Opinion



The statue of St. Peter is seen as Pope Francis leaves his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 14. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Let's start with the compliments. Ross Douthat's latest book, *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, exhibits a writing style that is admirable and enviable, and his command of the English language is exemplary, his ability to turn a phrase exceptional. And, like his columns, there is an almost lawyerly logic to his writing, as he moves from fact to argument and from argument to thesis. And, like all great spiritual writing, Douthat does not hold back: His personal wrestlings are there upon the page for all to see.

But I come to bury Douthat not to praise him, for his facts are nonsense, his arguments tendentious, and his thesis so absurd it is shocking, absolutely shocking, that no one over at Simon & Schuster thought to ask if what he writes is completely or only partially unhinged. I incline to the former adverb.

You would think that someone who works for a newspaper would be able to distinguish fact from fancy, to feel some sense of authorly responsibility for getting the story correct, have a nose for propaganda and insanity. In the case of Douthat's book, these attributes are missing. As I read my review copy, a paperback with no footnotes, I kept noting in the margins, "Source?" and "How would he know this?" and "That is not how bishops talk about one another." When the hardback arrived with the footnotes, I realized in the first instance that the sources were few, or a paragraph full of assertions would have a footnote that only referenced the last of those assertions. And among the sources were Life Site News, and Catholic World Report, an essay by John Zmirak and articles mostly from Edward Pentin, Sandro Magister and John Allen. If you are unfamiliar with these "sources," check them out. The first three are lunatic fringe, and the latter three display varying degrees of anti-Francis bias.

To
CHANGE
the
CHURCH

POPE FRANCIS *and the* FUTURE *of* CATHOLICISM

ROSS DOUTHAT



To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism
Ross Douthat
256 pages; Simon & Schuster; 2018
$26.00

Wrong on the synods that led to *Amoris Laetitia*

Many of the passages I questioned had to do with the second of the two synods of bishops, about the family, held in 2014 and 2015. It is worth examining them in some detail because facts matter and because they betray the unhelpful admixture of bias and ignorance that Douthat displays. The synod proceedings were confidential, and my usual sources were scrupulous about not discussing what happened within the aula. But this week I reached out to three synod fathers, two from the U.S. and one from Latin America, and asked if they would comment on Douthat's claims. After each of the following quotes from Douthat, I will share what these bishops — who were in the synod hall — told me.

On Page 117 he writes:

> This time there was talk that the final document would face a simple up or down vote, instead of allowing bishops to vote paragraph by paragraph. There were even rumors that this document, like the midterm report of the prior synod, was already written by the pope's collaborators. This rumor seemed to set up a fait accompli. …

There was talk? There were rumors?

One synod father replied, "The idea that the writing teams were given material in advance is just nonsense. It is simply not true." Another told me, "I heard absolutely nothing along these lines either in the small groups or when the bishops met in general session, or even at the coffee breaks. This is a total fabrication by those who were looking for ways to undermine the credibility of the synod by calling into question the process." A third added, "The guidelines and procedures for voting were established before the synod started and were distributed to all who participated in the synod, before it even began."

On Page 122, Douthat writes:

> So there was no question of anything like Kasper's original proposal being brought up for a vote. Instead the liberals shifted tacks, returning to the broader idea of doctrinal decentralization, of a "local option" for churches and bishops' conferences, an official tolerance for experimentation without fear of sanction from Rome. This direction seemed to be where the pontiff himself was leaning in a speech two weeks into the synod, in which he talked about empowering national bishops conferences — bodies created after Vatican II, which had a certain prestige but no official teaching authority — and spoke of the "need to proceed in a healthy decentralization." But here too conservatives pushed back. ... Balked again, the reformers now retreated to a third approach: not a formal path back to communion, not a country-by-country decentralization of doctrine, but a pastor-by-pastor, case-by-case approach, which would distinguish the 'external forum' of church teaching from the 'internal forum' in which priests dealt with individual souls.

Of course, the distinction between the internal and external forums is long-standing, and wasn't something cooked up by the liberals at the synod. More importantly, this account seems not only overly cynical and political, but also treats as sequential parts of a discussion that was multi-faceted from start to finish, with different emphases emerging out of the nature of the conversation, not out of political strategizing.

