Vatican

Pope Francis greets Nicolas Senèze, right, Rome correspondent for the French Catholic newsp

Pope Francis greets Nicolas Senèze, right, Rome correspondent for the French Catholic newspaper La Croix, aboard the flight from Rome to Maputo, Mozambique, Sept. 4. (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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ABOARD THE PAPAL FLIGHT TO MOZAMBIQUE — September 4, 2019

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Pope Francis has spoken in unusually frank terms about the theological divide in the U.S. Catholic church, calling it an "honor" that some conservative Catholic groups in the country continue to criticize his papacy.

In a brief exchange with a journalist aboard his Sept. 4 flight from Rome for the beginning of a three-nation tour of Southern Africa, the pope was presented with a new book that details years of efforts by conservative U.S. Catholics to influence his decision-making.

Handed the volume by its author, Nicolas Senèze, Rome correspondent for the French Catholic newspaper La Croix, the pope said plainly: "It's an honor that Americans attack me."

Francis told Senèze that he had heard about the book, published in France and titled *How America Wanted to Change the Pope*, but had yet to read it. Passing the volume

to an assistant, the pontiff joked: "It's a bomb!"

Criticism from conservative U.S. Catholics has been a staple of Francis' six-year papacy, with right-wing outlets such as EWTN and First Things taking aim at many of his initiatives, such as his effort to fight global climate change and his focus on the merciful nature of God.

A number of bishops have also been frequent critics, including Cardinal Raymond Burke, whom Francis removed as the chief judge of the Vatican's highest court in 2014.

Senèze's volume focuses particularly on two recent U.S. conservative efforts: the October 2018 creation of a "Better Church Governance" group that is working on a report investigating each of the world's Catholic cardinals; and support for the August 2018 call from former papal diplomat Archbishop Carlo Viganò for Francis to resign the papacy.

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Francis spoke with Senèze at the beginning of the 10-hour flight, as he briefly greeted, one-by-one, each of the some 70 journalists traveling with him.

Shortly afterward, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni sought to downplay the importance of Francis' remarks, saying the pope was speaking in an "informal context" and "wanted to say that he always considers criticism an honor, especially when it comes from authoritative thinkers, in this case from an important nation."

Francis' Sept. 4-10 voyage is only his second to sub-Saharan Africa. He will first visit Mozambique, and then the island nations of Madagascar and Mauritius.

In general remarks to all the journalists aboard the Sept. 4 flight, Francis asked for prayers for the people of the Bahamas, which this week suffered historic levels of damage from Hurricane Dorian.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story appears in the **Francis in Africa 2019** feature series. View the full series.