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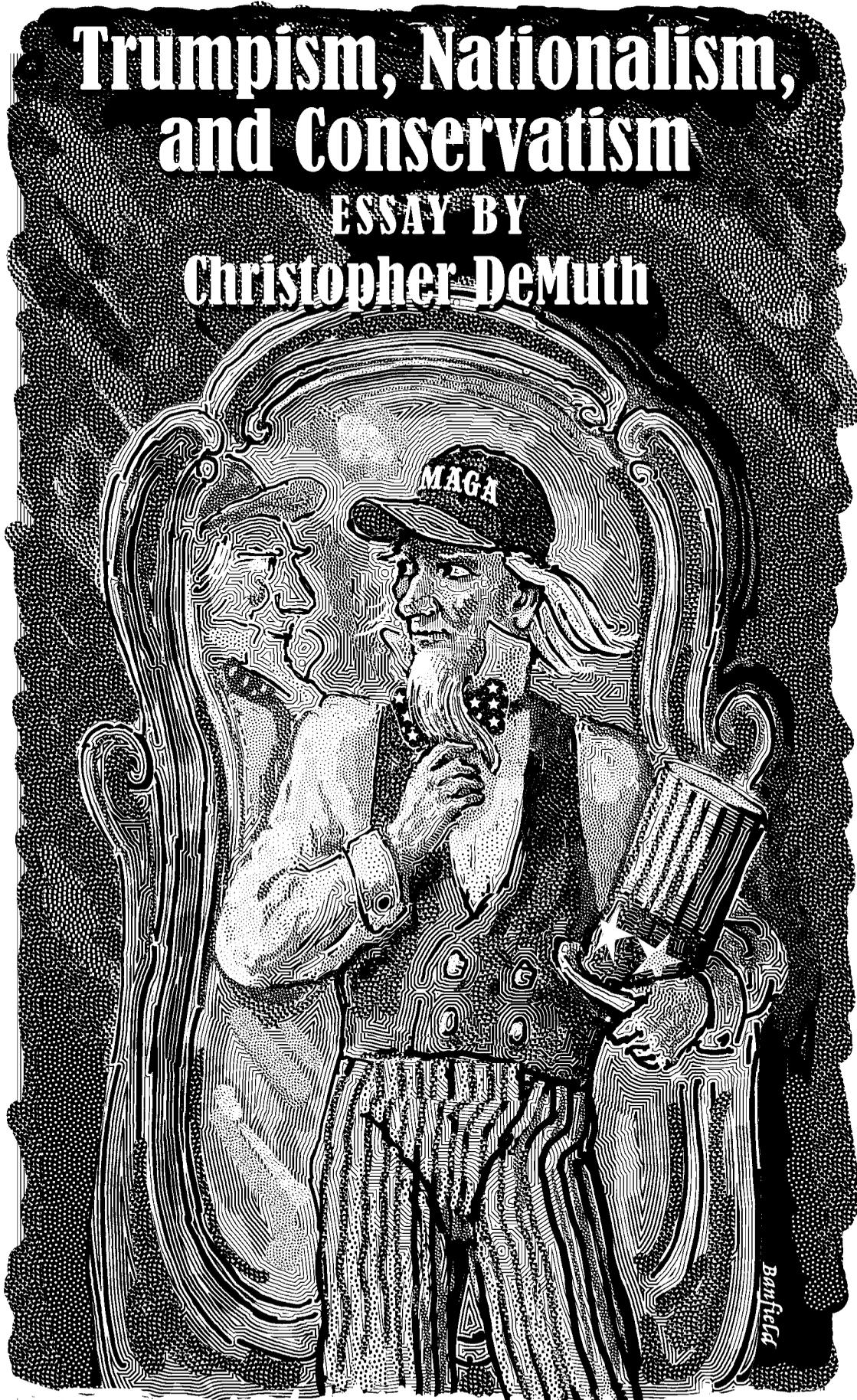
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IS THE POPE CATHOLIC?



