NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER DONATE NOW!
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The 'Most Dangerous Place' is outside the womb

Jamie Manson | Mar. 9, 2011 Grace on the Margins

I?m not sure if it made national news, but two weeks ago a three-storey billboard posted in the Soho section of Manhattan caused a bit of controversy here.

The billboard featured a picture of an African American girl. Above her head read: ?The most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb.?

The billboard was sponsored by the organization

, which apparently is led by an African American. Nevertheless, the sign was quickly condemned for its inherently racist tone and its blatant shaming of African American women.

The billboard was removed within a week, sparking a characteristically hysterical reaction from the Catholic League?s William Donohue, who decried the action as ?an exercise in urban fascism.? [1]

The abortion rate in New York City, which by some estimates is as high as 41 percent, has received particular attention lately. But other statistics in the city seem to garner less publicity.

The perfect storm of the economic downturn, soaring unemployment, and unaffordable housing has hit low-income families in New York City particularly hard. In Harlem alone, family homelessness increased 64 percent between 2008 and 2010. Currently there are over 15,000 children living in city shelters.

Yet, no one seems to be connecting the soaring abortion rate with the crises of increasing poverty and homelessness.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan, responding to the abortion statistic, reiterated the promise of Cardinal John O?Connor twenty-five years ago: ?Any woman who is pregnant and in need of help can come to the church and we will help you.? One assumes that Dolan is speaking particularly to women facing economic hardship.

The archbishop is making a bold promise. I have served in two churches in Manhattan and, more recently, worked with a number of shelters for pregnant women and new mothers within the five boroughs. Given what I?ve learned, I feel it is important to trace the likely experience of a woman who arrives at a parish office with

this kind of need.

If the woman fits the profile of most pregnant women and new mothers currently living in shelters, the church is in for an uphill battle.

Of the pregnant women and new mothers living in the shelters with which I worked, more than half are between the ages of 18 and 25. And, yes, many are African American.

But the vast majority of these young women also suffer with at least one form of mental illness and have been exposed to some form of domestic violence -- typically at the hands of a parent or other relative. At least a quarter of the population struggles with alcohol or drug dependency. Perhaps most disturbing, nearly 70 percent do not have a high school diploma or GED.

Because they were raised in unstable environments, and a good number of them in foster care, most of these women have no life skills. As one woman religious who has worked with homeless women for decades told me, ?They do not know how to properly mop a floor, let alone take care of an infant.?

Even if the woman who arrives at the parish hasn?t faced this degree of hardship, it is important to consider what level of assistance a parish could feasibly offer.

In New York City, the average monthly rent is $2,700. Perhaps as a result, churches here are routinely asked for help with rental and utilities assistance. At one parish where I worked, we received an average of ten calls per day.

Since few churches have social workers on staff, often ministers are left with the challenge of determining a person?s level of need. Even the wealthiest parish could not offer adequate, sustainable financial assistance to most of those who seek it.

If a pregnant woman is homeless or on the verge of eviction, a church?s only recourse will be to refer her to a shelter. While Catholic Charities has a network of affiliated shelters for pregnant women, because of city regulations a church cannot send a woman directly to one of these facilities. Rather, the woman will have to be first screened by a city-run intake center.

In the five boroughs of New York City, there is only one intake center for pregnant women and families. It is located in the Bronx, and only one subway goes there. Once a woman is screened, there is a chance that she will be sent to a Catholic Charities affiliated shelter, but ultimately the assignment is made at the discretion of the city intake center.

Once in a shelter, a woman has to find both an apartment and work within six to nine months. Typically, she will receive public assistance (formerly known as welfare) during this period. But in order to receive public assistance, she must attend all-day work programs. These programs do not offer further education, but, instead, offer ?trainings? that usually amount to menial labor like janitorial work or clearing parks of debris.

These programs fail to develop skills necessary for a new mother to become self-sufficient. Tragically, because of the amount of time these programs require of women, shelters often do not have adequate opportunities to offer them crucial parenting and life skills classes.

Once a woman finds a job, she is entitled to secure an apartment. Public assistance pays 70 percent of the rent for the first two years. If during this period a woman loses her job, she and her family also lose their apartment.

If she holds on to the job, after two years she is offered no further rental assistance. Many of these women are

only skilled enough to hold minimum wage positions at the rate of $7.15 per hour.

Because of their lack of education, they usually cannot move beyond these dead-end jobs.

According to a recent study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, a woman would have to earn over $25 per hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment in New York City.

Given this system, there is little wonder why the rate of recidivism among homeless families in the city spiked 137 percent between 2005 and 2009, according the Institute for Children and Poverty.

So while privileged Americans continue to be outraged over the fate of the unborn in the five boroughs of New York, few seem moved to target the forces that truly imperil the lives of children here: parents who lack education and life skills, a childhood trapped in an unbroken cycle of poverty, poor access to healthy foods, unsafe living conditions, and inadequate services for family members who are mentally ill, abused, and addicted.

The greatest irony, of course, is that many of the loudest voices crying out in horror at the high abortion rate are also the strongest voices proposing severe cut backs in entitlement programs -- not to mention union busting and tax cuts for the wealthiest.

There may be more than one exercise in urban fascism going on here, Mr. Donohue.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Jamie Manson?s column, "Grace on the Margins", is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **E-mail alert sign-up** [2]. If you already receive e-mail alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Grace on the Margins" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/07/2015 - 04:12*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/most-dangerous-place-outside-womb

Links:
[1] http://www.catholicleague.org/release.php?id=2091
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup