

Your Right to Know: Ecological Breastfeeding

NFP Awareness Week in 2013 runs from July 21 through July 27. This week I begin focusing on your God-given right to know certain facts about natural family planning. The order of my topics will follow a more or less chronological order according to which the process or sign was practiced or discovered.

Let's start with ecological breastfeeding because this is the sort of breastfeeding that was practiced for many thousands of years and was significantly responsible, according to some demographers, for keeping the world population quite stable for many centuries. This is the kind of baby care in which mother takes her baby with her wherever she goes and allows her baby to nurse whenever he or she wants. The result is frequent and unrestricted nursing.

The 19th century Malthusians drew attention to population issues, dropped the morality of the Rev. Thomas Malthus, and were soon promoting contraception. Among the social classes in which women breastfed their own babies, there was a general if confused knowledge that breastfeeding somehow delayed the next pregnancy. This led Dr. Leonard Remfry of British Columbia to study the effect of lactation on menstruation and pregnancy, and in 1895 he published that only six percent of the breastfeeding women in his study became pregnant before their first postpartum menstruation http://www.nfpandmore.org/remfrys_article_1895.pdf . Dr. Konald Prem of the University of Minnesota Medical School surveyed nursing mothers and found in 1971 that only five percent became pregnant before they had a first period. http://www.nfpandmore.org/Postpartum_ovulation_prem.pdf.

Research was more plentiful in the second half of the 20th century, and Sheila has summarized this at <http://www.nfpandmore.org/reviewbreastfeeding.shtml> . When she attended La Leche League meetings in 1963-1967, the League promoted the idea that "total breastfeeding" spaces babies, but among mothers who gave their babies nothing but their breastmilk there was still a wide variation in the length of breastfeeding amenorrhea (the absence of periods). The mothers would discuss this, and one of them, Nancy Hornback, really encouraged Sheila to research it.

That she did, and the combination of the research and the experiences of nursing mothers led her to formulate a hypothesis. She wrote her first book, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*, and included a survey. That survey showed that those mothers who followed what we now call the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding averaged 14.6 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea. See <http://www.nfpandmore.org/The%20Seven%20Standards%20Summary.pdf> .

Some years later she analyzed a much larger number of surveys and found almost exactly the same results, 14.5 months <http://www.nfpandmore.org/spacingbabies.shtml> .

Other researchers have found similar or almost identical results. The evidence is clear. The frequent suckling of ecological breastfeeding naturally postpones the return of

menstruation and fertility. On average, if the mothers become pregnant soon after their first period, their babies will be spaced about two years apart, and that's beautiful. Ecological breastfeeding is an excellent form of natural baby spacing.

Everyone has a God-given right to know this information. It is truly God's own way of spacing babies, and the frequent suckling both maximizes all the benefits of breastfeeding and maintains a mother's milk supply.

So why doesn't every Church-related NFP course teach ecological breastfeeding as a normal part of its instruction? I don't know.

Should the Catholic Church insist that all NFP programs related to diocesan or parish efforts promote and teach ecological breastfeeding? Well, why not? Isn't it part of God's natural revelation? And doesn't the Catholic Church have to teach both the natural and the divine law? And isn't it obliged to do what it can to help couples live out the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*? And what could be healthier?

My conclusion: Since ecological breastfeeding is God's own plan for spacing babies, you have a God-given right to learn it, and the Catholic Church has a God-given obligation to teach it to engaged and married couples. In fact, it should be taught by respectful teachers in seventh or eighth grade.

John F. Kippley, July 19, 2013