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Life-Giving Bodies: Towards an Analogical Relationship Between Breastfeeding and the Eucharist

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Abstract:

As embodied people who benefit spiritually from the concrete aspects of the sacraments for the understanding of spiritual realities, breastfeeding provides a concrete experience that reflects the bodily self-gift of Christ's Passion. The analogy of desiring the Eucharist as an infant desiring to latch provides an opportunity to consider the transformative power of the Eucharist to unite one to Christ, nourish one's spiritual growth, and strengthen the bond of the Body of Christ.

Keywords: Eucharist, breastfeeding, Aquinas, sacrifice

I. Introduction

The gift of Christ's body on the cross, recapitulated in the Eucharist, invites one to reflect upon the ways in which a corporeal self-gift can become both physical and spiritual nourishment for the benefit of another. Explaining the sacrament of the Eucharist, Aquinas writes, "[T]he spiritual life is analogous to the corporeal ... so there needed to be the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is spiritual food."¹ Aquinas argues, "[T]he effect of this sacrament is considered from the way in which this sacrament is given; for it is given by way of food and drink. And therefore this sacrament does for the spiritual life all that material food does for the bodily life, namely, by sustaining, giving increase, restoring, and giving delight."² Reflecting upon the gift of Christ's body in the form of food offers an opportunity to see its holistic impact on embodied life.

¹ *Summa Theological*, III.73.1. All quotations are from Aquinas, *The "Summa Theologica" of Thomas Aquinas, Part III*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Providence, (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1914).

² *Summa Theological*, III.79.1.

Analogous to the gift of Christ's body in the Eucharist is the physical and emotional gift that a breastfeeding mother gives for the life of her child. Breastmilk has long been regarded as significant for more than physical nourishment. In the Roman Empire, breastmilk was understood to have an exceptional impact on an infant that went far beyond physical nourishment. Medical theories asserted that breastmilk contained "moral, intellectual, and even ethnic qualities."³ John David Penniman explains, "the plastic soul of an infant, like the doughy composition of its newborn limbs, could be molded into perfect form through proper nourishment and nurture."⁴ This essay will explore what an analogy between breastfeeding and the Eucharist may reveal of Christ's self-gift.

The Eucharist contains not only the body of Christ, but, according to Aquinas, also the soul of Christ.⁵ A breastfeeding mother, likewise, confers to her infant not only the gift of her body but also that of her soul. I will argue, first, that the self-gift of breastfeeding is a gift of body and soul because it is physically and emotionally taxing on a mother. Beyond the physical benefits breastfeeding provides her infant, it also emotionally supports her infant, imaging the holistic nourishment of the Eucharist. Next, I will caution against idolizing the breastfeeding mother as an ideal of female embodiment. Finally, I propose that a breastfed infant's desire to receive the complete self-gift of the mother is analogous to a Catholic's disposition to the gift of the Eucharist.

Feminists are often cautious or avoidant of engaging in theological reflection on the maternal functions of the female body in the interest of distancing "women's identity from

³ John David Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 43, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300222760.001.0001>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵ *Summa Theologica*, III.76.1.

biological determinism.”⁶ Biological determinism need not be the inevitable conclusion of reflection on the maternal functions of a woman’s body. This perspective erroneously assumes a monolithic category of women and the female body, and it restricts authentic reflection on female embodiment. Feminists seem caught between what are often regarded as mutually exclusive approaches – that of constructionism (claiming all that describes male-female difference is created by social constructions and biases) or essentialism (claiming there is no way to understand human beings apart from sexual difference).⁷ Without choosing constructionism or essentialism, I argue that theological reflection on the maternal functions of the female body can and should exist without being reductionist or imposing biological essentialism.

II. The Life-Giving Body of a Mother

As embodied people who benefit spiritually from the concrete aspects of the sacraments for the understanding of spiritual realities, I argue here that breastfeeding provides a concrete experience that reflects the bodily self-gift of Christ’s Passion. Ancient Christian thought reflects a connection between breastfeeding and the spiritual life. Tertullian believed that infants benefitted physically, intellectually, and spiritually through breastfeeding; thus, a Christian woman breastfeeding an infant would impart the Christian faith through both nourishment and nurturing. Penniman observes, “The two processes of nourishment and nurture are, in fact, collapsed within this one phrase: *lacte Christiano educatus*.”⁸ This tradition demonstrates that well before there were medical discoveries of the mental and physical health benefits of

⁶ Myra J. Hird, “The Corporeal Generosity of Maternity,” *Body & Society* 13, no. 1 (2007): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X07074760>.