EVEN WHEN, AS AT PRESENT, THE CATHOLIC Church exercises very little direct political or social power, its continued witness to the world after two millennia retains a compelling grandeur. Empires rise and fall, revolutions come and go, but the Church—miraculously—endures, despite great internal troubles, a great pre-modern bulwark in the modern day against shallow rationalism and moral relativism. And so when the Catholic Church seems to have become unsure, or divided, about its own meaning—as it has been since Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis in March 2013—the world notices.

In one of the early, defining moments of his papacy, Francis told the 3 million young people assembled in Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day 2013, “*hagan lío*,” a phrase from his native Argentina that means “raise a ruckus” or, more literally, “make a mess.” He presumably wanted them to bring fresh energy into the daily life of the Church and the world. The prudence of asking young people to do what they are already inclined to do anyway—knowing little, as they do, of the Church or

the world—is debatable. But there’s no question that in his various efforts to stir things up, Pope Francis has in many ways, figuratively and literally, made a mess of the stewardship entrusted to him. Several recent books help us to understand that mess and its broadening repercussions.

Enigmatic Figure

THE BRITISH JOURNALIST AUSTEN IVEREIGH published the earliest and, despite the flood of books since, still the most important biography in English of the new pope, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (2014). Francis is the first pope from Latin America, and Ivereigh has an advantage over other commentators because he wrote his doctoral thesis at Oxford on Argentine history, a notoriously treacherous subject, which was later published as *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina, 1810–1960* (1995). He also worked for the late Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, archbishop of Westminster and one of several bishops

who, as Ivereigh himself admits in the book, collaborated to elevate Bergoglio to the papacy, unsuccessfully in 2005 when John Paul II died and then in 2013 when Benedict XVI stepped down. Ivereigh did serious research on Bergoglio for his book and conducted numerous interviews with people who knew the future pope in his earlier life. All this enabled the author to situate a basically unknown figure at the time of his election within the various social, political, and religious currents of his native environment.

The great disadvantage of Ivereigh’s work, however, is already clear from the title. It would be wrong to say that the book is pure hagiography; it admits Bergoglio made mistakes. But even the most admiring biographer cannot make much of a case that the future pope was highly successful—as a reformer or anything else—in Argentina. Francis is the first Jesuit pope. When he became the provincial superior of the Jesuits in Argentina during the 1970s, he was so divisive a leader that his tenure ended after only six years. He then held various positions and pursued studies



intermittently, in and out of Argentina, but remained so controversial that in 1992 he was asked not to reside in Jesuit houses any longer.

Through friendship with Cardinal Antonio Quarracino of Buenos Aires, he was recalled from a kind of internal exile, made an auxiliary bishop in the capital, and later succeeded his patron as archbishop. There certainly wasn't much evidence of his carrying out reform, great or otherwise. Vocations were few and Church initiatives modest, though he did start sending more priests into poor areas to minister to the marginalized. When the Vatican was considering making Bergoglio a cardinal in 2001, then Jesuit Superior General Peter Hans Kolvenbach wrote a letter to John Paul II advising against it because of the controversies Bergoglio had provoked over many years and, it is said, because of psychological instability. (The letter, it is also said, has disappeared from the archives.) The basic facts here are not in dispute. Francis has admitted that he saw a psychiatrist during a troubled period in his life, and he did not really repair his relationship with his religious order—which remained broken for 37 years—until he became pope.

What Bergoglio became famous for—and Ivereigh does a good job in highlighting, while remaining silent about the lack of achievements—was his presentation of himself as a man who lived simply and, quite conspicuously, did not embrace the usual perquisites of a prince of the Catholic Church. People all over the world have learned of how he took the subway and not a limousine (often not even a car) to meetings, lived in a modest corner of the episcopal palace in Buenos Aires, and gave personal attention to ordinary people he encountered. He is the first successor of Saint Peter to take the name “Francis”—after *il poverello*, the little poor man, as Francis of Assisi is affectionately known in Italy. Although amplified to mythic proportions by an enthralled media, the new pope's emphasis on simplicity and humility is genuine, as is his warm affection when interacting with the homeless, disabled, or otherwise marginalized, and both traits go a long way toward explaining the enthusiasm that greeted the first days of his pontificate.