One synod father commented, "There was never any discussion of 'fall back plans.' The issue was how can the Church best minister to all families realizing the many unique challenges some face and that they sometimes feel alienated from the Church. Douthat's comments reduce the work of the synod to politics when all along it was profoundly pastoral. To put it another way, the bishops were not thinking about themselves in terms of how they could prevail with a particular position. Rather they were thinking of the people we have been sent to serve."

Another synod father told me, "There was a small and vocal minority of bishops whose interventions gave more importance to doctrine versus pastoral practice. This created some tension, but the results of the final vote, paragraph by paragraph, indicate almost unanimously that the synod fathers favored 'a healthy equilibrium' (to cite an expression used by St. Pope John Paul II) between doctrine and pastoral

practice."

On Page 125, Douthat writes:

> The mood in Rome [at the close of the synod] was paranoid and toxic; the mood among the hierarchy distrustful and disappointed. "If a conclave were to be held today, Francis would be lucky to get ten votes," a Vatican source told the New York Times just before the synod. It was an overstatement then; by the end of that strange October, it wasn't.

I asked one of the synod fathers if Douthat's characterization of the mood at the close of the synod was correct. "Absolutely not," he replied. "How does he explain that a secret vote was taken on each paragraph and all of them received a minimum of two-thirds support with most receiving close to unanimous approval? The pope was cheered by the bishops repeatedly. This conjecture about the pope not having the full support of the bishops has no basis in fact and is the wishful thinking of a minority voice who just do not like the pope." A second synod father, when given this quote, stated simply, "The mood was upbeat."

> I cannot recommend that anyone buy this book, but if you do and you retrieve it from the non-fiction section of the bookstore, you can ask for your money back.
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I wish I could report that Douthat merely had a bad source for his comments about the synods, but mistakes of fact stalk this book. On Page 122, he writes about a speech Pope Francis gave on the anniversary of the creation of the Synod of Bishops, "in which he talked about empowering national bishops conferences — bodies created after Vatican II, which had a certain prestige but no official teaching authority. ..." But the U.S. bishops conference formally began in 1917, not after Vatican II. The bishops 'conference for England and Wales, though not as old as the US conference, got its start in 1958, that is, *before* Vatican II. And, in 1867, the Fulda Conference of German Bishops began meeting, and it was reorganized, but essentially unchanged, after Vatican II. (As well, Douthat is wrong about bishops' conferences having no teaching authority. Perhaps he was still a Protestant back in the 1980s when the U.S. bishops' conference issued important teaching pastorals on

war and peace and the economy.)

Wrong on Cardinal Müller, the popes, Cardinal Cupich

On Pages 185-186, he discussed the pope's decision not to renew Cardinal Gerard Müller's term at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, writing: "The real reason, or one of them, seemed to be that Francis blamed [Müller] for the *dubia* even though he hadn't been a signatory — and, indeed, one of the phone calls Müller made after his being fired was to one of the four *dubia* cardinals, Joachim Meisner, the retired archbishop of Cologne and a longtime friend of both the cashiered CDF [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] head and Benedict XVI." The footnote references the call, but not the reason Francis sacked Müller. It was one of Rome's worst kept secrets that Müller could not manage a one-man band, that meetings of the CDF were cancelled because he had not prepared for them, that it was not only the clergy sex abuse cases that were repeatedly taking too long at the CDF. That is why Müller was sacked.

Repeatedly getting his facts wrong, and apparently mistaking the Twitter feeds of some extreme conservatives for reality, is only one of the cardinal sins of Douthat's book. Analytical ineptitude is a related, but different, sin. On Page 51, writing about the Jesuits and their approach to ministry, Douthat opines: "In missionary territory, this means that Jesuits have often embraced what's called 'inculturation,' a refashioning of the Christian message so that it makes a better fit with the pre-existing habits and customs and theological instincts of Japanese peasants or Chinese mandarins or the Tupi-Guarani Indians of Paraguay." It is clear that Douthat prefers to see "the Christian message" as something completely transcendent of history, as eternal and unchanging, but these ideas are rooted in what was the first instance of inculturation of the Christian faith, its adoption of ideas drawn from Greek philosophy to explain itself. Was that inculturation bad, or is it only bad when Jesuits do it?



