

Sheila Kippley

# Breastfeeding and Catholic Motherhood

God's Plan for You and Your Baby

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*Dedicated to Pope John Paul II  
for his efforts to promote breastfeeding  
and the welfare of the family*





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## *Foreword*

This book is the fruit of John and Sheila Kippley's many years together as husband and wife, and of their ceaseless efforts as active promoters of natural methods of birth regulation and the time-proven benefits of breastfeeding.

It is a well-known scientific fact that breastfeeding, and especially ecological breastfeeding, has brought substantiated positive results in babies' health in defending against certain childhood illnesses and in helping infants grow and develop better. In addition, it brings long-term psychological benefits to the growing child. As for the mother, prolonged breastfeeding is also associated with positive effects on her general health.

In the overall picture, it is especially the nurturing of the close mother-infant bond that is so fundamental for the child's serene general growth and development. This aspect is of utmost importance today. At a time when the family is under attack, and the act of procreation is being constantly manipulated, this book affirms the continuity of the mother-child relationship from the womb, to the breast, and in the family. In this regard, the Holy Father himself did not hesitate to raise his voice in defense of this most honorable task entrusted to mothers:

In the family, which a woman establishes with her husband, she enjoys the unique role and privilege of motherhood. In

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a special way, it belongs to her to nurture the new life of the child from the moment of conception. The mother in particular enwraps the newborn child in love and security, and creates the environment for its growth and development. Society should not allow woman's maternal role to be demeaned or count it as of little value in comparison with other possibilities. Greater consideration should be given to the social role of mothers, and support should be given to programs that aim at decreasing maternal mortality, providing prenatal and perinatal care, meeting the nutritional needs of pregnant women and nursing mothers, and helping mothers themselves to provide preventive health care for their infants. In this regard 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.<sup>1</sup>

Reconnecting with John Paul II's "theology of the body," Sheila Kippley also proposes a few thoughts and meditations for breastfeeding mothers who wish to find spiritual nourishment and encouragement from the Church in their most important task. This maternal attitude helps in expressing tenderness and in creating a more normal relationship that also contributes to the integral development of children in the dialogue of love that began even before birth.<sup>2</sup>

*+Alfonso Cardinal López Trujillo  
President, Pontifical Council for the Family  
Vatican City, December 2004*



## *Introduction*

The purpose of this book is to provide Catholics with scientific and spiritual support for breastfeeding. Of course, the many benefits of breastfeeding apply to all mothers, whether believers or atheists. But this book is addressed especially to Catholics. I will be quoting popes, bishops, priests, and others representing the Catholic Church to convey the Church's long-standing support for breastfeeding. And I hope to show how breastfeeding is an integral part of the vocation of Christian motherhood.

Today we have more clinical research than ever to support breastfeeding, much more than I had when I began my family in the Sixties. The spiritual approach to breastfeeding is less well known, but it is also important, and dedicated Catholics especially may find it interesting and compelling.

I am well aware that bottle-feeding is still the norm in America. Many people might ask, "If breastfeeding is so good, then why didn't my mother breastfeed me?" My mother breastfed me for only a few days. I don't blame her for not having breastfed me longer, nor should you blame your mother for not having breastfed you. Remember that the cultural influences in our society against breastfeeding, especially extended breastfeeding, have been very strong. Secondly, in our bottle-feeding society, the correct information and support for breastfeeding was often lacking and still is.<sup>3</sup>

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This is not a book on how to breastfeed. Fortunately, there are many books, organizations, and professionals to help women succeed at breastfeeding. Nor is this a book on parenting. The principles of breastfeeding are compatible with many parenting styles, and good parenting books, including specifically Catholic parenting books, are easily available. Also, I have already covered some parenting advice and the topic of natural mothering in my book *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing*.<sup>4</sup>

No, the main purpose of this book is to show the spiritual dimensions of breastfeeding; how breastfeeding is a natural, healthy part of being a Christian woman, mother, and wife.

Today many teachers of Church doctrine regarding sexuality make use of the “theology of the body” and the idea of the marriage covenant. These concepts can be applied to breastfeeding as well. The theology of the body was developed by Pope John Paul II to affirm and explain the self-giving nature of marriage and marital sexuality. Breastfeeding is an act in which the mother’s body becomes a gift of self to her baby. In addition, the mother makes a “covenant” with, or unspoken commitment to, her baby through the devoted task of breastfeeding him over a period of time. In the traditional mother-baby breastfeeding relationship, mother and baby are inseparable.