Whatever his track record in Argentina, Francis was elected to be a reformer, yet in the six years since he became pope, the rot in the Church has only become worse. Vatican finances, despite promises and early steps to make them more transparent, are still a murky—sometimes criminal—mess. The Roman *curia* (the Vatican offices charged with running a church of 1.2 billion people all over the globe) tell any visitor willing

to listen these days that they are confused about their mission. The pope has shown himself quite willing to blur several Catholic teachings in order to meet halfway some of the worst developments in modern culture—a popular move with liberals and non-Catholics, but a betrayal for serious Catholics. And in several countries as well as the Vatican itself, the Church has been engulfed (again) by a lurid scandal of largely homosexual predation and cover-up, which—judging from the unhurried bureaucratic responses

At the center is the rather enigmatic figure of Jorge Bergoglio, who seems to inspire intense dislike and equally intense admiration at each point in his life, forcing those around him to form factions for or against him. He came of age while Juan Perón dominated Argentine politics, and later, after the military coup in 1976, had to try to protect his people while the generals who had taken control of the government conducted their *guerra sucia* or “dirty war,” sending death squads to silence political dissidents. Bergoglio learned to speak ambivalently in public. Like Perón, he boldly tells different groups what they want to hear, even if he often contradicts himself.

This characteristic lack of precision and consistency can be found, for example, in Francis's recent rewording of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which now makes it appear as though sacred Scripture and the entire history of Christianity can be waived aside when it comes to the permissibility of capital punishment. For many people inside and outside the Catholic Church this has raised the question: are other moral teachings also now up for grabs, or just the ones liberals don't like?

Perhaps nowhere is his studied ambiguity more evident than in the notorious 2016 apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (“The Joy of Love”), which among its 261 pages (it is the longest single document ever produced by a pope) buries in a footnote deliberately vague language in order to give the impression that adultery no longer bars one from receiving Holy Communion. Bishops, priests, and laypeople throughout the Church issued open letters, begging the pope to bring much needed clarity to the matter, without success. In politics a certain amount of studied ambiguity can be a useful tool. But in religion—especially when it comes to some of the most burning current issues—ambiguity can look like confusion, or even surrender.

High-Handed Manipulator?

THE MOST CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF Pope Francis, and in some ways the most insightful (though perhaps not entirely accurate) is *The Dictator Pope: The Inside Story of the Francis Papacy* by Marcantonio Colonna. The author's name is a grand Renaissance pseudonym; the original Marcantonio Colonna served as one of the victorious admirals at the 1571 naval battle of Lepanto against the Ottoman Turks, a turning point in repelling the Muslim threat to Christian Europe. Before the book was revised for print, after first appearing in an online version, the author was revealed to be Henry Sire, an

Books discussed in this essay:

The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope, by Austen Ivereigh. Henry Holt and Co., 464 pages, \$30 (cloth), \$16 (paper)

The Dictator Pope: The Inside Story of the Francis Papacy, by Marcantonio Colonna. Regnery Publishing, 256 pages, \$26.99

The Political Pope: How Pope Francis Is Delighting the Liberal Left and Abandoning Conservatives, by George Neumayr. Center Street, 288 pages, \$27

The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church, by John Gehring. Rowman & Littlefield, 286 pages, \$34 (cloth), \$26 (paper)

Lost Shepherd: How Pope Francis Is Misleading His Flock, by Philip F. Lawler. Gateway Editions, 256 pages, \$26.99

To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism, by Ross Douthat. Simon & Schuster, 256 pages, \$26

ranging from clumsy P.R. spin to stony silence—shows little sign of being seriously dealt with in Rome. This latest disgrace has damaged Catholicism's moral credibility, touched high cardinals and Church officials (former U.S. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick most notably), including some of the pope's closest confidantes, and even shaken public confidence in Francis himself—so much so that Carlo Maria Viganò, a former Vatican *nuncio* (ambassador) to the United States, has called on him to resign.

Oxford-trained historian who had been living for years in Rome.

