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November 3, 2015: Title: Ross Douthat's Mistake Mistake

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Title: Ross Douthat's Mistake

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11/3/2015—Ross Douthat responded today in the Post-Gazette (the column appeared earlier in the NY Times) to a letter to the Times from theologians criticizing him for commenting on what Douthat characterizes as a rift in the Catholic Church over admitting the remarried to communion without an annulment. Douthat is right that both liberals and conservatives have reasons for downplaying the extent of the rift. And he is right to be offended when theologians respond that he does not understand because he is a lay person. But Douthat is treating Church divisions as if they were American political disagreements and the two contexts are different. First, Church doctrine really does change—it does not just “deepen.” This was the case with the teachings of Thomas Aquinas as well as Vatican II. Second, the doctrines he is so concerned about are really not that important. They are political flash points, not theological ones. Jesus taught that marriage could not be dissolved, but the annulment process already reverses that teaching in many cases. Anyway, the issue is communion, not divorce. Jesus ate with sinners. Finally, changes here will not require “a bitter civil war.” That is a political columnist talking, not a Catholic. The Church had a civil war over the Reformation. It is not going to have one over a matter like this. The Church develops in an elaborate dance between continuity and change—sometimes more of one and sometimes less. Fortunately, the Church is not really like politics.