened the door to change that Benedict obviously opposes, even if he refuses to formally say so. Thus, Jorge Bergoglio was elected Pope, in a conclave Douthat describes precisely to the extent it is possible to do so. Bergoglio's election was in a way very similar to Obama's in 2008 (not that Douthat uses the analogy)—a mostly unknown candidate upon whom each faction could project their own views, imagining that Bergoglio would generally govern as they would, or at least not in dramatic opposition to their desires. Yes, the dwindling “St. Gallen” faction (liberal cardinals such as the German Walter Kasper and the Belgian Godfried Daneels) were instrumental in this—but probably not as part of some nefarious plot, merely because they viewed Bergoglio as the best alternative they could hope for. And conservatives were confident that the past three decades had put guardrails on the Church's doctrinal future, such that a new Pope who was a somewhat unknown quantity was not a risk.

Francis began with, as we all know, a whirl of populist activity of no discernable intellectual or doctrinal consistency, which could be interpreted in many ways. And, like Vatican II, it was so interpreted, to offer something for everyone, at least for anyone who looked at the right angle, perhaps without stepping back to question whether his interpretations were not merely wishful thinking. All this changed, though, when the question of marriage came front and center in the councils of the Church. As Douthat notes repeatedly, the “marriage problem” is at the very core of Catholic identity. “From the first, [Christ's] vision of marriage's indissolubility, its one-flesh metaphysical reality, was crucial to Christianity's development and spread.” It was tied to the specific words of Christ (unlike such more likely hot-button issues such as homosexuality and abortion), and the Church had always, uniformly, 100%, taught that one could not divorce and remarry without committing grave sin.

Many suffered and died for this principle, from Thomas More on down. Yet this obviously conflicts with the modern secular view, and over the past few decades, liberals in the Catholic hierarchy had increasingly, in the mushy, elastic way that characterizes most liberal theological gambits, pushed changing Church doctrine to officially recognize that, at least in some circumstances, Catholics could divorce and remarry. All agreed that in practice Catholics were sometimes allowed to do this, through annulments or local bishops and priests implicitly tolerating the practice. But liberals wanted the doctrinal change, and, for reasons unclear, Francis decided to side aggressively with the liberals, calling a synod of bishops to evaluate the matter.

Conservatives argue that changing doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage would inevitably set the Church on the path to destruction (and would produce no benefits), since the Church has never recognized that the absolute moral law can be changed, or become subject to a relative, subjective analysis based on individual circumstances. Doing so would bring into question not just marriage, but every moral absolute. Douthat mostly agrees with this argument, which is a hard argument to dispute. The two supposed exceptions, slavery and usury, are not to the contrary. Slavery was always morally disfavored by the Church, and usury, though a closer question, was not a core moral doctrine in the same way as marriage. And the common liberal claim, variations on “Jesus said we sometimes have to ignore the law to exercise mercy, love and charity,” is simply false—Jesus never once suggested the moral law had any exceptions, only the ritual law. In fact, he repeatedly made the moral law more absolute—for example, by rejecting the Mosaic Law’s acceptance of divorce. As Douthat says, “This is not some complicated esoteric reading of the New Testament; it is the boringly literal and obvious one, which is why it take a professional theologian to dispute it.” (Of course, if you think all of this is pointless inside baseball, rather than the Roman church being the last, best hope of mankind, all this is silly. But if that’s true, you probably haven’t read this far.)

Douthat gives the blow-by-blow of the bishops’ synod on marriage and the family that took place in 2014 and 2015. Without going into detail, the bottom line is that a minority of liberal bishops, with the direct cooperation of Francis, attempted to manipulate the Synod into endorsing divorce and remarriage—and were defeated. The Pope was

angry, and has stayed angry; he has therefore abandoned his earlier balance between conservatives and liberals, and now he excoriates conservatives, especially the younger generation of priests, and aligns himself totally with liberals. Engaging in various radical departures from past synod procedure, wrapping up he wrote a document (the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*) that obliquely endorsed the liberal position, and followed that up with a long series of leaks, of private letters and the like, that openly encouraged defying the traditional Church position. At the same time, he has moved uniquely aggressively in modern history to strip conservatives of power and grant unparalleled power to liberals. So, says Douthat, here we are today, with conservatives unable to show definitively that Francis is engaging in an attempt to change basic doctrine, and thereby change the church wholly in all sorts of areas, from euthanasia to homosexuality, but knowing that to be the case. Meanwhile, liberals run riot and triumphant, more or less, although as of yet unable to accomplish their goal of formal doctrinal change. There is much detail around this, parsing specific statements, their implications and possibilities, but that's what it boils down to.