Then-Archbishop Blase Cupich is pictured after the opening session of the Synod of Bishops on the family at the Vatican Oct. 5, 2015. (CNS/Paul Haring)

On Page 59, Douthat manages to slur three popes, writing, "If the agenda of the two conservative popes [John Paul II and Benedict XVI] could be summed up as 'retrench, restore, and then evangelize,' Bergoglio seemed more impatient with the first two impulses, uncertain of their necessity, and focused almost exclusively on the third." John Paul II and Benedict XVI were deeply engaged in the most important theological revolution of the 20th century, the ressourcement theology that informed Vatican II, which entailed rediscovery of the sources, not a retrenchment, and Bergoglio's daily sermons refute the idea that he is not rooted in the traditions of the church; he is

rooted not so that those traditions become museum pieces, but so that they become alive.

Not content to slur the popes, Douthat also commits a calumny against Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich, writing on Page 72 that, "You could read an awful lot of Blase Cupich sermons without finding anything that would make a Democratic Party functionary the least bit uncomfortable." I have heard a fair number of the good cardinal's sermons, and I know plenty of Democratic Party functionaries who do not like his repeated calls to respect life, nor his defense of *Amoris Laetitia* with its clear distinguishing between gay relationships and Christian marriage; nor, frankly, are many Democrats comfortable with Cupich's articulation of the traditional teaching of the church that the right to private property is a consequence of the fall, and you can't wiggle self-interest into a virtue, and that "this economy kills." I wish more Democrats did sound like Cupich. To assert there is no difference between the two is asinine.

Wrong on Catholic theology

The most common analytical flaw, however, is the binary simplicity of his theological analysis. Comparing Douthat's wrestling with the rich, nuanced tradition of Catholic moral and sacramental theology is like comparing a 7-year-old's paint-by-numbers drawing with the collection of the Louvre. I do not exaggerate. Consider this passage on Pages 98-99, in which he attempts to tackle Pope Francis' teaching on marriage and family:

> For a pope to contradict his predecessors so flagrantly, to break with a tradition so deeply rooted and recently reaffirmed, was supposed to be literally impossible — precluded by the nature of papal infallibility, prevented by the action of the Holy Spirit, and unimaginable given the premises that conservative Catholics brought to these debates. Indeed, if a pope could bless communion for some adulterers using premises explicitly rejected by his immediate predecessors, it would suggest that the Orthodox and Anglicans were closer to the mark in their view of church authority than the Catholics — that the pope might be a fine symbol of unity, but that as the last word on faith and morals his authority had been rather exaggerated for at least a thousand years.

My marginal note reads, "Huh?" If this purported throwing overboard of everything for which the Catholic Church has stood "for at least a thousand years" is actually what Francis is doing, how come more than two-thirds of the bishops at the synod, in a secret ballot, voted for a text that Douthat finds so wrenching?

Or, consider this passage on Page 130, in which he compares *Amoris Laetitia* with John Paul II's encyclical on moral theology*, Veritatis Splendor*:

> Where the Polish pope had rebuked situational ethics, the Argentine pope piled up lists of mitigating factors that could make an apparent mortal sin less serious. Where John Paul II had insisted that even in difficult circumstances the moral law is never impossible to follow, Francis discussed all the ways in which family turmoil and personal psychology and the exigencies of modern life could make the moral law seem either too hard to comprehend or too difficult to obey fully and immediately.