⁷ Nancy Dallavalle similarly challenges this dichotomy and argues for a third option in her article “Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology,” *Horizons* 25, no. 1 (1998): 23-42.

⁸ Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, 9. Penniman quotes “*lacte Christiano educatus*” (raised on Christian milk) from Tertullian, *To Scapula* IV.5 (CCSL II.2:1130–31).

breastfeeding, ancient cultures valued breastfeeding for more than just the food it provided to infants.

A breastfeeding mother gives her infant life through her milk. A mother's body, from her own physical resources, produces milk for her infant that hydrates, provides calories in fats and proteins, and provides immunological support for the infant's development. The self-gift of breastfeeding is not easy or convenient. For different women, it can require persistence, pain, emotional distress, sleepless nights, isolation, or all that and more. "Mainstream breastfeeding promotion depicts an easy physiological process, and this discourse undermines the energy and sacrifices required."⁹ Breastfeeding mothers often experience fatigue and an increase in appetite because her energy resources are going to her infant as her body prioritizes sustaining her infant's life. In choosing to breastfeed, a mother chooses to give her physical body over to her infant.

More than physical resources for her infant's physical needs, though, a breastfeeding mother gives of her emotional resources for the benefit of her infant's emotional development. Breastfeeding establishes an intimate bond between mother and child. An infant will desire more than nutrition from breastfeeding. This can be seen in what is called "comfort sucking," which provides the infant with a sense of security, emotional attachment, and even pain relief.¹⁰ The emotional benefits of breastfeeding reflect a sort of spiritual care for the infant. And, the emotional connection goes both ways. Many women who express breastmilk while away from their infant report that they need to intentionally focus their mind on their baby to 'let down'

⁹ Elaine Burns et al., "Corporeal generosity: Breastfeeding bodies and female-dominated workplaces," *Gender, Work & Organization* 29, no. 3 (2022): 796. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12821>.

¹⁰ "Comfort Nursing: Definition, Concerns, and Benefits," Healthline. Last medically reviewed on August 13, 2020. <https://www.healthline.com/health/breastfeeding/comfort-nursing>.

milk,¹¹ suggesting a strong connection between the physical and emotional aspects of breastfeeding for the mother. Thus, breastfeeding is not only a corporeal self-gift but also, in the emotional intimacy, it is an encounter between two souls.

Christ's act of self-sacrifice on the cross was more than a handing over of his physical body. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus experiences deep emotional pain and distress (cf. Mt 26:37) that offers a glimpse of the courage required in his self-gift. In the Eucharist, the gift of Christ's body offers both physical and spiritual benefits. Breastfeeding, analogously, is both a physical and spiritual self-gift from a mother to her infant. This relationship of both physical and spiritual nourishment given by a breastfeeding mother offers insight into Jesus' words: "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood remains in Me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, the one who eats Me, he also will live because of Me" (Jn 6:55-7). A breastfeeding mother's self-gift of her body likewise sustains and nurtures the whole person.

III. "Mom Shame" is not Life-Giving

For all that is beautiful, life-giving, and spiritual about breastfeeding, some advocates of breastfeeding have also weaponized this choice against women. I want to carefully make the distinction that, in comparing breastfeeding to the Eucharist, this is not intended to elevate breastfeeding mothers over other women. The argument, as will become clear below, is that being witness to the relationship between breastfeeding mothers and infants in any way can invite one to reflect upon approaching the Eucharist with the desire of an infant for nourishment and intimacy.

¹¹ Burns et al., "Corporeal generosity," 796.

To say that, in a small way, breastfeeding mothers may themselves uniquely encounter an understanding of what it is to give a gift of one's body for the physical and spiritual benefit of another is not at all to say that women who do not breastfeed harm their infants nor do they fall short of imaging God in their bodies. Breastfeeding is just one physical expression of giving a spiritual and corporeal gift of self. It is also not to say that women who are not biological mothers turn away from an encounter with God. Biological and non-biological mothers give of themselves physically and emotionally in many ways for the physical and spiritual nurturing of their children.¹² This clarification is crucial not only because condemning women for their choices regarding motherhood has a long history but it is also because it is highly prevalent today.¹³

One must acknowledge the reality that social and medical pressures relating to breastfeeding in the United States can at times be harmful to mothers and infants. In the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Fiona Woollard writes: "There is significant sociological evidence connecting decisions to use formula and feelings of shame, guilt and failure."¹⁴ The ethics of framing mothers' infant feeding choices in a benefit-harm dichotomy deserves further reflection.¹⁵ Meghan Henning prudently observes this unfortunate reality, arguing that the present social condemnation of women who do not breastfeed their infants is not unlike ancient ideas of eternal punishment in Hell of women who did not fulfill their socially-mandated nurturing role by

¹² The physical and emotional gift of self of motherhood and all the choices mothers make for the benefit of their child(ren) could possibly be called "spiritual" breastfeeding analogous to spiritual Communion. However, I would caution against adding this dimension to the analogy. It risks reducing the self-gift of motherhood to the act of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding is simply not as central to the mother-child relationship as the Eucharist is to Christ's relationship with the faithful. Thus, expanding the analogy in this way runs the risk of idolizing breastfeeding as if it could image the Eucharist almost perfectly.

