

Should Women Breast-Feed in Church?

Jesus was breast-fed.

It's a point often made by mothers who want to breast-feed in church, but know others would prefer that they retreat to the nursery, or find an out-of-the-way bench. Another point they make: Breast-feeding is part of God's plan—so of all places, why not in church?

"Breasts were made to feed a baby," said Misti Ryan, a devout Christian lactation consultant in Texas whose business has a cross in its logo.

A mother can breast-feed modestly and should be allowed to nurse in church if she wants to, said Ryan, who has nursed five children in her Baptist congregation. "The church needs to go there."

Pope Francis did go there last month, in his much-noted comment to a journalist about a young mother and infant who had come to a recent general audience:

"She was shy and didn't want to breast-feed in public, while the pope was passing," Francis recalled. "I wish to say the same to humanity: Give people something to eat! That woman had milk to give to her child; we have enough food in the world to feed everyone."

Breast-feeding advocates delighted in the pope's acceptance of breast-feeding as a natural act appropriate in a sacred place. If it's fine during a papal audience, then why not at the mall, the supermarket—or even in church?

Still, many Americans—at least according to a series of informal conversations and online forums—feel queasy about

breast-feeding in the pews.

And though American mothers are increasingly choosing to breast-feed and 77 percent of babies are nursed for at least some part of their infancy, the site of a woman breast-feeding in church can still raise eyebrows and draw disapproval.

But it's generally a quiet disapproval: No one wants to be seen as the one who denied food to a baby, or denied its mother the opportunity to hear the Word of God.

Take for example, Mary Fischer, a popular online blogger on parenting issues known as "The Mommyologist." Fischer blogged in September about the "5 Places Moms Need to Breastfeed Discreetly," with "church" as No. 5.

"It's wonderful when moms want to bring the kids to church and nurture their faith early on," she wrote. "But a cover-up is a necessity with a baby in tow. Do I really have to elaborate here?"

The post inspired hundreds of comments, many of them taking Fischer to task, and a mocking parody on a feminist parenting website. As one commenter replied to Fischer: "You must have some psychological damage to be so freaked out about other women feeding their babies the way nature/God intended."

Fischer, the commenter concluded, "pretty obviously did not breastfeed or she wouldn't have drawn such ridiculous conclusions." Actually, Fischer did breastfeed her son, who is now 7. But not in church.

"There are certain places where it really does make people uncomfortable," she said. "The last thing I want to do is be listening to a sermon and look over and see boobs. If you need to do it, fine. Just make sure you have a cover-up."

At the Catholic church she attends in Connecticut, Fischer said she has never seen another mother breastfeeding, but if

she did, she wouldn't say anything to the mother. "I would never ask anybody to cover up," she said, adding that she might go home and grouse a bit to a friend.

Elizabeth Dalman, a new mother who lives near Anaheim, California, says the reaction to her breastfeeding in her Baptist church has always been polite, but she can tell at times that fellow congregants feel uncomfortable.

Dalman's son, now 10 months, hates to nurse under those apronlike cover-ups that hide a nursing mothers' breasts—but also babies' heads. After she nursed in her church's lobby recently, a woman informed her that the church provides such cover-ups.

Many churches, including ones in heavily Mormon Utah, where nursing rates are 9 percentage points higher than the national average, are welcoming to nursing mothers.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has no policy on breastfeeding, but encourages the practice in its guidelines for natural family planning education, according to Theresa Notare, assistant director of the USCCB's Natural Family Planning Program.

And an Internet search for meetings of La Leche League International, the most well-known breastfeeding advocacy group in the U.S., finds that many are held in churches.

But even a church that hosts La Leche may not feel comfortable for a breastfeeding woman on Sunday.

Barbara Emanuel, executive director of La Leche, says experiences vary from church to church, but it's a shame that breastfeeding is an issue anywhere, given that "it's what women's bodies are made for," and that for millennia, "it wasn't discussed."

"I don't think mothers have a right to infringe on other

peoples' right to participate in a service, or the right to hear the sermon," Emanuel said.

"But basic baby noises shouldn't be so disruptive that it would be a problem." {eo}

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