Sire makes a damning case that—notwithstanding Francis’s public image as a humble and holy man—the pope is a kind of *peronista*, high-handed in his methods and cunning in employing the kind of populist manipulation he learned by watching Juan Perón. Francis himself has admitted that as a young Jesuit superior he was overly authoritarian, and the three synods he has called in the past four years, which are meant to be episcopal assemblies for assisting and advising the pope, certainly had the appearance of having been stage-managed to predetermined outcomes.

Francis also indulges a fiery Latin temper in private—and, often enough, in public. His many colorful insults (“fomentor of coprophagia,” “museum mummy,” “creed-reciting, parrot Christian,” “sourpuss,” etc.)—so many, in fact, that a “Pope Francis Little Book of Insults” has been compiled online—are amusing in a way, if you aren’t Catholic or don’t think they ill befit the vicar of Christ. But they also contradict the much celebrated softer, gentler side of the pope: he frequently preaches that to insult a person violates his or her dignity. The authoritarian characteristics get little notice, however, by media who think they’ve found an ally.

A good portion of Sire’s animus stems from Francis’s rough handling of the Knights of Malta in 2016, an episode he sees as emblematic of much of the Vatican’s activities under this pope. It had been discovered that a high official of the Order, Baron Albrecht von Boeselager, had allowed contraceptives to be distributed by one of its charitable agencies, a violation of Catholic moral teaching. He was swiftly removed from his position. In the power struggle that ensued, Francis ignored the Order’s sovereign independence and roughly took personal control, reinstating von Boeselager and improperly requiring the Grand Master of the Order to step down. The pope even injected his personal representative into the mix, sidelining Cardinal Raymond Burke, the Order’s officially designated “patron” (who already under Francis had been removed as the head of the Vatican’s highest court and shifted to this largely ceremonial position). After *The Dictator Pope* was published, Sire himself was first suspended and eventually expelled from the Order.

The episode with the Order of Malta is consistent with several trends within the Francis papacy, from his appointment of dubious prelates around the world to his inner circle (three of whom resigned under a cloud of scandal at the end of 2018), to his restructuring of the former John Paul II Institute

for Studies on Marriage and Family, appointing officials at best indifferent, if not openly hostile, to what the Church teaches on conjugal love. At the same time, Francis has been seeking to decentralize decision-making from Rome to the various regional episcopal conferences within the Church (not to mention the accord he signed with Communist China that gives the government a role in the appointment of bishops).

Leftist Politics

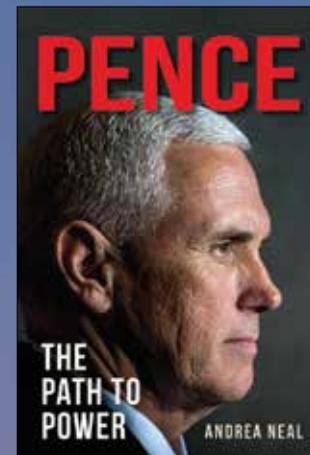
SIRE’S OBSERVATIONS LARGELY AGREE with George Neumayr’s relentlessly ideological reading in *The Political Pope: How Pope Francis is Delighting the Liberal Left and Abandoning Conservatives* (2017). A contributing editor (and former executive editor) of the *American Spectator*, Neumayr views Pope Francis mainly as a Marxist, which is not entirely mistaken but too systematic for such a freewheeling figure. We know that in Argentina Bergoglio opposed Jesuits who had embraced Marxist forms of liberation theology, alienating that wing of the Order. He believed God’s people wanted justice and relief from poverty and oppression, not class struggle. At the same time, he absorbed some of the Marxist tropes common for decades in Latin America—and often a proxy for anti-Americanism.

It’s important to realize the unique history of Argentina, even within Latin America, as a powerful influence on the pope. The Peruvian novelist and Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa is said to have written:

There are countries that are rich
and countries that are poor.
And there are poor countries that are
growing rich.
And then there is Argentina.

