A confession to you, my nursing daughter

What am I to make of your singular desire for milk?

by Natalie Carnes in the April 22, 2020 issue

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Christ, like you, came into the world by a womb. The God who made heaven and earth came as one of the least of these, harbored in the body of the woman who became God's mother. There is no room which can contain God, but God entered the uterus, the smallest room anyone ever inhabits. Mary's hospitable yes drew the uncontainable God into the world, and her swollen belly became the first glimpse of Christ, the human-God.

Like the Christ-babe, like all babies, you eventually left the womb. No longer swimming in my body, you have become a land creature, like me and separate from me. When you were in my womb, my body bore the burden of care without waiting for or requiring my consent. Only in rather minimal ways did I willingly participate: avoiding scotch, eating well, submitting to medical care. My body provided all your material needs.

In birth, my body is relieved of some of its burdens, and I learn new ways of nurturing your life. It is a shift for you, no doubt. It is also a huge shift for me. Margaret Mead once wrote, “The mother who must learn that the infant who was but an hour ago a part of her own body is now a different individual, with its own hungers and its own needs, and that if she listens to her own body to interpret the child, the child will die, is schooled in an irreplaceable school.” I am being schooled in the irreplaceable school of your separateness. My hunger is no longer your hunger. I learn to tend to you—to know your cries, your expressions, your squirms. Through our separateness, I learn attunement to you.

As I attune to your needs, I discover that you are initially a slow nurser. The first few days, even weeks, you are sleepy, not yet awake to your own desires. In the womb, everything you needed arrived before you could want it, and you seem in the period after birth to expect that pattern to continue. You have not learned, or felt compelled, to reach for what you need. I feel my swollenness and try to coax you to take some milk. You eventually agree and leisurely take in some nourishment.

But soon your desires seem boundless. Certainly they are not bounded by hunger. You nurse for many reasons—because you are scared or tired or because you want to be close to me. You nurse for reassurance and pleasure and comfort. One day you nurse every hour.

Did God in infancy nurse only when hungry and thirsty? Or did God nurse also when sleepy, fearful, or wanting Mary? How did God as a baby feel when Mary held the six-months-older child of her kinswoman Elizabeth? Did young Jesus tolerate Mary’s affections toward John the Baptist, or did he protest when asked to share her? What if Mary were watching Elizabeth’s son, and he cried for milk? Would she have nursed baby John? Would Jesus have happily shared his milk with his cousin? Or would he, as Augustine describes his infant self, have grown pale watching another take his mother’s milk?

What is a mother to make of her baby’s singular desire for milk? Augustine observed the desire uneasily in his son, projecting backward into his own life as an infant and outward to all humanity. “Who reminds me of the sins of my infancy?” he asks. “Was it wrong that in tears I greedily opened my mouth wide to suck the breasts?”

This is not a difficult question for Augustine—it seems obvious to him that the greed was wrong. Today, Augustine’s judgment seems strange. We lightly excuse, or even

sentimentalize, a child’s insistent desire for milk and disinclination to share it. It is a phase to us, and it will pass. But to Augustine, the phase passes into a more sinister kind of greed, for it is evidence of humanity’s conception in iniquity.

Is your single-minded nursing a sign of your iniquity? After your first sleepy days, your desire for milk grows to a voracious appetite. A few months after you are born, my day is busy. I am revising an article coming due, preparing for the next day’s class, and grading a stack of papers. But the babysitter keeps knocking on the door, apologetically bringing you to me. Is it possible you are hungry again? Nursing, I look down at you. You smile mischievously, somehow remaining latched on the breast as you do. Keeping my gaze with your big, impish eyes, you give a happy grunt. What kind of greed could this be?

Sarah Hrdy tells me it’s about your survival. An evolutionary biologist, Hrdy casts the story of mothers nursing babies in a much larger arc, dating to the beginnings of maternal lactation. Babies at that time began to be born especially vulnerable. The mother who was not attuned to her infant’s condition would lose the baby to starvation, dehydration, or exposure, and so natural selection favored babies and mothers sensitive to each other’s signals and bodies. Lactation requires a high level of attunement to the baby’s appearances, smells, and sounds.

