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Statement from San Angelo Bishop Michael J. Sis on Pope Francis’ ‘Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family’

(Following are statements made by San Angelo Bishop Michael J. Sis at a news conference Friday, April 8, 2016, at Holy Angels Church in San Angelo)

Today at Noon Roman time, Pope Francis released his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love: “On Love in the Family.” It is Pope Francis’ landmark document on marriage and family. It is initially being published in six languages: Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, English, and German.

The text is very long – 256 pages, organized into nine chapters. As usual, the table of contents is at the end. Like all papal documents, it is organized according to paragraph numbers. There are 325 paragraph numbers. For your convenience, we have provided a 7-page summary and some links to informative websites.

The official date of the document is March 19, 2016, but it was not made public until today. I did not receive it until yesterday. Needless to say, my study of the document has been somewhat rushed. It is the sort of book that merits a slow, patient, and meditative reading. I highly recommend it, especially for any Christian who is married or thinking of getting married.

The document is the fruit of two worldwide consultative events called Synods of Bishops, held in Rome in October 2014 and October 2015. The synods included questionnaires that were used around the world.

This work is based in human experience, the Bible, and almost 2,000 years of Church teachings. It cites the writings of Francis’ predecessors, particularly Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. It also draws upon Francis’ own previous writings as bishop and pope.
The most frequently cited source is the Bible. The philosopher most quoted in the book is Thomas Aquinas. Many of the citations in the book are from Latin American writers and bishops. Francis also quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Eric Fromm.

*Amoris Laetitia* reads easily and smoothly. It is a very positive work which seeks to make marriage more desirable and attractive. It presents the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and family. It offers a perspective of hope and compassion, filled with concrete reminders of the beauty of family life. It encourages couples to trust in the grace of God for living out their marriage.

What does the document *not* do? It does not give up on marriage. It does not express hopelessness or helplessness in the face of moral failings. It is not just trying to be fashionable or “hip.” It is not decrying the evils of the present age or denouncing a decadent world. It is not trying to impose rules by sheer authority. It does not present a view of marriage that is exclusively insisting on the duty of procreation. It is not an abstract theological treatise on the ideal of marriage.

Here are some highlights from the document:

**Chapter One** offers the biblical basis for marriage and family. It speaks of the “primordial divine plan” for marriage. It clearly embraces an understanding of marriage that is between a man and a woman, open to children, faithful, loving, and a lifelong commitment.

**Chapter Two** considers the current situation of families. Pope Francis seeks to be grounded in reality as he lists the many challenges faced by families, including migration, the “culture of the provisional,” the anti-birth mentality, lack of housing, pornography, violence against women, abuse of minors, lack of respect for the elderly, and rampant individualism. He also includes a section on “gender ideology” (56), where he expresses disagreement with an ideology that tries to completely separate personal identity from the biological difference between male and female. He says that we are creatures, not the Creator: “Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift.” He says we need to accept and respect our humanity as it was created.

**Chapter Three** offers central elements of classic Catholic teaching on marriage and the family. Pope Francis emphasizes marriage as a lifelong and faithful commitment, the Catholic view of marriage as a sacrament, the right to life, and the importance of the education of children.

The three chapters that I would most recommend to married couples and to those who are preparing to marry are Chapters Four, Five, and Seven.

**Chapter Four** is about love in marriage. It begins with a long explanation of St. Paul’s passage on love in I Corinthians 13:4-7. This chapter is like none I have ever seen in any papal document, entering deeply into the emotional world of the spouses. It presents the erotic dimension of human love as a gift from God. Pope Francis portrays marital joy as embracing both positive and negative experiences: a “mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures.” (126) He says that the famous passage in Ephesians 15:6 (“wives, be submissive to your husbands”) is really about reciprocal self-gift of husband and wife.

**Chapter Five** is about the fruitfulness of love and welcoming new life. Here the pope shows that family includes more than just the traditional “nuclear” family; it also includes a wider network of many relationships.

**Chapter Six** is especially useful for pastoral ministers in churches. It proposes improved methods for the formation of healthy families, especially the preparation of engaged couples and
ministry to couples in their early years of marriage. The document states that Church teaching remains clear that marriage is between a man and a woman, and homosexual unions cannot be placed on the same level as Christian marriage. Even so, paragraph 250 states, “We would like before all else to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while ‘every sign of unjust discrimination’ is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence.”

In today’s press conference I have invited Dave and Linda Erickson, who are leaders in one of our major diocesan efforts of marriage preparation, called Engaged Encounter. In this chapter, Pope Francis also touches on his recent reforms of the procedures for the declaration of nullity of marriages. I have invited Mr. Tom Burke, who serves on the marriage tribunal of the Diocese of San Angelo, to explain how Pope Francis’ intervention has affected that process for us.

Chapter Seven is about the raising of children, which includes ethical formation, proper discipline, passing on the faith, and sex education. In this chapter the pope is both practical and hopeful. As he describes family life, he even mentions the common scene of a family being together at the dinner table while everyone is on their cell phones.

You may recall that much of the controversy around the Synod of Bishops in October was about the reception of Communion by Catholics who are divorced and civilly remarried. Chapter Eight takes on this issue through a lengthy exposition of how general rules cannot apply absolutely to all particular situations. He cites the moral teachings of Thomas Aquinas as well as the “law of gradualness” found in the teachings of Pope John Paul II. Pope Francis says that these couples are part of the Church. They are not excommunicated. Pastors need to do everything possible to help people in these situations to be actively included in the life of the faith community. We need to show understanding in the face of exceptional circumstances, while never dimming the light of the higher ideal, and never proposing less of what Jesus offers to the human being. (307) The paragraph that makes explicit reference to the reception of Communion in some irregular situations is 305, with its footnote 351.

As he presents the “logic of pastoral mercy,” Pope Francis also cautions us that the exception does not make the rule. He says, “If someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others.” (297)

Chapter Nine speaks of the spirituality of marriage and the family. He says that all families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love.

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