The last third of the book evaluates possible futures. First Douthat draws analogies to the Church disputes over Arianism (in essence the denial of Christ's divinity), in the fourth century, where rationalizers endorsed Arianism over the more mystical, and ultimately orthodox, position. Douthat's main point is that it took several generations for the Church to declare a winner, and in the meantime, a lot of the discussion resembled today's discussions about what type of Church to have, although revolving around a totally different set of doctrinal matters. Second, he draws analogies to the seventeenth-century controversies over Jansenism, a rigorist Catholic movement that was essentially a throwback to Augustinianism, with a focus on near-predestination and the worthlessness of man that had much in common with Calvinism. Douthat believes that Jansenism was too rigorist to survive in the modern world, and the more flexible Jesuits, their main opponents, had the right of it, even if some of them were too flexible, especially in accommodating the sins of the rich and powerful (a common criticism of the historical Jesuits). Still, even if the Church does require some adaptation to the times, "while there is a power to this logic, it is also true that Catholicism cannot both be a ship of Theseus in which every single

part can be replaced and also be the church founded by Jesus Christ, the embodiment of a perfect and eternal Godhead.”

Finally, Douthat says, in essence, that “we’ll see.” Maybe liberals will triumph. Maybe conservatives will resurge. Either way, we may have a schism. Maybe we will have a period of flux and uncertainty lasting decades. As with larger political trends in the West, the Church faces an unsettled future, and in both, perhaps a new synthesis will emerge, opposed, perhaps, to the decline of the West and the erosion of doctrine, but also opposed to the neoliberal world order and modern “throwaway culture” (although that sounds more like a conservative triumph than the new synthesis Douthat claims it would be). He is somewhat optimistic and always civil in evaluating liberals’ motivations. His analysis is insightful and clear. But, at the end, Douthat doesn’t take his evaluation far enough, either on what underlies the current impasse or on what conservatives can do about it.

Douthat, like other writers have in the past, tries to understand what drives Pope Francis. He discusses his Jesuit background, his Argentinian experience, his stated beliefs about evangelization and “shaking things up.” He wonders if perhaps Francis thought marriage would not be a divisive issue and was surprised at the pushback. And like all writers on Francis, he ends up somewhat mystified, since the pieces don’t really fit together, in general and especially over time. I can suggest a simpler answer that nobody seems to raise—the Pope is just a very stupid man who has, like Zelig or Forrest Gump, stumbled into a situation for which his talents and nature make him totally unfit.

Such men lack consistency, because they simply don’t have the intellectual horsepower to maintain it, while they quickly and without noticing contradict themselves if it’s needed to get shiny baubles such as the praise of those they realize to be their intellectual or social betters. The betters are wholly aware of this, and use this tendency to easily manipulate stupid men (this technique is a form of flattery, obviously, which is known to work best with the stupid). Maybe Douthat thinks this and just doesn’t want to say it. He mentions Francis’s “ghostwriters” at least ten times, including repeatedly naming a specific Argentinian bishop, Víctor Manuel Fernández, as the Pope’s main ghostwriter. We can be certain neither John Paul nor Benedict used a ghostwriter; I doubt if any relevant Pope has extensively used ghostwriters before Francis.

But if you have to use ghostwriters, you necessarily mark yourself as stupid, and, moreover, you place yourself in the hands of your ghostwriters, whom, as in the tale of the Emperor's New Clothes, you don't want to question, because, certainly, you don't want to self-identify as what you know you are—stupid. Thus, Douthat says “Bergoglio embodied a certain style of populist Catholicism—one suspicious of overly academic faith in any form. . . . To the extent that his faith did have an intellectual foundation, it was the idea of a popular genius in theology, of the way that piety and creativity of the faithful could effectively teach and develop doctrine from below.” Again, it would be simpler to say “Bergoglio embodied the inability to think clearly about actual Catholic doctrine, its roots and derivation.” He's just dumb, and has been manipulated into being the tool of liberals, who fortuitously were able to use him to rekindle their dying fire.

This is the Ockham's Razor solution to Douthat's conundrum. I don't know if it's true, but certainly, any parsing of the Pope's unscripted discussions strongly supports this thesis. Oh, sure, he uses high-sounding, high-flying words—but if you look closely, they are used in a stupid way that betrays a simplistic understanding of any of the concepts he invokes. And since his writings aren't his, we can conclude he is merely incapable of any higher level thought. That may be acceptable for the local hedge priest, but it's a disaster in a Pope.

Let's examine another indication of Francis's stupidity. Douthat several times mentions the interviews Pope Francis has five times granted to an elderly atheist Italian journalist, Eugenio Scalfari. The weird thing, that nobody can understand, is that Scalfari refuses to take notes or record these meetings—but then offers extensive “transcripts.” Every single one of these has resulted in violently heretical utterings being attributed widely and publicly to Francis (today, for example, as Rod Dreher notes, Scalfari quotes Francis as strongly denying the existence of Hell, and directly endorsing the heresy of annihilationism, as if he were a Jehovah's Witness). Yet Francis continues to give Scalfari these interviews, and after each one, the Vatican officially issues non-denial denials. Douthat, implicitly, and Dreher, explicitly, attribute this to calculation on Francis's part—opening the door to extreme heterodoxy without creating a point vulnerable to counter-attack, like plate armor of the High Middle Ages, all angles to deflect sword blades. Presumably,

in this scenario, the Vatican liberals, who control the official pronouncements of the Vatican as an entity, are cooperating in Francis's plan. Again, maybe. But I think it more likely that in this scenario Francis is the drooling idiot child, rocking back and forth, continuing behavior he doesn't himself comprehend, because the people he trusts, the people who feed him the sweet, sweet taste of adulation and praise for his brilliant insights, keep manipulating him into doing things like this. In other words, I don't dispute there are smart people who are trying to undermine Catholicism and turn it into Episcopalianism—but Francis isn't among them.

