

John F. Kippley

WHAT EVERY PRIEST SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ECOLOGICAL BREASTFEEDING

“**W**hy should I, as a priest, be interested in breastfeeding?” That was the response we received from a well-known priest to whom my wife, Sheila, wanted to give her book *Breastfeeding and Catholic Motherhood* (2005). We were astonished by this reply, even dumbfounded. Neither one of us had a ready response.

The most basic answer, however, comes from the heart of Christian discipleship: “Because, Father, you are called to love mothers and babies. Once you learn about the health benefits of breastfeeding, you will want mothers and babies to enjoy all that God provides in this natural form of baby care. You also ought to know that frequent nursing is God’s own plan for spacing babies without periodic abstinence. Many women do not know these things, so you, Father, as a leader and teacher, can help them.”

All of this was completely foreign to me and Sheila when we married. Neither of us came from breastfeeding families. Our interest in breastfeeding started when Sheila was pregnant with our first baby, and her childbirth instructor strongly

urged her to breastfeed. She also encouraged her attendance at the breastfeeding support meetings of La Leche League (LLL). About the same time, we read an article about the natural spacing effects of breastfeeding, which LLL also taught.

At the local LLL meetings, the mothers noted that there was a significant difference in the duration of breastfeeding amenorrhea (the absence of periods due to breastfeeding) among those in attendance. One of the moms encouraged Sheila to research the reasons for this difference, and Sheila accepted the challenge. The result was her first book, *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing* (1969). It included a survey for breastfeeding mothers. As the completed surveys came in, we analyzed them and published the findings in the *Journal of the Nurses Association of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists* (Nov.-Dec. 1972). We repeated the survey with a larger sample almost two decades later and published our findings in the *International Review of Natural Family Planning* (Spring/Summer 1989). The results were almost identical and showed that mothers who followed the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding experienced, on average, 14.5 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea. Add nine months of pregnancy, and that yields about two years between babies without the need for abstinence from the marital act.

What are the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding? We had to give a special name to the pattern of frequent nursing to distinguish it from the style of breastfeeding that has little or zero ef-

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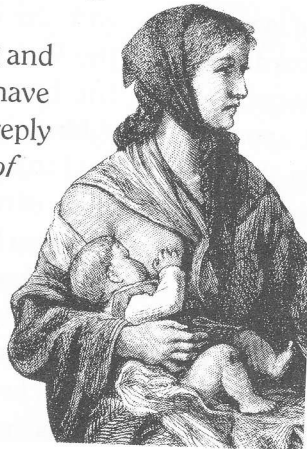
fect on the return of fertility. We call it *ecological breastfeeding*. The Seven Standards are maternal behaviors that encourage frequent suckling, behaviors that are associated with extended breastfeeding amenorrhea. They are:

1. breastfeeding exclusively for the first six months of your baby's life, without introducing other liquids or solids, not even water
2. pacifying or comforting your baby at your breasts
3. avoiding bottles and pacifiers
4. sleeping with your baby for night feedings (bedtime feedings assume safe-sleeping practices)
5. sleeping with your baby for a daily nap feeding
6. nursing frequently day and night and avoiding schedules
7. avoiding any practice that restricts nursing or separates you from your baby

There is really no question: Breastfeeding mothers who observe the Seven Standards delay the return of fertility by 14 to 15 months. That's an average. In our samples, about seven percent of mothers had a period by six months, and 33 percent were still in amenorrhea at 18 months. We did not include the surveys of three mothers who experienced slightly more than 40 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea because we thought they might skew the results.

Sheila had a great advantage over most of the previous researchers. They basically had only the duration of breastfeeding amenorrhea for their records. Sheila's advantage was that she was a breastfeeding mom in contact with other such moms. This sensitized her to the importance of maternal behaviors and how they might affect the delay of menstruation and fertility, and she structured her breastfeeding survey accordingly.

For decades we have been promoting and teaching ecological breastfeeding, and we have encountered some skepticism. Sheila's reply to the skeptics is *The Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding: The Frequency Factor* (2008). This book reviews independently published research on each of the maternal behaviors listed in the Seven Standards and demonstrates that each behavior is related to the frequency of suckling.



For decades we have also taught the many health benefits of breastfeeding in general, emphasizing that frequent suckling maximizes these benefits in two ways. First, frequency is vital for maintaining the mother's milk supply because steady demand ensures a steady supply. Second, frequency maximizes the protective aspect of breastfeeding.

The protective aspect is not immediately evident; thus, it is easy to think that the only important factor is the breastmilk itself. The reality is more complex but readily understandable. As Stephen Buescher, a research physician, explained in his talk "Human Milk Anti-Infective Properties," breastfeeding is a *system* of nutrition, information from baby to mother, and protection (International Lactation Consultants Association, 2006).

A baby is born with a weak immune system. The mother is the primary immune system for her baby. If and when a baby gets a "bug," it is transmitted to the mother via suckling. That's the "information" part of the system. The mother reacts, produces antibodies, and transmits them as she nourishes her baby at her breasts. If the mother gets a bug, she also transmits her subsequent antibodies to her breastfeeding baby. From the perspective of science, it's a great system. From the perspective of faith, it's a divinely designed mother/baby ecology. But it is more than a divine design to be admired from afar; it is part of God's plan for the welfare of mother and baby, as the following list of benefits makes clear.