Another theme that runs throughout this book is the importance of the mother’s remaining with her child during the early years of life. This mother-baby togetherness is the common practice in societies where traditional breastfeeding is practiced. This special togetherness occurs naturally with breastfeeding, as God meant it.

There are two points concerning the text. First, you may find some additional information in the endnotes to be of interest. Commentary related to the text was added to the endnotes in

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each section or chapter. Second, masculine pronouns are used to differentiate the baby from the mother. With the topic of breastfeeding, mother and baby are mentioned often; using *he*, *him*, or *his* for the baby and *she* or *her* for the mother helps to avoid confusion.

If the information in this book encourages more mothers to nurse their babies, or to nurse for a longer period, the effort to write and publish it will have been worthwhile.





*Breastfeeding and  
Catholic Motherhood*



Chapter One



*The Health Standard  
for Mother and Baby*

God the Creator has a plan for all men, women, and children, and this plan applies to every area of our lives. When we learn and follow that plan, we are happier.

For example, if we discover and follow the rules for good nutrition, we will enjoy better health than if we don't. If we follow God's moral law, we will have happier relationships and peace in our hearts. God's plan extends to the conception and nurturing of babies as well. Through God's design, the mother's pregnant body nourishes and protects her baby during the first nine months of life. After childbirth the mother's body continues to nourish and protect her baby for many more months through breastfeeding. The repeated act of breastfeeding provides food for the baby — human milk, which is more nutritious than any other milk or food that a newborn might consume. Breast milk is not only the best nourishment for the baby, but the act of breastfeeding also provides the best nurturing environment for him. When a mother nourishes her baby at her breasts, she provides a safe and protective environment and the gift of her own personal presence, so important during the early years.

Breastfeeding is a natural process; the mother uses her own God-given natural equipment: her breasts to nourish and comfort her baby; her arms, her back, and her front or chest to carry him; and

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her lap and her arms to hold him. Remaining physically close to her baby, the mother follows his cues with regard to his hunger, his tiredness, his alertness, his playfulness, and his need to be comforted. She also avoids the regular use of bottles and pacifiers.

Mothers may choose variations from this type of mothering, of course. Whatever specific parenting choices you make, the goal for successful breastfeeding is to nurse frequently enough to maintain an adequate milk supply for the baby. Parents must realize that supply follows demand and that when they reduce the opportunities for suckling, the milk supply may be reduced.



### *Breastfeeding follows the biological laws*

The natural processes of the body are often referred to as “biological laws.” The Church has spoken frequently of the biological laws and encourages us to respect and follow them.

In 1960, Pope John Paul II (then Bishop Karol Wojtyła) wrote in his book *Love and Responsibility* that man’s actions “must be in harmony with the law of nature.”<sup>5</sup> In this book, the Pope wrote:

In the world of human beings the dictates of the natural order are realized in a different way — they must be understood and rationally accepted. *And this understanding and rational acceptance of the order of nature is at the same time recognition of the right of the Creator.* Elementary justice on the part of man toward God is founded on it. Man is just toward God the Creator when he recognizes the order of nature and conforms to it in his actions.<sup>6</sup>

In his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life), Pope Paul VI frequently stressed the importance of following the biological laws, and their connection to the natural moral law.<sup>7</sup> We

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are told to “consider biological processes first,” that “the teachings based on the natural law must be obeyed,” and to “observe the laws inscribed on [our] nature by the Most High God” (n. 10, 11, 31).

Pope John Paul II reminded us three times in *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) to follow the biological laws.<sup>8</sup>

- “There is a plan for life which must be respected” (n. 22).
- “We are subject . . . to biological laws” (n. 42).
- We are told to “respect the biological laws inscribed in our person” (n. 97).

Breastfeeding is one significant way for us to subject ourselves to God’s biological laws, to carry out God’s plan for our lives.

God’s breastfeeding plan is simple. Yet this simple plan can have far-reaching effects upon the human race, offering numerous benefits for the baby, for the mother, and for society. God’s plan is indeed good, and it is therefore good for us to try to follow it.