So, then, why are these churchmen trying to undermine Catholicism? Well, I suppose they might be the willing henchmen of Antichrist, the beast from the bottomless pit who will shortly emerge, but probably not. I suspect what drives the coterie that controls Francis, by throwing treats in his path like he was a mewling puppy, is a combination of nearly all of them being in reality some type of Deists, not actually Catholic in belief, combined with many or most being homosexuals eager to have their sins endorsed and be relieved of their shame. This is supposition, of course, although there are many hints in this direction (though few in this book). Certainly it is no secret that many, if not most, seminaries from around 1970 on until the 1990s, and maybe even now, were hotbeds of homosexual activity and celebration, and there is no doubt that the vast majority of powerful liberal clerics were matriculated at that time (although not the oldest among them, like Kasper—which is not to say they are not also homosexual). Plausible rumors of homosexual networks among Vatican priests are common, and similar homosexual networks recur throughout history, such as the Cambridge Apostles—especially in environments where homosexuals are officially repressed. And, like the Apostles, they tend to deliberately corrode the structures that nurture them—much like a reverse Samson, they pull down the temple of their benefactors, not their enemies, on their heads out of hatred for them, but make sure they escape the rubble themselves, or at least pleasure themselves among the fallen stones.

So, a stupid Pope is used as a pawn by a group of men intent on staving holes in the Barque of Peter. This is a problem. But the problem is grossly exacerbated by conservatives' own tactical and strategic failings. Douthat relates the often-told anecdote of how Benedict supposedly,

when talking to an ally, bemoaning how little he was able to accomplish, gestured toward his office door and said “My power ends there.” This anecdote is told to illustrate what is a universal truth—bureaucracies frustrate autocratic rulers, even those with theoretically unlimited powers. Maybe—but the anecdote is used to prove far more than it does prove. “Frustrate” does not mean “defeat.” If it were otherwise, *Francis* could not have done what he has, or those who control him have. Since the entire point of this book is that he has, in fact, accomplished substantial change in the Church, and more is promised, it is not true that his power ends at his office door (whether or not the use of his power is his choice or the choice of others). And if it is not true for *Francis*, it was not true for *Benedict*. It is a cop-out, a defeatist’s, or a coward’s, or a weakling’s, response. *Benedict*’s power stopped at the door because *Benedict* refused to will it be otherwise. He weighed himself, and found himself wanting.

The real problem is that *Benedict* was not willing to do what it took, and nor was *John Paul II*. They refused to recognize and appropriately fight the internal war that was ongoing. Instead, as the Right has done throughout the modern era, they took half-measures, and endorsed hope as a plan. They extended olive branches to their enemies and took them to their bosom, where they uncurled their viper heads and bit their benefactor, as the Left has always done, since their goal is an ideological utopia at any cost, not comity or a middle ground. Examples are legion, but no better one can be found than something that seems small—*Benedict* deliberately choosing to resign a month before his chief opponent, *Walter Kasper*, would have been excluded from the conclave that would elect a new Pope. No liberal would ever consider doing such a thing, or, for that matter, appointing any conservative to any important post. Instead, they purge, as *Francis* has done, because they understand what is at stake, and what must be done to win it.

If conservatives are going to win, they must recognize their enemies and treat them as such. They can love them, while they throw them overboard, and lash them with a whip of fire when they try to climb back aboard (while shriving them as they drown). Conservatives seem to be waiting for a literal *Deus ex machina*. What they need to do instead, for example, is to steal the “thick dossier [given to *Benedict*] on internal intrigue and corruption—issues of clerical sexual misbehavior,

gay and straight, included”—and publish it. They need to hound their enemies into retirement or exile by any means necessary, and cow any that remain into submission. They need to organize and destroy the power, on every level, of their enemies. Of course, often they will fail, and bear the consequences. But they will only be doing what liberals have done for decades, whenever they get the chance. There can be only one, and the sooner conservatives recognize that, the better. Sure, I’m always preaching this, but that doesn’t make it any less correct. Such an approach is not Jansenism—one can have a flexible, yet conservative, approach to the forms of Church doctrine. But this can only be done on a clear field, when the head of the serpent has been crushed. Whether conservatives can realize or implement this is the question of the day, and the century.