

Ethics Made Simple

The image of a mother giving milk to her infant is a prototype for all ethical human relationships.

by Dr. Donald DeMarco



If we can answer one simple question correctly and carry out its logical implications, we can gain an understanding of ethics that is an outline for good behavior, joy, and fulfillment for all human beings. The question is this: To whom does the mother's milk belong?

The natural evidence indicates conclusively that the mother's milk belongs to the baby she is breastfeeding. From the standpoint of its ingredients, the milk is ideally suited to the child's biological needs. It provides proper nourishment and strengthens the child's immune system, protecting him from

infection and disease. The milk is of no special benefit to the mother. Psychologically, breast feeding fosters a loving bond with the mother and helps give the child both a sense of self as well as a sense of belonging. Nature has made it abundantly clear that mother's milk is intended for the child and to be provided by the mother.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, combining insight with a touch of humor, once stated that "A pair of substantial mammary glands has the advantage over the two hemispheres of the most learned professor's brain in the art of compounding a nutritive fluid for

infants." Nature does naturally and spontaneously what science cannot do deliberately and painstakingly. Can we say that breast milk is better than any udder milk?

The demonstrable fact that the milk belongs to the baby establishes the fact that a human being is not an isolated entity riveted to its own selfish needs. The mother is for the child, just as Adam, from whose side Eve was taken, is for his wife, and Christ on the Cross, from whose side gushed blood and water, is for all other human beings.



In other words, human beings are persons, which is to say, that they have their own unique individualities, but also live and love in relation to other persons. Man is far more than a mere individual. The network that results, ultimately, from a series of interpersonal relationships, is a good society of ethical people.

We can say, therefore, that the image of the mother giving milk to her infant serves as a prototype for all ethical human relationships. Ethics honors the nursing mother by recognizing that she sets in motion a series of interpersonal relationships. The father is needed to provide for his children something other than food. As theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar contends, mother and father must provide both a “hearth and a horizon.” Hence, the fundamental role of marriage and the family comes into view. The family, then, becomes the fundamental unit of society. In this way, the milk of human kindness permeates society and nourishes all its inhabitants.

When St. Augustine said of the Nursing Madonna that “She gave milk to our bread,” he was referring to the Eucharist and how it provides both corporeal as well as spiritual benefits for all human beings. The nursing mother, then, is a prototype for all ethical relationships insofar as she represents the fullness of personality, offering to others both bodily and spiritual nourishment.

It has been said that breastfeeding is a gift that lasts a lifetime. The truth of this statement lies in the fact that breastfeeding offers a powerful and long-lasting experience, as well as icon, of what it means to be a person. And being a person, in the ethical sense, is to live in relation to others in a spirit of giving and receiving.

Ethics, as Pope John Paul II liked to say, is actually nothing more than “anthropological realism.” What he means by this, simply, is that we behave ethically when we are acting as real human beings. We may learn a great deal at our mother’s knee, but that learning

process had its origin at our mother’s breast.

The mother’s breast is the one material reality that simulates the spiritual reality of love. Just as love grows by giving it away, mother’s milk replenishes itself to the degree that it, too, is given away. All other material things are depleted when given away. It is the glory of love and generosity that, as Christ said, will increase our lot a hundredfold.

Ethics need not be a difficult subject to grasp. All we need do is understand that a mother’s milk belongs not to her or to anyone other than her baby. Ethics, then, far from leading people into the morass of relativism or scepticism, is really baby simple.

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PRECIOUS WORDS

by Maria Ellis

Have you ever heard a child say something concerning God or other spiritual matters that was very profound or just plain cute? Here are a few treasures uttered from the mouths of our little ones.

Down in Front!

Our parish priest once related a funny incident. When he was washing the sacred vessels after Holy Communion, a boy in the front said loudly, “Mom, they washed the dishes. Can we go now?”

Holy Hoops

One time our family attended a Baptism in a church that doubled as a parish school gymnasium. When we

entered, my 5-year-old announced, “Wow! A basketball church!”

Primary Mover

One day my children were asking where Jesus is. I told them that He is in Heaven and also lives inside us. My 2-year-old, Gabrielle, lifted up her shirt and moved her belly in and out. Then she said, “Jesus is moving!”

“...the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Mark 10:14

To have your child’s “Precious Words” printed in this article, please email preciouswords@catholic.org for consideration.