

BREAST-FEEDING: AN IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR ALL CATHOLIC WOMEN



Julie Larose

Member of St. Mark Parish Council, Prescott, Ontario

The League has supported many health and human rights issues over the decades. One issue that touches women is breast-feeding. There are many reasons that Catholic women in Canada should promote breast-feeding education and support.

God gave women the amazing gift to feed and nurture infants from their own bodies, during pregnancy and afterward. Breast-feeding is the way that human infants are meant to be fed. Unfortunately, within the last century in the Western world, a trend began to feed infants with bottles and artificial milks. At the time, doctors believed it was more scientific and mothers believed that they were doing what was best.

We now know, however, that bottle-feeding increases the risk of many health complications. For example, infants who are bottle-fed have a higher risk of developing allergies and respiratory, gastrointestinal and ear infections. There are also long term health risks, including obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes. Women who do not breast-feed have higher risks of anemia, osteoporosis and breast, cervical and endometrial cancers. Besides the personal costs of all these illnesses, they add a large burden to the health care system.

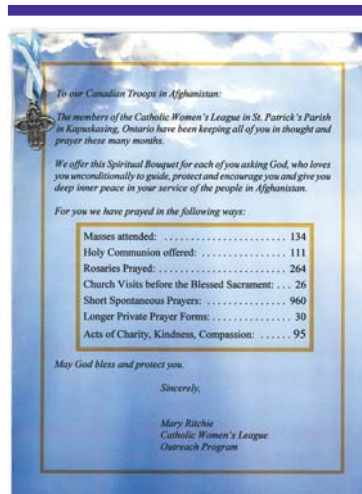
Mothers and health professionals in the Western world are now recognizing the overwhelming benefits of breast-feeding and breast-feeding rates are slowly on the rise. However, it can be a struggle when bottle-feeding is so firmly entrenched in today's culture, formula companies inundate mothers with misleading advertising and free samples, and society has highly sexualized views of the female body. Pressure exerted by relatives or acquaintances who did not breast-feed can also undermine a mother's confidence that her body was designed to nurture her infant.

In developing countries, breast-feeding becomes an even more pressing issue. Contaminated water supplies, poverty and lack of medical care mean that infant feeding choices are even more important. Breast-feeding protects children in developing countries from many of the mortality risks of childhood. In emergency situations, such as wars or natural disasters where large numbers of people are displaced or cut off from food supplies, it can be life-saving for infants and young children. Unfortunately, developing countries

are following the trends of the Western world from several decades ago and bottle-feeding is on the rise. Many Western aid organizations also find it easier to supply infant formulas than to supply mothers with food and educate them about breast-feeding.

Breast-feeding has other benefits that affect all Canadians. It is pollution-free and does not use precious natural resources the way that manufacturing and preparing formulas and bottles do. Mothers who must continue to work or go to school can still provide breast milk to their infants, and since their milk protects infants from many illnesses, they often have less absenteeism than mothers whose infants are bottle-fed.

Finally, breast-feeding can be an important part of Catholic family life. Used exclusively, it suppresses a woman's fertility and can be incorporated in to natural family planning. While most women will delay menstruation for at least six months while breast-feeding, some report delayed menstruation for over two years. As well, mothers save money on formula and bottle-feeding supplies, save time with formula preparation, and reduce stress with less infant illness and increased bonding. Breast-feeding may take a little extra effort in the early days or weeks as mother and infant learn to nurse together, but the benefits will last for years. Nearly all women can breast-feed, and any who encounter challenges should be encouraged to seek support from experts rather than quit right away. †



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This is a copy of a spiritual bouquet that St. Patrick Parish Council members offered to Canadian troops in Afghanistan. The expediter was local Member of Parliament Brent St. Denis.