

The Spirit's Tether: Family, Work, and Religion Among American Catholics, 2013, 294 pages, Mary Ellen Konieczny, 019996579X, 9780199965793, Oxford University Press, 2013

Cultural conflicts about the family—including those surrounding women's social roles, the debate over abortion, and in more recent years, debates about stem cell research, same-sex marriage, and contraception—have intensified over the last few decades among Catholics, as well as among American citizens generally. In fact, these conflicts comprise much of the substance of the moral polarization that currently characterizes our public politics. Scholars have demonstrated the importance of the media in the endurance of these conflicts, as well as the important role played by elites, particularly religious elites. But less is known about how individuals in local settings and cultures—especially religious settings—experience and participate in them. Why are these conflicts so resonant among ordinary Americans, and Catholics in particular? By exploring how religion and family life are intertwined in local parish settings, this book strives to understand how and why Catholics are divided around these cultural conflicts about the family. It presents a close and detailed comparative ethnographic analysis of the families and local religious cultures in two Catholic parishes: religiously conservative Our Lady of the Assumption Church and theologically progressive St. Brigitta Church. Through an examination of the activities of parish life, together with the faith stories of parishioners, this book reveals how two congregational social processes—the practice of central ecclesial metaphors, and the construction of Catholic identities—matter for the ways in which parishioners work out the routines of marriage, childrearing, and work-family balance, as well as to the ways they connect these everyday challenges to the public politics of the family. The analysis further demonstrates that these institutional processes promote polarization among Catholics through practices that unintentionally fragment the Catholic tradition in local religious settings.

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