¹³ A full discussion of this goes beyond the scope of this essay, but it is an incredibly important and relevant discussion. For more on this see Meghan Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2020.

¹⁴ Fiona Woollard, "Should we talk about the 'benefits' of breastfeeding? The significance of the default in representations of infant feeding," 757.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* for more on ethical considerations.

breastfeeding their infants.¹⁶ Suggesting that a breastfeeding woman may glimpse an intimate understanding of the sacrifice and gift of Christ's body is not to idolize breastfeeding. Rather, it presents an opportunity to imaginatively place oneself in the perspective of the infant, approaching the Eucharist with similar longing, excitement, and need.¹⁷

IV. Dependence on the Life-Giving Body of Christ

An infant is innately aware of his or her dependent relationship to the breastfeeding mother. Anyone who has witnessed this relationship will know that, at times, just the sound of her voice will lead an infant to cry out for her. When mother and infant have spent any time apart, her return often sparks a reaction of not only excitement but also intense need to be with her and latch for comfort more than hunger. The question at hand is whether an infant's disposition to the breastfeeding mother reflects a way for a Catholic to approach the Eucharist.

How one receives the Eucharist has implications on the effect of sacrament. Aquinas distinguishes between sacramental eating and spiritual eating, each of which lead to different ends:

[I]t sometimes happens that a [human being] is hindered from receiving the effect of this sacrament; and such receiving of this sacrament is an imperfect one. Therefore, as the perfect is divided against the imperfect, so sacramental eating, whereby the sacrament only is received without its effect, is divided against spiritual eating, by which one receives the effect of this sacrament, whereby a [human being] is spiritually united with Christ through faith and charity.¹⁸

¹⁶ Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury*, 151.

¹⁷ The absence of reference to the nursing Madonna in this essay is intentional for two reasons. First, in a very practical way, it over-complicates this analogy. Here, I am arguing that a Catholic relate to the Eucharist as an infant relates to the breastfeeding mother. The self-gift of the Eucharist is imaged in the self-gift of breastfeeding. There are beautiful reflections on Mary breastfeeding Jesus as one who gave a gift of herself so that Jesus could grow up to give humanity the self-gift of himself, but this is a separate topic. Here, it is the mother who images Jesus. The second reason relates to "mom shame" in that Mary's perfect motherhood is a human yet entirely unattainable ideal for Catholic women. A careful reflection on the ways in which Catholic women relate to Mary deserves further attention.

¹⁸ *Summa Theologica*, III.80.1.

For Aquinas, the possibility of receiving the Eucharist spiritually as well as sacramentally is primarily a question of one's state of sin. It seems more appropriate here to reflect rather on the state of faith than of sin in order to discern the difference between receiving the sacrament as one who believes in its effect on the spiritual life or as one who deeply recognizes dependence on its such effect.

The analogy of breastfeeding falls short when compared to 1 Corinthians: "I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to consume it" (3:2). Penniman observes, "Paul employs breast-feeding to establish social unity and to diagnose levels of maturity – of growth in the *pneuma* – among his correspondents."¹⁹ What follows in Paul's thought is that the more spiritually mature Christians would no longer breastfeed, but consume solid food.

However, Paul's analogy does not diminish the value of breastmilk in Greco-Roman culture. On the contrary, Penniman argues, breastmilk was an image of shared kinship which "links individuals together as a people, a bound social group."²⁰ Perhaps the breastmilk analogy for the Eucharist invites one to receive it as a type of nourishment that binds together the Body of Christ.

The analogy of desiring the Eucharist as an infant desiring to latch provides an opportunity to consider the transformative power of the Eucharist to unite one to Christ, nourish one's spiritual growth, and strengthen the bond of the Body of Christ. Might the breastfeeding infant reveal the child-like disposition Jesus imagined when he said, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all" (Mk 10:15)? As any theological analogy, it does not fully elucidate divine truth. However, what the analogical

¹⁹ Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

relationship between breastfeeding and the Eucharist can bring is a framework within which one can imagine the physical and spiritual benefits of Christ's body in the Eucharist.