### *An icon of Jesus Christ*

*Evangelium Vitae* is a long document, but it’s fairly easy to read. In this encyclical, Pope John Paul II teaches that each human life is sacred from conception to death and that we should serve life, especially where we encounter it at its weakest. Life is at its weakest at both ends of the spectrum — the unborn and infants at one end and the elderly and infirm at the other. “Human life finds itself most vulnerable when it enters the world and when it leaves the realm of time to embark upon eternity” (n. 44). Why should we be more concerned about babies and the elderly? *Evangelium Vitae* teaches that every human being is “an icon of Jesus Christ,” “a sign of the living God,” or “the image of God’s glory” (n. 84). If

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our babies are icons of Jesus Christ, then wouldn't we, as parents, want to give our babies the best possible care?

One of the best choices new parents can make is for the mother to breastfeed her baby.<sup>9</sup> God's breastfeeding plan provides numerous benefits for mother and baby, and, amazingly, many of these benefits for both mother and baby continue for years afterward.



### *Three key truths about breastfeeding*

Research strongly suggests three key conclusions about mothering and childcare during the early months and years of life.

- *Babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life.* This applies to the medically advanced countries of North America and Europe as well as to less-developed countries. *Exclusive breastfeeding* means the baby receives only mother's milk.

- *Babies should be nursed for at least one year.* The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), representing the pediatricians in the United States, based this recommendation for American mothers on a thorough review of the research up to 1997. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recommend that all babies worldwide be breastfed for at least two years. (As we will see, some benefits of breastfeeding continue to accrue in the second year of life.) While I prefer the latter recommendation, I always offer the AAP recommendation when asked, "How long should a baby be nursed?" To have many more American mothers nursing their babies for at least one year would be a great improvement over the current situation.

- *A mother's consistent and loving care for her baby during the first three years of life is most important to her child's healthy emotional*

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*development.* God in his wisdom has ensured the best care for each child through prolonged lactation. Through prolonged lactation, the child can receive exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, can be nursed for at least one year or possibly more, and can be ensured the presence of his mother during most of those important early years.

This chapter will be devoted to the *physical* and *health* benefits of breastfeeding, for both mother and child. The next chapter will discuss the *emotional* benefits of breastfeeding, especially as they pertain to the child during the early years.



### *The health benefits of breastfeeding for the baby*

Simply put, breast-fed babies are healthier than babies who are not breast-fed. Breast-fed babies have fewer illnesses than babies who are not breast-fed. If a breast-fed baby gets sick, his illness is usually not as severe as the same illness in a baby who is not breast-fed. This is common knowledge among well-informed doctors, researchers, and parents.

Breast milk is “liquid gold” for any baby’s health.<sup>10</sup> Formula will never come close to the composition of human milk. There are “thirty regulated components in formula milk and over two hundred components identified in human milk.”<sup>11</sup>

Breast milk is a living food. It changes hour by hour, day by day, month by month. The mother’s body is constantly fine-tuning her milk to meet her baby’s health needs. This is most evident during illness, when the breast begins to manufacture specific antibodies to fight the infection the baby has or to prevent the infection from spreading from mother to baby. Formula, of course, remains constant and does not adapt to the baby’s needs as human milk does.

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Today, professional organizations that are concerned for children promote the benefits of breastfeeding for the baby. While these benefits are sometimes described in the daily press, the research generally appears in specialty breastfeeding journals or other health publications. Thus, most people, even if they have a vague idea that breastfeeding is best, are quite unaware of its specific benefits. In addition, many who agree that breast milk is best also have the impression, skillfully developed by the baby-food marketers, that formula is just as good.

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP),<sup>12</sup> the AAP,<sup>13</sup> and the United States Breastfeeding Committee<sup>14</sup> name many specific health benefits for breast-fed children. (There are other sources from public-health doctors, nurses, obstetricians, and gynecologists, but they usually repeat the benefits listed by these organizations.) They have found that breastfeeding tends to reduce incidences of diarrhea, allergies, ear infections, respiratory-tract infections, urinary-tract infections, diabetes, asthma, eczema, bacterial meningitis, lymphomas, childhood leukemia, inflammatory bowel disease, multiple sclerosis, sudden infant death syndrome, botulism, necrotizing enterocolitis, gastroenteritis, Hodgkin's disease, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, autoimmune thyroid disease, and many other health problems large and small — including obesity in childhood and adolescence. Breast-fed babies even go on to have fewer cavities and less orthodontic work.

