

Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (University of California Press, 2005)

Reviewed by Michael Leuken

Marriage is brought into being by the promise of the vows, and creates a home where children can be welcomed. What remains of that home if marriage is redefined as an optional luxury, or if childbearing is regarded as a necessity to be sought apart from or before marriage? What if the Church now faces a cultural situation in which the life-long promises that low-income urban women believe they can make and keep no longer have any necessary connection to marriage and home, but only with “being there” for children? And what if these children are themselves thought of not as valuable in their own right, but primarily as providing meaning for the lives of their mothers?

These are some of the unintended questions which are forced upon the reader by the authors of *Promises I Can Keep*. The authors are professors of sociology studying the lives of poor women in Philadelphia. They begin by noting that “many Americans believe a whole host of social ills can be traced to the lapse in judgment that a poor, unmarried woman shows when she bears a child she can’t afford,” and that the solution is for these women to “wait to have children until they are older and more economically stable, and they should get married first.” The authors’ goal in this book is to address this belief.

That marriage has been radically separated from childbearing among the poor is clear enough. Social science has not, they claim, so far been able to explain this “decoupling,” or tell “what will make marriage more likely among single mothers.” In pursuit of an explanation, the authors have focused on 162 low-income single mothers living in impoverished neighborhoods of Philadelphia. “Their stories offer a unique point of view on the troubling questions of why low-income, poorly educated young women have children they can’t afford and why they don’t marry.” The book is aimed at readers inside and outside of academia, including policymakers. It will be of particular interest to those whose task it is to bring the Church’s teaching about marriage and family to the urban poor.

Of course, both the poor and the affluent are delaying marriage. In both cases the authors believe the institution of marriage has not been rejected, but rather redefined. It has become something that can be delayed for economic reasons – a “luxury.” But low-income urban women have much to gain by having children early. For these women, children are no luxury, but a “necessity, an absolutely essential part of a young woman’s life, the chief source of identity and meaning.” Whereas among the more affluent the “couple relationship is at the heart of family life, with children as desirable complements,” the situation is different among poor women. There, it seems, “the mother-child relationship is central, with the father as a useful complement.”

Thus while middle-class women generally follow a path that envisions having children after economic success and marriage, poor women tend to see a childless life as tragic. They are prepared to wait for marriage until after economic success (giving the husband a chance to prove himself), but not to grow old waiting for children.

The stories the mothers tell reveal much about both the depravity and the greatness of the human spirit. The situation of low-income mothers is bleak, and there are no easy solutions to the poverty they face. The authors make it clear that the poor mother’s aim in having children – contrary to a popular opinion among the middle classes – is not to give up control of her life but to increase it. These women “use motherhood as a way to make meaning in a void.” It is an opportunity to prove one’s worth, to give one’s life a purpose. It is as if “a baby has the power to solve everything,”

offering in many cases an alternative to drug addiction, crime, and jail. The clear message of the book is that the choice to become mothers represents a regrettable yet reasonable strategy for women who, thanks to feminism, see themselves as increasingly autonomous.

But can we not say more about this tragic loss of traditional marriage, family, and home? Is the only available option to accept the changes and set policy to ensure that the new arrangements function smoothly? In order to do justice to any social phenomenon involving human beings we must go beyond sociological science. The authors stop at what they take to be the facts of the matter. But they need to ask more – not just as human beings, but as scientists. Can we use words like “meaning” without giving them content? After much talk of “self-identity” and “self-fulfillment”, the conclusion that “establishing the primordial bonds of love and connection is the ultimate goal” comes as something of a surprise. Social scientists need to ponder the content of these rather vague expressions. Here the Church speaks in the name of human experience, and her wisdom is ready to hand in *Familiaris Consortio* and *Letter to Families* by Pope John Paul II.

The breakdown of marriage and family depicted in *Promises I Can Keep* makes one fact startlingly clear. An understanding of the family as the basic cell of society and man as having been created in the image and likeness of God can no longer be taken for granted in our society – even among those who claim to be religious and to hold marriage in high regard. But it is significant to note that the low-income mothers in this study know that having children before marriage is not “ideal.” Furthermore, they are appalled at the way marriage is treated as nothing more than a piece of paper by many more affluent couples. In other words it is often the poorer mothers who hold onto the hope of marriage in the true sense of the word. They reverence marriage, but hold back for fear of failure, of mistreatment or divorce. As they raise their children they continue to say, “I want that white picket fence dream.” But they also say, “I’m gonna make sure I have my own everything before I get married.” And as a result the child ends up serving the interests of the mother. The irony is fascinating, and heart rending.

The book may be useful to those doing pastoral work with the inner-city poor. It provides an intimate and sobering look inside the lives of the men and women who are having children there. The authors are to be commended for correcting the dominant view that unmarried mothers are lazy and unintelligent. In fact, it seems they are hard at work attempting to achieve an autonomous independence that produces for them a “scaled-down version of the classic American dream.” Perhaps this is why both the *Wall Street Journal* and *Ms. Magazine* have their kudos on the book’s back cover. Both no doubt approve of the author’s policy recommendations, which aim to make the new situation work more efficiently. But the book provides much material for further anthropological and theological reflection, especially in the way it highlights how the human desire for communion – and for children – endures, even when misled and brutalized.

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