Lactation also helps to create this attunement. The first mission of a mammal baby, Hrdy writes, is “stimulating and conditioning its mother making sure that she becomes addicted to nursing” and so also more attuned to the baby’s signals. Now, after millennia of lactation, mammal mothers are highly attuned to their babies. Hrdy thinks of a mother dog who keeps returning to her litter, “nosing each pup, alert to distress, sensing their needs, suckling babies, keeping them warm.” She likens the mother dog to a human mother who returns to her baby every 15 minutes to make sure he is breathing.

I think of your father as I read about the mother dog. He was constantly anxious about your breath those first few nights. I slept exhausted between nursing sessions, oblivious to his worry. Or maybe—perhaps this is what Hrdy might rejoin—I slept soundly because I trusted he was anxiously checking on you. For though he cannot lactate in the way a woman can, your father, too, is part of an animal group that has survived by the attunements of lactation. And we are all of us from a particular species that has survived by cooperative breeding and investment in one another’s well-being.

Hrdy points out that human mothers need help because of the long time it takes for you children to grow and the many needs you have during your path to maturity. Lactation is what makes us the committed mothers that, as mammals, we are, and it gives rise to conditions in which we become the kind of species that has allomothers—“other mothers”—like fathers, grandparents, babysitters, and older siblings.

In our own species, the attunements born of lactation are part of what protects babies from abandonment. Nursing apparently stimulates hormonal and neurological responses in the mother that, along with other sensory cues, generates a strong attachment. Once mother and child have suckled, the mother has bonded to the infant, her desire for it surpassing all other considerations.

So I think about you and your occasionally constant nursing and how this practice solidifies the infant-mother bond that ensures your survival—as if you are desiring me to desire you. It is such a complex desire, your desire to nurse. Can one narrate it as sin without slipping into nonsense?

Even Augustine has softer moments when he recounts his infancy. At the end of his meditations on sin in babyhood, Augustine claims that he feels no responsibility for the actions of his infancy. Is that a recognition that his “greedy nursing” is something other than human sin—or that it is, at the very least, a sin incomparable with adult sin? Sections earlier, he even has a positive account of nursing. What he calls “the consolations of human milk” welcome Augustine into life. The consolation was most directly from his mother or nurses but ultimately from God, who filled their breasts and seeded the natural order with gifts. “For the good which came to me from them was a good for them; yet it was not from them but through them.”

The milk was God’s gift to baby Augustine, God’s gift to you, God’s gift to baby God, to welcome the infant into the world. Augustine learned this later in life when God called out to him through other gifts. The gifts of creation taught him what gifts were and how to receive them as such.

I find these Augustinian insights helpful for thinking about you and your desire. Your desire for milk is excessive—and in that excessiveness, the desire points beyond itself. It suggests a desire that has not yet found its end. Mingled with hunger, thirst, and the need for human comfort is a desire that will not be satisfied by food, drink, or intimacy. It is the desire for more, for something beyond the world you know. I

believe it is your desire for the divine.

Your life's singular desire for milk will one day proliferate into a number of different desires: physical, social, sexual, religious. But now they are one desire angled in my milky direction. And why wouldn't your proto-religious desire be directed toward me? I am the only divinity you know. So I take your voracious appetite for milk not as a sign of sinfulness but as an image of potential love for the divine. I take you, in your moments of milk-drunk bliss, white dribbles rolling down cheeks and chin, catching in the folds of your neck, to be an image of beatific happiness.

I look at your small body with your large desires and wonder what kind of baby God was. Did God also babble and kick with excitement? Did God reach out with chubby arms toward mother Mary? Did God smile while sleeping? What was God's first word? And what, I wonder again, about God sharing Mary's milk? Was God loathe to share mother's milk in the same way all other babies and toddlers are?

The infant's reluctance to share the nursing mother heralds the toddler's protest of her mother holding other babies. As both baby and toddler, you have yet to learn hospitality. Your desire for milk and mother has been laced with anxiety. You act as if other babies are threats, a habit that for many people persists well beyond infancy.