The health benefits of breastfeeding translate into practical lifestyle benefits, too. The same authorities also find that breast-fed children, compared with those who are not breast-fed, tend to:

- Score higher on cognitive and IQ tests in school;
- Score higher on visual acuity tests;
- Stay in the hospital fewer days as premature infants;

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- Have a more mature infant intestinal tract;
- Have a stronger immune system;
- Show a better response to vaccinations.

According to the AAFP, “The strongest evidence indicates that these positive effects of breastfeeding are most significant with six months of exclusive breastfeeding” and that “the effects are dose-related, with improved outcomes being associated with more, longer breastfeeding.”<sup>15</sup>

Is formula just as good? No.

Every year in the United States, parents, insurance companies, governments, and hospitals spend up to \$7 billion on conditions and diseases that might have been prevented or lessened in severity if the mother had breastfed.<sup>16</sup> It's estimated that universal breastfeeding in the United States would reduce health costs by approximately \$1.2 billion, simply due to the reduction of insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus alone.<sup>17</sup> For another example, exclusively breast-fed infants have been found six to ten times less likely than formula-fed infants to develop necrotizing enterocolitis, which can cost in excess of \$200,000 per case to treat.<sup>18</sup> Most important, some 1.5 million babies worldwide would not die each year if all mothers breastfed exclusively for six months.<sup>19</sup> Given such data, it is fitting to consider breastfeeding as an integral part of a pro-life mind set.



### *More health research to support breastfeeding*

Cases of acute lymphocytic leukemia, Hodgkin's lymphoma, and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma were studied from 1983 to 1997, and the results were published in 2001. Those babies who were breastfed for less than six months had almost three times more

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lymphoid malignancies compared with those babies breastfed for more than six months, 279 as compared with 100 cases. The researchers concluded, “The protective effect of longer breastfeeding against childhood leukemia and lymphomas is now more firmly established.”<sup>20</sup>

A British study published in September 2002 found that total cholesterol and lipoprotein cholesterol were high in breast-fed infants, but that these levels were lower than average when those infants reached adulthood. The conclusion was that breastfeeding provided long-term benefits for cardiovascular health.<sup>21</sup>

Studies published in 2003 indicate that breast milk is a possible protection against Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder<sup>22</sup> and that a high frequency of breastfeeding might reduce the risk of rheumatoid arthritis for the baby as an adult.<sup>23</sup>

The intelligence- and learning-related benefits of breastfeeding have also been well documented. Premature babies who had received only human milk at the hospital after birth later showed an 8.3 percent advantage in IQ over premature babies who had received other milk at the hospital.<sup>24</sup> Children who were breastfed for eight months or longer did better academically all the way through twelfth grade compared with children who were not breastfed.<sup>25</sup> A study of more than three thousand adults found that there is “a robust association between the duration of breastfeeding and adult intelligence.”<sup>26</sup> That adults can enjoy this benefit of breastfeeding twenty to thirty years later is astounding. For parents who want their children to get As or Bs in school, choosing to breastfeed could give them an important head start.

Breastfeeding can also help prevent obesity, a health problem that has worsened recently in our nation and that contributes to an increase in the incidence of other diseases. You can’t go a week without reading or hearing about this concern from the media or

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from teachers. Yet a 2004 study involving more than 246,000 low-income children born in seven states confirmed the fact that “breastfeeding is protective against pediatric overweight.” Some of the conclusions of this research should interest every parent: “The rate of overweight at four years of age was highest among children who were never breastfed or who were breastfed for less than one month; furthermore, overweight decreased with increased breastfeeding duration. The rate of underweight was highest among children *who were never breastfed. Thus, children who were breastfed are less likely to be either overweight or underweight*” (italics mine). The researchers concluded as a result of their study that breastfeeding should be recommended for at least a year.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, breast-fed babies become ill, too. But statistically, babies are generally healthier and brighter when breastfed. And the advantages are more evident with a longer duration of breastfeeding.

In the beginning of the book of Daniel, Daniel and his three companions refused to eat the rich foods and wines of the king. Daniel made arrangements with the head steward that the four young men would eat only vegetables and drink only water for ten days as a test period. At the end of the ten days, Daniel and the three young men “were better in appearance and fatter than all the youths who ate the king’s rich food” (Dan. 1:15). This same kind of story is being played out today. Catholic mothers choosing to breastfeed will have healthier babies than those babies raised by secular standards of bottles and babysitters.



