

Rejecting men, embracing children

By Helen Alvaré, J.D.

The recent news of the nearly 40% out of wedlock birth rate in the United States should pretty much rock our world as citizens and as Catholics. According to the Centers for Disease Control report, this means 1.7 million children were born to unmarried mothers in 2007, a figure 250% greater than the number reported in 1980. The implications for our society loom large. According to empirical data published over the last several decades in leading sociological journals, these children, on average, will suffer significant educational and emotional disadvantages compared to children reared by their married parents. They will be less able to shoulder the burdens that “next generations” traditionally assume for the benefit of their families, communities and their country. They are likely to repeat their parents’ behaviors. The boys are more likely to engage in criminal behavior and the girls to have nonmarital children. There is also the fact that American society is becoming increasingly segregated by different marriage and family patterns. (See Kay Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste in America*, 2007). To wit, according to the CDC report, out of wedlock birth rates for Hispanic and African American women are more than three and two times, respectively, the rates for non-Hispanic white women. Furthermore, only a tiny fraction of the children of college educated women are born outside of marriage, while very high percentages are born to women with a high school education or less.

For Catholics, the possible “normalizing” of out of wedlock childbearing is of particular concern, not only because of the diminished well-being of vulnerable children, but also because it calls into question the very necessity, the very centrality of the male-female relationship, for the lives of individuals and society. If, as we believe, the relationship between Christ and the Church is glimpsed in a special way in marriage, and if human beings come to understand God’s love in a privileged way as spouses, what does it portend if marriage is no longer understood to be the keystone of a good society?

Furthermore, all of this is happening in the teeth of increasingly well-known empirical findings about the disadvantages suffered by children reared outside of married, two-biological-parent households. It is literally “unreasonable.” It trudges on as if facts don’t matter. Adult sexual choices have everything to do with the well-being of the children they make; yet bad choices go uncensored by society.

So what *does* matter? What might influence single women and men to think about the long-term well-being of children? Does religion have a role? Does the law? While these questions are too large for a single essay, I will begin to address them in this column, and in additional columns over the course of the coming Summer. A good place to start is with the landmark study performed by sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (2005). Although it focuses upon a limited segment of the lone mother population – urban women (in Philadelphia and southern New Jersey) – its method of qualitative investigation gives the reader access to the lives and the thought processes of single mothers in a rich and revealing way. One author lived among these poor mothers and interviewed 162 in depth over a period of two years. The women were African-American, Caucasian and Hispanic. The resulting book runs over 200 pages. This essay will discuss a few of its most striking findings for the purpose of considering useful responses.

First, the researchers concluded that the majority of children born to lone mothers could not correctly be deemed “unplanned.” Rather, many were planned or actively sought. And the majority were somewhere in the middle between planned and unplanned. In other words, many of these very young couples (it was not uncommon for the mothers to be 14 or 15 years old) explicitly or implicitly wanted a baby in their lives. Their reasons by and large would be familiar to anyone who has ever hoped for a child. They wanted someone who was an extension of their beloved, a piece of

him or her. They wanted to love another person deeply. (Oddly enough, this raw appreciation for children seems to surpass that which might be found among wealthier women, who seem to be putting off having children until they feel that they have satisfied all of their educational and financial needs first).

What is different about very poor mothers' desires for children seems to be related to their relationally, financially and educationally impoverished circumstances. Relationally, the authors described these young mothers as existing in an environment without close, trusted ties. In particular, the men in their lives were considered to be highly untrustworthy and worse. Infidelity seemed almost a universal problem among the fathers. Drug and alcohol problems, criminal behavior, and domestic violence were extremely common. Motherhood provided a chance for these women to "establish the primordial bonds of love and connection." (185).

Financially and educationally, the prospects for the women who became lone mothers seemed paltry to nonexistent. Their experiences at the local public schools were described as "chaotic." Their own single parents did not have the margins of time or money to make up for this serious deficiency. In this setting, the "opportunity costs" of having a baby are very small. And in the girls' eyes, the advantages of having a baby loomed large: the possession (they spoke often in "ownership" terms) of a person who could be trusted to love them for the long run. There was also the opportunity to achieve a version of success well-accepted in their community: triumphing over terrible odds to raise a child well and to show yourself to be a good mother.

