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Francis effect redux?

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Quad 136

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[◻ Previous](#) [Next ◻](#)

Francis Effect Redux?



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Pope Francis' historic visit to the United States was striking not so much for its impact among Catholics, for whom Francis is the leader of their Church, but for its impact among non-Catholics, who were widely moved by both the Pope's pastoral message and his humble style.

The media widely and enthusiastically covered his visit and his message but with the public's short attention span in a 24-hour news cycle, during an election year one would think that the Pope might fade from view. Yet while he has returned to Rome, Pope Francis surprisingly continues to occupy media interest, including in the rarified media space of *The New York Times*.

I have found a recent series of stories featuring Pope Francis and the Church to be fascinating and possibly unprecedented, at least for many years, maybe since Vatican II.

First, a couple weeks ago *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat wrote a [column](#) entitled, "The Plot to Change Catholicism." It focused on the recent Bishop's Synod on the Family, and in particular on the debate within the Catholic Church about whether divorced and remarried Catholics can receive communion without having their first marriage annulled. This column provoked a surprisingly powerful response, not least among professional theologians.

On October 26th, on the website [Daily Theology](#), over a hundred leading theologians from universities all across North America, including Notre Dame, Boston College, Villanova and Georgetown, signed a letter critical of Douthat's column. The brief letter said:

To the editor of the New York Times

On Sunday, October 18, the Times published Ross Douthat's piece "The Plot to Change Catholicism." Aside from the fact that Mr. Douthat has no professional qualifications for writing on the subject, the problem with his article and other recent statements is his view of Catholicism as unapologetically subject to a politically partisan narrative that has very little to do with what Catholicism really is. Moreover,

accusing other members of the Catholic church of heresy, sometimes subtly, sometimes openly, is serious business that can have serious consequences for those so accused. This is not what we expect of the New York Times.

The letter got widespread coverage in the press and Douthat responded in **another column** in the *Times* with, “Letter to the Catholic Academy,” in which he explains his objectives to “My dear professors!”:

I hope we can agree that current controversies in Roman Catholicism cry out for explanation. And not only for Catholics: The world is fascinated – as it should be – by Pope Francis’ efforts to reshape our church. But the main parties in the church’s controversies have incentives to downplay the stakes. Conservative Catholics don’t want to concede that disruptive change is even possible. Liberal Catholics don’t want to admit that the pope might be leading the church into a crisis.

So in my columns, I’ve tried to cut through those obfuscations toward what seems like basic truth. There really is a high-stakes division, at the highest levels of the church...

While the controversy over divorce and communion is certainly deeply meaningful for the many divorced and remarried Catholics and even for their Catholic family and friends, it is very much an “inside baseball” kind of controversy, with the theological subtleties confusing to non-theologians and probably boring to non-Catholics. Why would the wider world care about these controversies in the Roman Catholic Church? Why does the establishment’s most prestigious print media outlet devote precious column inches to such minutia?

Certainly much of the interest comes back to Pope Francis, whom the world finds compelling and fascinating. He is more accessible and engaging than the scholarly Benedict, with the personal warmth of John Paul, while delivering a generous, human and inclusive Gospel message. But there is also a surprising interest in Francis’ “efforts to reshape our church,” as Douthat notes. Some non-trivial part of the non-Catholic world seems to have a stake in matters that would seem far removed from their lives. Maybe these internal controversies matter because the wider public, finding this Pope’s compassionate message especially compelling, want or need his moral authority to extend to the Church hierarchy as a ratification of Francis’ Gospel message.

Regardless of the exact nature of the interest, the Catholic Church and its leader, in some small way, are influencing the moral conversation in the world. On the one hand, that’s not surprising for an institution that has shaped morality profoundly for more than two millennia. On the other hand, it’s very surprising in a secular 21st century where at least overt religious interest and practice are on the wane in the West and the same Catholic Church continues to suffer from a self-inflicted moral crises around sexual abuse. For the Church to have regained some moral authority so soon after the widespread and deserved public shaming over clergy sexual abuse is surely surprising to even its most supportive followers and is an obvious tribute to the personal appeal of Pope Francis, whose influence may be only beginning.

Interesting times indeed.

By **Michael Hemesath** | November 10th, 2015 | Categories: **History** | **0 Comments**

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).