How coarse and hoary! And how myopic? These are the ruminations of a man who has been listening to some crank theologians and canonists who think Francis is flirting with heresy, who confuse moral and sacramental theology, who know nothing of the various ways the church's teaching about what is, and is not, a valid marriage has changed over the years, and who can't quite explain why the opposition to Francis is so loud and seemingly well-organized here in the United States but not elsewhere. Could it be that there is a kind of American Catholic, be it a political operative or a CEO, for whom it is important to keep conservative sexual norms as the touchstone of Catholic identity rather than, say, commitment to the poor? Here at NCR we have been examining the links between big conservative donors and organizations that champion the kind of sectarian Catholicism Douthat venerates, first this article by Tom Roberts and this week, a series on the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) by Heidi Schlumpf. Douthat's worldview tracks with that of these well-funded, ideologically driven groups.

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Douthat's myopia could have been ameliorated if he had actually consulted what thoughtful, learned churchmen have to say. Cardinal Donald Wuerl attended both synods. He wrote a series of blog posts about *Amoris Laetitia* in which he explained

the text in such a way that explodes the binary simplicity displayed by Douthat. In one, the cardinal wrote:

> For some, the issues are very clear. The teaching is lucid, the canon law is exact and therefore the priest's responsibility is to apply the law. For others, the teaching of the Church is broader. The ancient and received teaching of the Church includes the recognition of the condition of the person, the ability of the individual to even understand the regulations of the law, the necessity of pastoral outreach, and the inviolability of individual conscience, even when it is erroneous.

You see, Douthat is not wrong when he states that the church has always taught that sacramental marriage is indissoluble. But that one statement is not exhaustive, as the cardinal's statement makes clear. Other teachings, both moral and sacramental, affect the ministry of the church, and throughout our history, the church has adapted that ministry, and refined its teaching — as Douthat catalogues — to make the Gospel message more intelligible, more responsive, more true to itself. He thinks he can freeze all that circa 1993, as if *Veritatis Splendor* was the last and only word of church teaching that mattered.

Cardinal Donald Wuerl blogs by National Catholic Reporter on Scribd

Flat-out wrong on Pope Francis

There is a final passage that combines unsourced and incorrect assertions with tendentious analysis, all of it topped with a comparison that is grotesque. On Page 200, Douthat compares Pope Francis to Donald Trump, writing:

> The comparison to Trump is a fraught one, of course. Many of Francis's admirers have cast him as the anti-Donald and in certain ideological ways he clearly is — a populist of the left rather than the right, a defender of the rights of migrants who dismisses talk of a confrontation with Islam,

> a universalist and near-pacifist rather than a nationalist, and so on. But mirror images resemble one another even when the features are reversed, and as a ruler of the church, in the context of existing Catholic doctrine and discipline and norms, the pope has turned out to be far more Trumpian than most of the cardinals who elected him ever anticipated. Rome under Francis is much like Washington under Trump — a paranoid and jumpy place, full of ferment and uncertainty. Francis's opponents, like Trump's, feel that they're resisting an abnormal leader, a man who does not respect the rules that are supposed to bind his office. Meanwhile, to his supporters, as to many of Trump's, all these discontents are vindication, evidence that he's bringing about the changed required to Make Catholicism Great Again.

No, Mr. Douthat, the Holy Father is not a vulgar, misogynistic narcissist with little learning and a short attention span. The Holy Father does not gratuitously insult poor and desperate refugees and migrants. The Holy Father does not revel in his power or gild the buildings he owns with his own name. Rome is not "a paranoid and jumpy place" just because Douthat's friends are paranoid. There is no "uncertainty" except for those few who fancied a scenario in which the Second Vatican Council would be rolled back bit by bit until we could all return to the Golden Age that was the 1950s. This is whole-cloth nonsense leading to a comparison that is, as I say, grotesque.

I cannot recommend that anyone buy this book, but if you do and you retrieve it from the non-fiction section of the bookstore, you can ask for your money back. Douthat should go write novels. The editors at The New York Times should ask why they would continue to give a man capable of such dishonest prose some of their prime real estate. Let him go be among his friends at Life Site News and Catholic World Report where this kind of nonsense is standard fare. Maybe he could be the next editor of The Wanderer. He has done a disservice not only to those who seek to understand the Catholic Church but also to those of us work hard to get the true story, who base our analysis on facts not fictions, and who grow suspicious when our theses are unbalanced, in short, a disservice to journalism. This book is a disgrace.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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