I believe your aggravation about sharing speaks both to an anxiety about scarcity in the material world and also to the inadequacy of that world to meet the intensity of your desire. You are drawn by material stimuli but not fully satisfied by them. Once your world opens more fully to the divine, you will find objects worthy of your strong desire. And learning to share—to choose friendship over immediate gratification—will be important to entering into that larger world where your desires can be met. So I want you to learn to live into the generosity of your body. I want you to learn to give and receive the love of others beyond your mother-god, to open the gates of your small kingdom to welcome those who seem strange competitors for the earthly goods around you.

For a few months, everything goes well. I provide the milk you take; you take the milk you need, just as Augustine described it. I am an image of divine bounty to you, and my body signifies the unending gifts of God. It is good.

Then one day, as I feel myself overwhelmed by the stress of academic work and child-raising and household management, my body stops making enough. The

babysitter brings you to me hungry, and after a minute of suckling, you begin to suckle desperately, then cry in frustration. I try different postures and techniques for generating more milk for you. Eventually you become quiet, if not content. I give you back to the babysitter. An hour later, you are hungry again, back at my breast, and we repeat the same discomfiting ritual.

When I take you to the doctor two days later, she tells me your weight has dropped. We develop a plan to increase my milk supply, and she gives the plan a percent chance of success. Formula is our plan for failure. I hear the word *formula* as if she has recommended poison. Anxiety fills me.

I become feverish in my attempts to revive my milk supply. For seven days I nurse and then pump every hour, waking up twice more at night to do the same, while still trying to keep up at work. I eat oatmeal and lactation cookies and give up exercise. I spin myself into worry and exhaustion, and everyone around me—your father, my students, our friends—feels it.

The day I give you formula, I cry. You take the formula happily. I remain unconsoled. Eventually, the milk supply builds back up. It is never as plentiful as before, but it is enough as you begin to eat solid foods. We continue nursing, though it’s not easy, and I often feel guilty and annoyed. Why do I not release myself from my nursing anxiety to love you by other means? I have become confused about my significance—as if my milk were love itself, the abundant life you drink down in liquid form.

How many days did I deny you satiation out of my desire to reclaim my role as the abundant milk-giver? What kind of love was this that kept you hungry? I am disturbed by the violence of my love. The slip from loving to harming is easier and subtler that I had imagined.

Sara Ruddick tells a story about a mother who loves her baby who will not sleep. The mother is left largely on her own with her baby, who cries through long days and short nights, until the mother is nearly crazed with sleep deprivation. One night as she wakes, stupefied, to more screams and tears from her infant, she stumbles into the child’s room and tries to comfort her baby. Holding the baby in her arms, she imagines herself throwing it through the window, the glass shattering around her. The vision is so real that for a moment she believes she has done it. Horrified, terrified, she takes the baby out and rides public transportation all night, keeping

herself and her baby in view of others. As the guilt-ridden mother recounts this story to a group of mothers, one of them says to her that she did all she could to keep her baby safe and that what she did was enough. She and the baby survived the night.

I try to practice this same compassionate response to my own story. I tell myself that I did what was needed. I took you to the doctor; I did not leave your nutrition up to my own judgments; I gave you formula when you needed it. I kept you safe. Even so, today I long to feed that hungry, crying infant. Of course, I can't reach into the past and undo my frantic decisions. I am not God who holds all of time in my being. Now I can only pray that the Creator of time and babies and milk will be present to that suffering babe that you once were—and to her suffering mother, too.

I pray that the mother I once was will know that however much my milk-giving expresses life and love, life and love are still distinct from my milk. It is not my milk that holds you in being, gives you life, or saves you. I have confused the image with the imaged—milk with love, myself with life-giver.

It can be a fine line between loving the image as a way of loving the imaged and loving the image *instead* of the imaged. It is easy to peel the two apart, separating image from imaged, creation from Creator, and so to seek in the first what can only be satisfied in the second. Confusing the two, I plunged us both into misery. For you are not my creation but God's gift to me, and as a gift, you are a source of sweet delight.

You are a gift of the Creator, a sign of divine love, an image of grace. Your father and I have spoken, and it is time for you to have another mother—Mother Church—and through her, to draw nearer to Mother God. We call our family and our church to set a date for your baptism.