

Comment on Ross Douthat essay, "Catholicism at Year Zero," New York Times January 5, 2016, <http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/01/05/catholicism-at-year-zero/>

Thomas O. Alderman, January 8, 2016

I think that ultimately Douthat offers nothing that would preclude the kind of reconsideration he opposes:

. . . [Y]es, not every question can be settled by precedents, the church must sometimes think and act anew, and other criteria, like the ones that Martens invokes, can matter for present-day debates.

But the point that conservative Catholics keep pressing in the current moment, without a satisfactory response, is that when the precedents line up the way they do in the case of marriage and divorce, there is a very heavy burden of moral-theological proof resting on the innovators,

To illustrate his point, he asks what would happen if someone made a persuasive argument that the Jerusalem council was wrong about the ceremonial law and that the church has been wrong about it ever since? He offers no reason why such an appeal would not be entitled to a hearing; indeed, he does not even claim it would not be entitled to hearing – on the understanding that advocates of change would bear a *very* heavy burden and would certainly get nowhere unless the church were already ripe for apostasy. Supposing that to be the case – supposing, that is, that we are entitled to a certain relative confidence that our understanding of the means of salvation is correct and will remain intact despite the necessary right of anyone to question it, and supposing further that Douthat himself implicitly acknowledges this – then the distance between Douthat and me virtually vanishes, and the distance between him and Martens shrinks noticeably.

Underlying all of this is the tension which exists between all of Jesus' ethical teaching and the practice and teaching of any and all expressions of His church, which Douthat and Martens have barely mentioned in this interchange, but which tension is the real source of their disagreement. That tension arises because Jesus' ethical teachings – generally, and not just on remarriage after divorce – are categorically unattainable by mortals in the present Age. And I think that is the point of his teaching: we cannot attain to righteousness in our own strength; we need a Savior to attain it for us.

The question, it seems to me, is this. *Given* the unattainability of Jesus' ethical standards, what should the teaching and the practice of the church be with regard to any particular moral failure? Supposing that forgiveness of the penitent sinner is also a given (since that is the very heart of the Gospel), then I am unable to identify any quick or easy solutions. As I said, I think Douthat implicitly acknowledges that there is no principled method for declaring such an argument – or such a beginning to such an argument – to be disqualified in advance.

Does that mean traditional church teaching does not matter? Of course not! What Douthat says

about that is also valid; but again, even he does not even claim that the weight to which tradition is entitled precludes the conversation: it merely makes it extremely difficult for it to go very far. Difficult, but not impossible, not in principle.

Finally, Douthat raises the spectre of schism, and presents the Anglican communion as an example – a very apt example, I would say. The solution, I think, is to realize the importance of agreement on what is essential to the faith and what is not. There are schisms and then there are schisms. Some schisms are good. Anyone repudiating the essentials of the faith is not part of the Body of Christ. They will probably find another congregation, and we should not bar their exit. The problem arises when we treat as essential what is not essential. For example, nowhere do the scriptures teach that any particular understanding of the Last Supper is essential to salvation. The alienation which arises out of treating that question as essential is an example of a bad schism: it destroys unity for the sake of something *less than* essential.

Indeed, Douthat mentions quite a few things which I would regard as non-essential. Is communion after divorce one of them? I'm not sure, but I think that is the question Catholics are wrestling with, and I don't see how they can prevent people from offering their opinions about it.