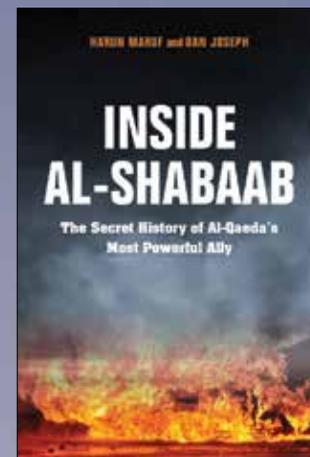
There is almost no parallel to such a country, which once had one of the world’s largest economies, becoming—by mismanagement and corruption—an ongoing story of decline. At present, Argentina is going through another round of runaway inflation, after several years when its GDP actually shrank. It’s no surprise that other Latin Americans often speak of Argentines as both arrogant and resentful.

From the very beginning, Francis spoke about globalized capitalism as an “economy that kills”—not noticing that it has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty. With his first full encyclical, *Laudato Si’* (subtitled “On care for our common home”), he made extreme, unrealistic environmentalism a

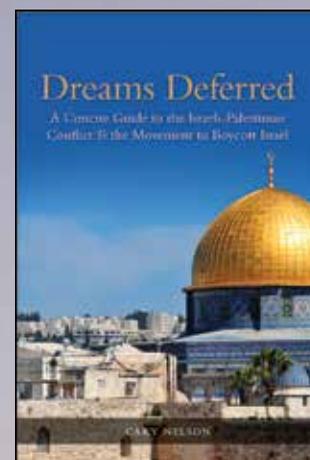


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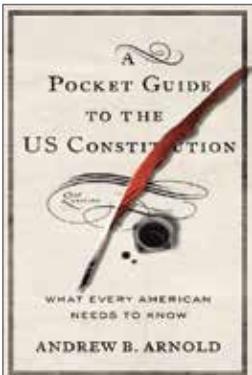
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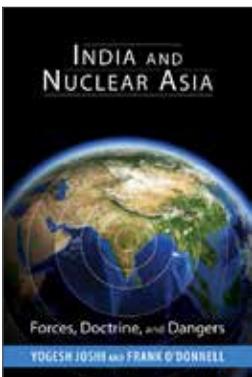
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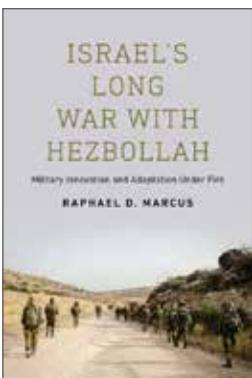
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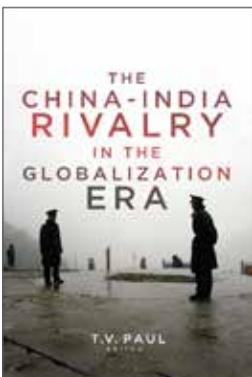
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kind of touchstone of his papacy. And he has pushed immigration—essentially open borders—in ways that, combined with his insistence that Islam is a religion of peace, have cost him respect in Europe. And not only in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Brexit Britain, but even in Italy, where 50% youth unemployment has made utopian schemes for resettling large numbers of mostly poor Middle Eastern and African immigrants deeply unpopular. Francis's positions are unfailingly couched in terms of "mercy"—a slippery word often invoked in this pontificate that has taken on ideological as well as traditional meanings.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this kind of politics was the 2016 conference celebrating the 25th anniversary of John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. Modern Catholic social teaching dates from 1891, when Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, the first attempt by a pope to respond to the Industrial Revolution and modern societies' changed economic conditions. Leo rejected socialism as incompatible with human nature and good social order, but accepted modern capitalism and industry insofar as they acted responsibly and in harmony with moral principles. Instead of the revolutionary class struggle, he called for cooperation between business owners and workers, even allowing a proper role for labor unions—long thought in Europe to be socialist tools—partly inspired by American models.

Centesimus Annus ("The Hundredth Year") celebrated the anniversary of Leo's great encyclical, but also the *annus mirabilis*, the miracle year 1991, when Communism in the Soviet Union and its satellites finally fell. You might have expected that the Vatican would invite figures central to that struggle like Lech Walesa to its conference—Catholics who had fought for the rights of workers and all citizens under Communist oppression. Instead, the main speakers included Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, both essentially Latin-flavored Communists; Jeffrey D. Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia and a United Nations stalwart; and, in an American election year, socialist presidential candidate Bernie Sanders.

