

Homiletic and Pastoral Review

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Breastfeeding mothers need support  
and hopefully  
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[TITLE]

The influence of one priest

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[BIO]

Mrs. Shelia Kippley earned her science degree in 1962 from the University of California, San Francisco. She authored *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing* in 1969 and has promoted ecological breastfeeding through a regular column and lectures. In 2004 she became co-founder of Natural Family Planning International. Her latest book is *Breastfeeding and Catholic Motherhood* (Sophia). Sheila has been married to John for forty-three years, and they have five grown children and ten grandchildren, all breastfed. This is her first article for HPR.

[TEXT]

Breastfeeding is a lifesaver for many babies in developing countries. It has also been demonstrated to be significantly healthier for babies in America, so much so that the American Academy of Pediatrics came out with a strong breastfeeding statement in 1997 and again in 2005, recommending that babies be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and nursed for at least one year. Exclusive breastfeeding means nothing but mother's milk. The wisdom of God's plan for mother and baby has been demonstrated over and over again in the past twenty years. Yet in the Church's concern for social justice, natural family planning, and health issues especially for the poor, the Church rarely mentions breastfeeding with respect to these issues. Breastfeeding can make a difference.

Two recent popes—Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II—urged mothers to breastfeed their babies, but today many priests may still not realize the positive impact they could have on their parishioners if they promoted breastfeeding in their parish and among their contacts. The promotion does not have to be done from the pulpit. While a few priests have spoken about breastfeeding during a Sunday homily, many priests would feel uncomfortable doing so, but there are other ways a priest can foster breastfeeding.

The pastor can choose a married couple to witness about breastfeeding for a few minutes during the baptismal preparation classes. The priest can promote breastfeeding when he talks on natural family planning or family life. He can encourage mothers in the parish to form a chapter of the new organization, Catholic Nursing Mothers League,<sup>1</sup> so that mothers in the parish would be encouraged to nurse for at least one year. The League would offer new mothers spiritual and personal support during the early weeks when most problems arise and a time when most mothers consequently quit nursing. If the parish has an adult education program, the priest can schedule a talk on the many benefits of breastfeeding and its impact upon society. Such a talk could be given by himself, a lay person, nurse, doctor, deacon or nun. The

parish website could provide information on breastfeeding, such as the scheduled meetings of the Catholic Nursing Mothers League or the lengthy breastfeeding talk given by Pope John Paul II in May of 1995. A priest can compliment a couple who has chosen to breastfeed their new baby, and he can encourage parents to bring their babies to Mass. Parents, whether breastfeeding or not, want to feel their babies and children are welcome at Sunday Mass. A modest picture of the nursing Madonna could be hung up in the Church or in another parish location. Such are some of the examples that could be implemented in a parish.

While breastfeeding should be the norm, unfortunately it isn't. Our society does not support breastfeeding, especially as the baby becomes a little older. Breastfeeding mothers need support and hopefully they will get that support in their parish. One Catholic doctor from Michigan told me that about 95% of the new mothers in his parish breastfeed their babies. If a mother has a problem nursing her newborn, the other mothers in the parish provide support for her. Once you have a parish where breastfeeding is the norm, mothers feel the support for breastfeeding in the parish and the mothers will feel comfortable bringing their nursing baby to church and school meetings and to Mass.

The benefits of breastfeeding are so fantastic that this type of childcare can no longer be ignored. Your influence as a priest can have a long-range impact on your parishioners, as I will try to demonstrate in the following "possible" examples. Let's assume you are Fr. Jones.

Sally and her husband were celebrating their seventh anniversary with dinner. The waitress asked: "How are things going tonight?" Sally's husband said, "Great. We've been married for seven years and for the first time my wife just told me she thinks we should have a baby!" Sally had heard her pastor, Fr. Jones, speak in a homily about one couple he knew and their decision to have another baby. Father's positive attitude about the value of children in a marriage got Sally thinking about her own situation. She eventually left her career, breastfed her children, and stayed home to care for them. When Fr. Jones was transferred, this couple made a point to express their gratitude to him.

As a result of Fr. Jones' gentle encouragement of breastfeeding, one baby in the parish who would have developed leukemia didn't develop this disease because he was breastfed. An adult parishioner avoided having Crohn's disease because her mother, also influenced by Fr. Jones many years previously, breastfed her as an infant and toddler. Some mothers in the parish who chose to breastfeed their babies for at least one year were protected from type-2 diabetes and this protection (15% for each baby breastfed for one year) lasted for 15 years after the birth of their last baby. Alice did not fracture her hip later in life because of the breastfeeding she had done many years ago when raising her family. Sue avoided having ovarian cancer because of the long amenorrhea (absence of menstrual periods) she experienced while breastfeeding her children. Tom did not develop celiac disease during childhood because he was exclusively breastfed at the time solids were introduced. With breastfeeding childhood celiac disease is disappearing.