Breastfeeding reduces the incidence of the following diseases for babies and children (note that some of these benefits are active years later):

- allergies
- asthma
- auto-immune thyroid disease
- bacterial meningitis
- botulism
- Crohn's disease
- diarrhea
- ear infections
- eczema
- gastroenteritis
- inflammatory bowel disease
- leukemia
- lymphoma
- multiple sclerosis
- necrotizing enterocolitis

- obesity
- respiratory tract infections
- sudden infant death syndrome
- type 1 and type 2 diabetes
- ulcerative colitis
- urinary tract infections

In addition to these specific conditions, breastfed babies also enjoy more general benefits, some of which occur years later. Compared with non-breastfed babies, breastfed children:

- stay in the hospital fewer days as premature infants
- have a more mature infant intestinal tract
- have a better immune system and a better response to vaccinations
- have fewer sick days
- score higher on visual acuity tests
- score higher on cognitive and IQ tests at school age

These benefits have been reported by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the United States Breastfeeding Committee. They are also dose-related, “with improved outcome being associated with longer breastfeeding,” according to the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Without going into great detail, I want to relate the experience some friends of ours had with Crohn’s disease. Their granddaughter had this nasty disease. It eats away at the intestine, and treatment involves surgery and a colostomy bag and then a slow and painful healing after surgery, after which another episode can occur. It is something you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemies — or their children.

Recently, I made a discovery: Breastfeeding can greatly reduce or eliminate this disease. Research published in 2017 states that Crohn’s disease is not found in breastfeeding cultures. Further, according to Gilles R.G. Monif, there is something present in 49 percent of the tested baby formulas that apparently triggers the start of Crohn’s disease in those who are genetically disposed to it (“The Prevention of Crohn’s Disease by Breastfeeding,” *Advanced Research in Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, Dec. 2017). So the first of the Seven Standards, “exclusive breastfeeding,” is extremely important. Mixing breastmilk with formula might actually diminish the protective effect of breastfeeding.

But what about mothers? Compared to mothers who do not breastfeed, the breastfeeding mother enjoys a decreased risk of:

- anemia
- breast cancer
- endometrial cancer
- lupus
- osteoporosis (yielding a reduced risk of a hip fracture)
- ovarian cancer
- rheumatoid arthritis
- thyroid cancer

Obviously, most of the mother’s benefits are experienced in later years.

Ecological breastfeeding — truly God’s own plan for baby care — provides not only widespread protection against these diseases but also the best nutrition. And not only is it free, it also saves a lot of money otherwise spent on formula and baby food.

Think about it this way: Imagine that a pharmaceutical company developed a vaccine that would protect — even partially, if not fully — against all the diseases listed above and without harmful side effects. Should the Church be indifferent to it? What if it were cheap compared to the cost of treatment for these diseases? Shouldn’t the Church promote it?

Pope St. John Paul II thought so.

In 1994 Fr. William Virtue completed his doctorate of sacred theology. He wrote his dissertation on the treatment of breastfeeding by the Church through the ages, concluding that “it has been the constant teaching of the Church that there is a serious obligation of maternal nursing.” He promptly sent his dissertation to the Pope. Within a year, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences co-sponsored, with the Royal Society of England, a conference in the Vatican on breastfeeding in which it endorsed the breastfeeding recommendations of UNICEF. Addressing the assembled experts, the Holy Father said that “the overwhelming body of research is in favor of natural feeding rather than its substitutes.... Women have a right to be informed truthfully about the advantages of this practice” (May 12, 1995). John Paul II encouraged mothers to breastfeed exclusively for four to six months and then to continue breastfeeding with appropriate supplemental foods “up to the second year of life or beyond.” He

added, "In practical terms, what we are saying is that *mothers need time, information, and support*" (emphasis in original).

More than 50 years earlier, Pope Pius XII also encouraged mothers to breastfeed. In his "Allocution to Mothers" (Oct. 26, 1941), the Holy Father wrote, "It is more desirable that the mother should feed her child at her own breast. Who shall say what mysterious influences are exerted upon the growth of that little creature by the mother upon whom it depends entirely for its development?"

The title of this article is: "What Every Priest Should Know about Ecological Breastfeeding." I hope that three facts are clear:

1. Breastfeeding in general has great health benefits. It is truly a divine plan for the health and welfare of babies and their mothers. However, the benefits are largely dose-related, and Western cultural practices can greatly diminish those benefits.

2. The frequent nursing of ecological breastfeeding maximizes babies' health and maintains mothers' milk supply.

3. Ecological breastfeeding significantly postpones the return of fertility, thus naturally spacing babies — and this too is part of the divine plan for families.

To every bishop, priest, deacon, and family-

life director who reads this, here is my plea: Please educate your parishioners and future parents about ecological breastfeeding. As a first step, visit the website of Natural Family Planning International (www.nfpandmore.org). We offer numerous resources, including a Home Study Course for natural family planning. This economical course encourages couples to be generous in having children, provides Catholic teaching on sexual morality, and teaches all the common signs of fertility. We are, unfortunately, the *only* NFP organization in the U.S. right now that promotes ecological breastfeeding as part of God's plan.

You can also support local breastfeeding mothers by sponsoring a chapter of the Catholic Nursing Mothers League (www.catholicbreastfeeding.blogspot.com). The CNML standards ensure that group leaders have at least a year of personal breastfeeding experience.

If you're still not convinced, you don't have to take our word for it. Take counsel instead from Pope St. John Paul II, who said, in an address to the International Conference on Population and Development, "Attention should be given to the positive benefits of breastfeeding for nourishment and disease prevention in infants as well as for maternal bonding and birth spacing" (March 18, 1994). ■

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