The Vatican under Francis has a very poor working knowledge of the United States, and a largely jaundiced view of it. In the first edition of *The Dictator Pope*, Sire claimed, without corroboration, that the Vatican—to compensate for the welcome given Sanders—had given Hillary Clinton's campaign \$100,000 taken from Peter's Pence, the annual collection from the faithful in support of the Holy See's charitable work. Many people, myself

included, expressed doubts at the time that the Vatican would do anything so reckless and nakedly partisan. In the new hardback edition, Sire contents himself with saying that the claim has been "repeatedly rumored from reliable sources" and argues that one reason the Vatican summarily fired Libero Milone, a layman who was auditor general of finances, was that he was getting too close to this and other potential scandals.

Partisan Spirit

A GREAT ENTHUSIASM DRIVES JOHN Gehring's *The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church* (2015), which focuses on what he regards as a strong spirit of renewal that the pontiff has injected into the Church and society in general. He quotes a Boston pastor: "I'm telling you, brother, if you focus on the numbers, you're missing the story.... There's an energy, a feeling, a spirit here. It's like a healing balm." The emphasis here has to be on the *spirit* of renewal because the expected bump in the number of people participating in Church, the sacraments, and religious activities of all kinds has not happened: in fact, the numbers continue to worsen. Part of the "Francis effect" is to have exacerbated existing divisions and tensions within the Church, sometimes producing strong opposition to the Holy Father among Catholics themselves. Attendance at the pope's Wednesday audiences in Saint Peter's Square and visitors to the Vatican more generally are at record lows compared to his two predecessors'.

Perhaps it's worth noting that Gehring works at Faith in Public Life, one of the many liberal Catholic organizations that have benefitted from the largesse of George Soros's Open Society Foundations. As the world learned thanks to Wikileaks and Hillary Clinton's hacked emails, Soros, through well-known Democratic operatives like John Podesta, supported a whole network created precisely to infiltrate the Church in America, in other countries, and in Rome itself. Faith in Public Life is a spinoff of Podesta's Center for American Progress.

There's no law, of course, against people financially supporting causes in which they believe. Using non-Catholic funds in an attempt to undermine the Church's teaching, however, is a twist that deserves serious scrutiny. Still, it's unlikely that even Francis shares all the leftist goals of Faith in Public Life. For instance, he called the movement to normalize the recent "transgender" craze a form of "ideological colonization."



Gehring writes with conviction and verve, and anyone looking for a blueprint on how a pope might be used to construct a radically political Catholicism could do worse than to start with him. He deplores the way the Church allegedly became part of the “culture war” in America under John Paul II and Benedict XVI—the “Republican Party at Prayer,” he acidly calls it, repurposing the old quip about Episcopalians. He prefers the progressive strain within the Church that has taken liberal stances on welfare, poverty, immigration, war and peace, and much else. The history here is relatively well told, but it reads Catholicism almost exclusively through partisan political lenses, describing the pope’s appointment of bishops, for example, as “Francis Builds His American Base.” In a funny way the arch-progressive Gehring and the arch-conservative Neumayr agree on at least one thing: the Church under Francis has become much more focused on progressive political coalitions and community organizing.

Theology on the Fly

PHILIP LAWLER’S *LOST SHEPHERD: HOW Pope Francis Is Misleading His Flock* is the best brief study for anyone who wants to understand the specifically religious—that is, the theological and ethical—aberrations of this papacy. A longtime distinguished Catholic journalist, Lawler was an early enthusiast for the new pope, but had a conversion experience when he noticed one day that the pope was inverting the meaning of the day’s Gospel, not just being unclear (as he often is when speaking off the cuff), but actually contradicting what Jesus was saying and what had been the Catholic Church’s teaching for two millennia: that no man may put asunder what God has joined together in marriage, and that to do so and remarry is adultery. And this was not just a passing blip. The pope has pushed about as strongly as he can, without provoking an open schism, the idea that divorce and remarriage are not obstacles for a Catholic to receive Communion. This may seem a trivial question to non-Catholics or something that should have been superseded long ago, but Catholics take seriously Jesus’ prohibition of divorce recorded in the Scriptures. It so shocked his listeners, even his own disciples responded: “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”