As a parishioner Tina nursed her first baby for a few months, but she wanted to nurse her next baby longer. She attended the Catholic Nursing Mothers League (CNML) meetings at the parish hall. At the third meeting she learned about the Seven Standards<sup>2</sup> and natural child spacing. At 20 months postpartum Tina is still in amenorrhea and is waiting for the return of her periods so she and her husband can have another baby. Tina has learned that God's plan for spacing babies is a wonderful benefit of breastfeeding. After Tina raised her family, she taught at a Catholic high school and found opportunities to speak of the good news about

breastfeeding to the students. These changes in Tina's life happened because Fr. Jones allowed the meetings of the CNML to occur at his parish.

Two mothers in the parish did not develop breast cancer because of their extended breastfeeding. Why? Research shows that if U.S. mothers who average 2.5 children would breastfeed just six more months, i.e., going from an average of only 3 months of nursing to nine months of nursing, the breastfeeding would prevent 25,000 women from getting breast cancer each year. If American mothers nursed for twelve months longer than usual, 50,000 of them would not get breast cancer each year. Thus a parish where breastfeeding is the norm would probably mean fewer breast cancer experiences among the parishioners.

Poverty is a problem in one area of Fr. Jones's parish. Two low-income mothers decided to breastfeed after picking up a brochure at the back of church. Fortunately, their WIC counselor supports breastfeeding. One of the main benefits of breastfeeding is that it costs nothing. John, a seminarian, heard Fr. Jones inform a gathering that the lives of 1.5 million babies worldwide would be saved annually if their mothers exclusively breastfed for six months. Later he became a missionary in a foreign country and did his best to encourage the new mothers to exclusively breastfeed their babies.

Anna found she was not the good mother she wanted to be with her first child. She slapped the baby occasionally and often lost her patience. Due to Fr. Jones's influence, she decided to breastfeed. She wanted a better relationship with her children. She was most thankful for the closeness she experienced with breastfeeding. Her baby thrived on this maternal intimacy, and she found her behavior of the past was eliminated. The breastfeeding helped her be a better mother in a very natural way. She had to be there for her baby, and she learned to give of herself on a continued basis for her baby. God's plan is good. Breastfeeding is not only the best start for baby, physically and emotionally, but it is also the best start for a mother.

Yes, the health benefits of breastfeeding are many and varied. Some are experienced by the mothers, others by the babies; some are experienced early in life, others later in life.

Priests need to learn more about breastfeeding. Certainly they want healthier moms and healthier babies, and many have learned about the importance of the mother during the early years in the formation of the child. It is true that breastfed babies get sick or develop cancer, and it is true that bottlefed babies can be very healthy. But statistically, it is also true that formula-fed babies will develop more infections and diseases than their breastfed peers. It is also true that breastfed mothers over the course of many years are healthier overall than those mothers who chose to bottlefeed.

The benefits are dose-related. That is why almost all medical and breastfeeding organizations encourage exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. You might ask yourself, "What difference does it make if a mother exclusively breastfeeds for four or five months instead of six months?" That question has been answered in the past and again most recently in an excellent study published in *Pediatrics*, February 2006. Babies exclusively breastfed for only four or five months had twice the risk of recurrent middle ear infection and four times the risk of pneumonia compared to those babies exclusively breastfed for six months. The extra one or two months do make a difference!

Because a longer duration of breastfeeding also enhances the benefits of breastfeeding, many medical organizations want mothers worldwide to nurse their babies for at least two years or beyond. This explains why our late John Paul II also encouraged mothers to nurse for at least two years. The exception is the American Academy of Pediatrics in their

promotion of breastfeeding for at least one year. In our bottlefeeding society, I believe that the one-year goal is more realistic. At least it's a start, and probably a more acceptable goal for young American couples.

Breastfeeding provides the answer to many problems in today's world. Many Catholics have a problem with abstinence-based systematic natural family planning, but little is said about breastfeeding. You cannot go a week without hearing about the problems of obesity, diabetes, breast cancer, or heart disease, and yet breastfeeding can reduce the risk of developing these diseases and others as well. Parents need to be properly informed so they can do what's best for their children within their abilities.

Sadly, many mothers today do not want to take care of their own children, especially babies. Many of these mothers, including those who do not have to work for economic survival, follow the trend to go back to work soon after childbirth. Breastfeeding may help mothers to reconsider their decision to go back to work or at least influence them to reduce the amount of separation by working fewer hours or fewer days.

The Catholic Church also needs more babies. As one priest recently told us, "We Catholics are committing suicide." You can't have breastfeeding mothers in your parish if the parents are choosing not to have babies. As priests, you can encourage couples to be generous in having babies. After such a talk, you will probably observe a few more babies in your parish nine to twelve months later. Most of these couples will be thankful you spoke up for life.

Most of the ideas in this article involve little or no cost. Remember one talk or a few words toward the promotion of breastfeeding can have far-reaching consequences that strengthen the overall health and perhaps even the spirituality of a parish. Perhaps this article will stimulate thoughts of other ways a parish priest can develop a culture of life within his parish.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> CNML website: [www.catholicbreastfeeding.org](http://www.catholicbreastfeeding.org)

<sup>2</sup> The Seven Standards of ecological breastfeeding are provided in Part III of the free online NFP manual at [www.nfpandmore.org](http://www.nfpandmore.org).