

Sacred Heart University

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June 1, 2016

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Interdisciplinary Faculty Offer Interpretations of Pope's 'The Joy of Love'

News Story: June 1, 2016



From left are Colleen Butler-Sweet, Rev. Anthony Ciorra, Michelle Loris, Ciara Leydon, Thomas Hurley and Bronwyn Cross-Denny.

An interdisciplinary panel of Sacred Heart University faculty members came together recently in the school's Schine Auditorium to offer their respective interpretations of "The Joy of Love: Francis' Apostolic Exhortation."

Pope Francis drafted the 256-page document following two synods (gatherings of bishops) at the Vatican, and it represents his reflections on those assemblies. His focus is on pastoral ministry—marriage, family, relationships and love.

Michelle Loris, professor and associate dean of the [College of Arts and Sciences](#), served as moderator for the discussion. Panelists included the [Rev. Anthony Ciorra](#), assistant vice president of [Mission & Catholic Identity](#); [Bronwyn Cross-Denny](#), chair of the Department of [Social Work](#); [Colleen Butler-Sweet](#), assistant professor, Department of [Sociology](#); [Ciara Leydon](#), associate professor, Department of [Speech-Language Pathology](#); and [Thomas Hurley](#), adjunct instructor, Department of [Catholic Studies](#).

Hurley spoke first, quoting the document's opening line: "The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church." From his perspective, Hurley said, the statement sets the tone of the work, though he added that it doesn't ignore the pain and imperfection of families. With regard to relationships, Hurley said the Pope believes that today's society is not committed to them—that they are often "throwaway."

He noted several other key thoughts the Pope offered: "Trust is important and enables a relationship to be free;" people need "to be daring enough to give themselves in love permanently;" "authentic love stands firm in hostile surroundings;" and "love in marriage is the greatest form of friendship." Hurley said the Pope suggests such love is possible—it's hard, but it's worth the effort.

Leydon said Pope Francis would like to see more understanding from the Church. "The Church must be generous and provide understanding and comfort instead of imposing rules when families are in crisis," Leydon said. "Parents must see children as gifts. They must punish them, but in line with what the child does. Parents often have to rewrite

their future when an idealized marriage is not realized. The Church needs to show mercy. We have to realize all of us are complex, a mixture of light and shadows.”

Cross-Denny sees the Pope as “kind of like a social worker,” promoting core values like service, social justice, dignity, integrity and competence. She said his view is that “We are human, we make mistakes,” and people should look at others in their environment and empower them. The Pope’s view of the family, she said, is socializing children to our society and that we need to allow children to make mistakes. “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed,” she concluded.

Butler-Sweet recognized that Pope Francis didn’t fully endorse gay marriage, but offered a more welcoming sentiment. With regard to divorce, she said today’s failures often are caused by strain on women who work all day and also take care of the home. Butler felt the Pope still has a 1950s homemaker/bread-winner view of marriage.

Ciorra took more of a big-picture view of Pope Francis’ document, saying, “The Pope is teaching us not so much by the document, but by his actions. Your present life and future life are very important to the Pope.” Ciorra said the work is like a Rorschach image—people can see what they want to see in it. He said some Catholics see the work as the Pope’s opinion, while others say the same rules are in place, and still others say it’s revolutionary.

“There’s the rules and there’s life,” Ciorra offered. “Life doesn’t always play out like we want. This document guides us on how to relate to each other. He’s giving to us a way of living life. People and love are more important than rules.

“The Pope is saying, ‘Don’t make judgments without understanding the complexity of the human situation. Pastors need to help people practice discernment. Moral laws are not stones to throw at a person’s life. Avoid cold, bureaucratic morality.’”