Lawler makes clear that this is not the only way in which the pope has been confusing people. Contrary to what many people, even many Catholics, now believe, the Church does not teach that a pope is simply infallible

in his every action or utterance. He’s an infallible authority on faith and morals when he teaches what he and the rest of the Church have received from Christ and the Apostles. He cannot merely make things up as he wishes. What’s more, Pope Francis was elected specifically as a reformer—of the curia, the abuse crisis, Vatican finances—not a modernizer or innovator. Nonetheless, he sent out early warning signs that he wasn’t much interested in fighting “the culture war,” for example, when he denounced “rigid” Catholics for “insisting” and “obsessing” on questions like abortion and homosexuality. As Lawler notes, “it hardly seemed necessary to complain about an ‘obsession’ with issues that are rarely even mentioned in a typical parish.” To many people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, who have sacrificed time and treasure over decades to defend family, marriage, and unborn human life, the remark was taken as a gratuitous insult.

It did not help when, on a flight back from Brazil, Francis pronounced one of the most

Pope Francis seems more a product of the crisis of confidence that pervades the West than someone who can alleviate it.

repeated lines of his papacy. Queried by a reporter about homosexuals, specifically the rumored escapades of one of his closest collaborators, the pope responded, “If they accept the Lord and have good will, who am I to judge them?” He did not say that homosexual behavior was okay, as many do when they use the phrase. In fact, he’s often said quite the opposite. But the world heard what it wanted to hear—a perhaps deliberate ambiguity that made him “Person of the Year” on the cover of the *Advocate* magazine.

There are probably only two people in the world who ought to watch every word they say: the American president, who can inadvertently start a war, and the Roman pontiff, who may weaken the whole moral structure of society. Soon after his election, Francis remarked, “The most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment and the loneliness of the old.” Sure, these are problems, especially in the developed world, but even there can they be the “most serious of the evils”? Here Lawler puts

his finger on a continuing problem with this pope: his inability to speak, and even think, clearly. Even on relatively non-controversial subjects like these, he sends out strange messages. On other occasions, he seemed to deny the reality of Hell or mused about changing the wording of the Lord’s Prayer. And no one has been able to persuade him not to speak so recklessly. The Vatican press office has frequently had to issue retractions, qualifications, or even denials.

Change Agent

SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR THE Catholic Church and the world in the 21st century? Ross Douthat initially believed the pope was only presenting a more welcoming face of Catholicism, while quietly remaining traditional. In *To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism*, the *New York Times* columnist argues that this papacy raises questions not only about the direction of the Church, but about our civilization:

People in France and Britain and the United States fear Western Christianity’s eclipse, they fear the collapse of community outside the posh megacities and the disappearance of the natural family everywhere, they fear what global capitalism, elite secularism, and Islamic self-assertion will mean for what remains of Christian civilization in Europe. These fears are not irrational, and recent trends have sharpened them, which is part of why Western politics has moved in a more populist and nationalist direction. But under Francis Rome has moved the other way, so that instead of a fully Catholic alternative to right-wing nationalism the Vatican seems to be offering conservative Catholics only judgment on their shortcomings, their chauvinism, their anxieties and lack of charity toward all.

Douthat puts his argument in the context of a much more balanced, less partisan reading of recent Catholic history than Gehring’s, focusing especially on the divisive watershed of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its aftermath. Francis, it is worth noting, is the first pope to have been ordained a priest after the council.

In Douthat’s reading, the Council gave rise to three main currents in the Catholic Church (with parallels in Western culture more generally). The first, rooted in the actual conciliar documents, was moderately con-



servative, opening up to modern democracy (there had already been a substantial history of Christian Democrat parties in Europe) with a greater emphasis on human liberty, but in continuity with the Church's pre-modern and natural law principles concerning human nature and society.