### *Health benefits for the mother*

Mothers, too, enjoy health benefits from breastfeeding. Mothers who breastfeed their children reduce their risk of developing osteoporosis later in life, because the mother’s bone growth is

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stimulated as soon as weaning occurs.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps for similar reasons, mothers who have breastfed will have a reduction in hip fractures after menopause.<sup>29</sup>

Further, women who have breastfed show a reduction in ovarian-cancer rates.<sup>30</sup> The medical community sometimes promotes the idea that women should use artificial hormone medication to have only four periods a year — linking reduced ovulation to reduced chances of acquiring ovarian cancer. But women who breastfeed frequently enough to inhibit their menstrual cycles, and thus do not ovulate for an extended period, also reduce their risk of acquiring ovarian cancer. In the latter case, the reduction of this disease is done naturally through breastfeeding, without any medication.

Women who have breastfed their babies for an extended period have a greatly reduced risk of getting breast cancer. The researchers of a 2002 study involving more than 147,000 women concluded:

- ♦ “The relative risk of breast cancer decreased by 4.3 percent for every twelve months of breastfeeding in addition to a decrease of 7 percent for each birth.”
- ♦ Women in the United States could reduce their breast cancer rate by 42 percent “solely by the longer duration of breastfeeding.”
- ♦ “If women in developed countries had 2.5 children, on average, but breastfed each child for six months longer than they currently do, about 25,000 breast cancers would be prevented each year, and if each child were breastfed for an additional twelve months, about 50,000 breast cancers might be prevented annually.”<sup>31</sup>

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These researchers also said that a major contributor to the high incidence of breast cancer in our country is the fact that mothers do not breastfeed or breastfeed for only a short period. Mothers who have breastfed have a lower rate of lupus and thyroid cancer,<sup>32</sup> as well as of anemia and endometrial cancer.<sup>33</sup> Thus, prolonged lactation clearly offers special health benefits to the mother.

At the annual meeting of the American College of Rheumatology in New Orleans on October 29, 2002, Dr. Elizabeth W. Karlson of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston reported that women who breastfed for a total of two years or more were fifty percent less likely to develop rheumatoid arthritis than those women who breastfed for three months or less. Those who breastfed for one to two years also had a lower risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis, but the risk was the lowest among those women who breastfed for two years or more. The longer the breastfeeding, according to Dr. Karlson, the better the protection against this disease.

Thus, research shows that women who breastfeed are at a lower risk for hip fractures, ovarian cancer, breast cancer, lupus, thyroid cancer, anemia, endometrial cancer, and rheumatoid arthritis. And most of these benefits show up many years after breastfeeding.



### *Breastfeeding, the health standard*

Today there is more and more research supporting the benefits of extended breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is a health issue for both mother and baby. Breastfeeding and bottle-feeding should no longer be considered equal options, such as whether to eat peas or corn with dinner. Similar to the decision not to smoke or the decision to use seat belts when driving, the decision to breastfeed is simply more healthful than the decision to use formula.

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The best decision is to provide your baby directly with breast milk. The next best option is to store expressed milk for when you cannot be there to feed your baby. Working mothers often use this method. The third option is to use breast milk donated by other nursing mothers and stored at a milk bank. This milk is often used by very sick or allergic babies and sometimes by very sick adults. Using formula or artificial milk is only the fourth-best option, although it is the most common nourishment given to babies in our country. Formula is convenient; we should be grateful for the availability of formula in situations when a mother truly cannot breastfeed. But the exception shouldn't replace the norm.



*Breastfeeding is the very best of care*

If you want to give your baby the best possible chance for good health and development, then breastfeed your baby. You will enhance your own health, too. Breastfeeding is a commitment of time and sacrifice on the part of both parents. As you have seen, the Author of Nature generously rewards those mothers who make that commitment.

In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, we are told seven times that “the family is the sanctuary of life.”<sup>34</sup> The family begins with the birth of a baby, and soon the baby is at the breast of the mother.<sup>35</sup> The first pro-life activity new parents can do after the birth of their baby is to love and hold their baby and to breastfeed. Each baby's sanctuary should begin lovingly in the arms and at the breasts of his mother and also in the arms of his father. Remember, each and every baby is “an icon of Jesus Christ.”