There is a second striking aspect of the book. I cannot accurately call it a "finding" because the authors don't mention it. It is the utter absence of moral-type thinking about sexual intercourse. While very occasionally, a lone mother might suggest that she believes premarital sex or cohabitation to be immoral, the subject doesn't otherwise come up. When the authors do reference the mothers' moral code they find that it includes rejecting abortion, often rejecting adoption (both are seen as a failure to accept responsibility for your actions) and failing to put your child's needs before your own or to stand by them through the inevitably tough ups and downs of their lives. But there is no real moral-type analysis of the meaning of the sexual encounters by which the children are conceived. These encounters are not coerced. They are rather an expected part of being a young adolescent. Moral ideas don't "kick in" until there is a pregnancy.

Several ideas for responding to this evidence come to mind based upon these two findings. First, it appears that there is room for a lot of improvement in religious communications about morality and sexual behavior. This is bad news in the sense that churches have failed to do this in the past. It is good news if it is possible that a really stepped up effort in this regard might make a difference in the future.

Second, the deep well of mistrust between men and women and the resulting loss to children has to be addressed. Given the behavior of the men described in the book it seems no surprise at all that the young women won't permanently ally themselves with these men. They treat the women as sex objects, abuse them and are repeatedly unfaithful to them. The women go along with it in the beginning, and occasionally thereafter, until they finally dismiss the men from their lives either on the grounds of their own safety or sanity, or those of their children. One message that cries out from the pages of this book is that the relationship between men and women must be healed. If not, everyone suffers, perhaps most poignantly, the children. The authors do not raise the question, but it seems eminently likely that part of the reason that the fathers are so cruel to the mothers in these communities, relates to father absence. The boys have no role models for learning how to be men, including how to treat women. That loss is "carried forward" into the next generation of children, and the next and so on.

This essay has assumed that we should "do something" about nonmarital childbearing. The reader should know, that in so doing, I have gone out on a limb already, by contradicting a lot of what passes for wisdom among family law and social policy scholars. "Making family law is hard," is a common refrain. (See Ira Ellman, *Why Making Family Law is Hard*, 35 Ariz. St. L. J 699 (2003)). Others refuse to credit the empirical data about the difficulties faced by nonmarital children (See Vivian Hamilton, *Mistaking Marriage for Social Policy*, 11 Va. J. Soc. Pol'y & L. 307 (2004)). And

a majority opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court has even announced in *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003), that making laws to promote a particular moral view is invalid under U.S. Constitution. (This rejection of ‘morals laws’ is treated as “*dicta*” first by Justice Scalia’s *Lawrence* dissent, and also by others. It is also ridiculous on its face as indicated by the continuous stream of morally based arguments used by federal and state legislators in support of every thing from health care reform to tax laws.)

In suggesting that Catholics and others ought at least to consider attempting to influence people’s *values* and *moral reasoning*, this essay has gone out on an even tinier limb. There is not only the “no morals laws” *dicta* of *Lawrence* to contend with, but also the view “you can’t put toothpaste back into the tube” when it comes to sexual behaviors. My review of Andrew Cherlin’s book (*The Marriage Go-Round*) in the last column indicated, however, that this prominent secular sociologist credited both law and religion with important roles in influencing citizens’ ideas about marriage stability. I agree. Of course there are all sorts of limits we would want to impose upon legislative action based on prudence, legitimate privacy concerns, and realistic appreciation for what the law can and cannot accomplish in the way of “making men moral.” (See Robbie George, *Making Men Moral* (1993). But it is foolish to conclude that individuals’ behavior regarding out of wedlock childbearing does not take any cues from the votes of a majority of lawmakers and the actions of the government and private officials who carry out the law. It is further foolish to conclude that Americans – who still testify regularly to pollsters about the importance of their religious beliefs – would fail to be persuaded at least somewhat, and over time, by intelligent, reasonable arguments in favor of channeling childbearing into marriage.

Catholics have special gifts and thus special responsibilities here. We have remarkably and uniquely developed moral and systematic theologies touching on the meaning of human sexuality. We are also required to exercise an option for the vulnerable as imitators of Christ. Therefore, - on the grounds of our profound understandings of the relationships between marriage and child well-being, and between marriage and our ability to glimpse God’s love – Catholics ought to feel especially responsible to be involved in the search for the right contents and mix of legal and religious efforts to re-valorize marriage and marital childbearing.

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