That moderation was mostly swamped by the radical cultural currents of the 1960s, even within the Church. Priests and nuns abandoned their religious vocations in droves (membership in Francis's own Jesuits is now only about a third of what it was in 1960.) Ancient liturgies, Church architecture and ornament, and devotional practices were swept away by an alleged "spirit" of Vatican II. The radical current in Catholicism subsided somewhat, as did the radical shifts in all of Western culture, and settled into what Douthat sees as a moderately liberal faction.

There was a partial recovery of a more confident, faithful Catholicism under the long pontificate of John Paul II—by any measure one of the great moral figures of the last quarter of the 20th century. He not only reined in the centrifugal forces in the Church, but in a large corpus of encyclicals and books over a papacy that lasted 28 years, he set a different tone—both morally and intellectually—for the Church as a whole. He was followed by the mild, scholarly Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), a former member of the *Académie française* and at 91 still perhaps the greatest living Catholic mind.

Until quite recently, a fair observer would have said that the Catholic Church is a basically conservative institution with a substantial liberal segment among active Catholics, all living within what Douthat sees as a kind of cultural truce. But the instability of that arrangement quickly appeared after Pope Benedict resigned in 2013, claiming that he was too old to deal with the massive reforms needed in Rome. This almost unprecedented

move—the last pope to resign was Celestine V in 1300—sent shockwaves through the Church. The cardinals who met to elect the next pope were seeking a bold reformer to clean up the sexual and financial scandals in which the Church found itself mired. What they got instead, observes Douthat, is someone who wishes not to renew but to *change* the Church—vaguely but radically—in several respects.

The "change" that Francis is pursuing necessarily involves dismantling the work of his two great predecessors, especially their efforts to restore an emphasis on truth and natural-law thinking. Douthat believes that conservatives were too optimistic to think that the 35 years of the John Paul and Benedict papacies had permanently tamed the cultural radicals. The Church has long been the most significant alternative to modernity's emphasis on personal feelings and situational ethics. Under Francis, it has not exactly abandoned the old truths, but they've been hedged in with a studied uncertainty that threatens to make them virtually ineffective. As clear affirmations of truth and justice recede, "dialogue" and "openness" become ends in themselves.

The central battle in the past two years has been over—what else—sex. Catholicism presents a very clear, cogent view on all forms of sexual activity. True love expresses itself as a total, faithful, fruitful, lifelong union, modeled on Christ's love for his Bride, the Church. That means no sex outside of marriage, and marriage between a man and woman, for life. Jesus' own words on marriage as an indissoluble covenant between one man and one woman were the undisputed standard of all Christian communities for centuries. This established doctrine clashes with essentially everything that has emerged from the sexual revolution: artificial contraception, easy divorce and remarriage, cohabitation, same-sex "marriage," transgenderism.

These may seem secondary matters compared with the essential truths of the faith; but as Douthat carefully shows, the debate here is not only over moral principles but also over two fundamentally opposed views of what it is to be human. The first pages of the Hebrew Scriptures say human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. And right after, "male and female He created them." Douthat says that if Jews and Christians got that wrong from the start, you could argue—and many have—that they've gotten everything else wrong since. Foundational notions about the human person and the family that have fostered our civilization are put in jeopardy. The most radical shifts on sex lead to today's toxic identity politics.

For Douthat, this would have been

an ideal moment to raise the church's banner, to offer a distinctively Catholic sort of synthesis—one that would speak to the right's fear that the West's civilizational roots are crumbling *and* to the left's disappointment with the rule of neoliberalism; one that would offer a Christian alternative to the aridity of secularism, the theocratic zeal of Islamism, and the identity politics of right and left.

Francis has done none of that: instead he has riven the only institution that might have elaborated such an alternative.

As the books reviewed here make clear, Pope Francis seems more a product of the crisis of confidence that pervades the West than someone who can alleviate it. Douthat's conclusion in particular is harsh but warranted: "*Hagan lío!* Francis likes to say. 'Make a mess!' In that much he has succeeded."

Robert Royal is president of the Faith & Reason Institute and author, most recently, of A Deeper Vision: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Twentieth Century (Ignatius Press).

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