

# The Pope and the Culture of Life

by HALEY STEWART on JANUARY 29, 2014

**On the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Pope Francis baptized 32 babies in the Sistine Chapel.** He encouraged the new mothers to breastfeed their babies right then and there if the infants were hungry. This isn't the first time Pope Francis has promoted public breastfeeding. [He recently invited a mother who was waiting to meet him, to please nurse her hungry baby.](#)

[The Holy Father told those gathered at the baptism](#), "Today the choir sings, but the most beautiful choir is [the choir] of children...Some are crying, because they are uncomfortable, or because they are hungry. If they are hungry, mothers, give them something to eat..."

The sound of a crying baby might not be objectively beautiful. However, in our modern culture of death, it should fall on our ears differently, as more precious and dear than ever before. Pope Francis' words reminded me of British author P.D. James' dystopian novel, *Children of Men*, in which mass infertility has prevented procreation and the youngest members of the human race are adults inhabiting a bleak and dying world. Against all odds, one woman becomes pregnant and the idea of a new life is a shocking and miraculous prospect. In the film adaptation, there is a scene in which the newborn child begins to cry and the characters on-screen look as if the whole world has stopped—it is a sound that defiantly screams "Life!" in a world of death and darkness.

Our world is not as troubled as James' fictional future, but tragically, modern society views children as inconveniences to be avoided rather than gifts of life and hope from God. We are fed lies that make contraception the norm and abortion a common "solution" to a pregnancy. In our culture of death, the cry of a baby takes on new meaning. The crying is the sound of the parents' faithfulness to avoid contraception and the courage of a mother who carries her child to term. It is the sound of a woman who has rejected the cacophony of lies and has bravely whispered, "fiat!" instead. Could there be a more beautiful sound?

In light of this, we must consider what it really means to be pro-life. Is it merely a bumper sticker or a vote on a ballot? We must examine how our culture's idolization of efficiency, convenience, and peace and quiet have warped us into seeking out "child-free" restaurants, airplane flights, and lives. If we truly reject the culture of death and seek to honor life, our actions will speak louder than our words. We must be reminded that a crying baby and the sight of a mother breastfeeding her child are the blessed fruits of the culture of life—and yes, that includes when that baby and mother are sitting beside you in Mass. It is wildly inconsistent to fight for

the right of the unborn child and then give that child's mother the stink eye when he has been born and she nurses him in the pew next to you.

We cannot allow the lies of a contraceptive culture to seep into our churches and sour us against the whispering toddler and the fussy baby who are also there to receive grace. We must see children as more than inconveniences or distractions. We must give thanks for the noise of life in a world of death.

I recently discovered the sad truth that the presence of children in Mass is still a heated debate when [I wrote about the great blessing our parish family is to us](#) and how they support young families. I was shocked and alarmed with not only the claims that children should be left at home so that the grown-ups could worship in peace, but more disturbingly, the anger some of the commenters expressed over the presence of infants and children at *their* Mass. One commenter even expressed outrage about a young mother nursing her child near his pew, an act he found repulsive and perverse.

But it seems that the Holy Father doesn't see it that way. In fact, not only does he *tolerate* public breastfeeding, he openly *encourages* it (yes! even in church). Why? Because meeting the needs of infants demonstrates that they are important and precious, not only to their immediate family, but their larger family, the Church. By refusing to elevate convenience over life by such a tiny act as supporting public breastfeeding, you can promote the culture of life in a selfish world that sees children as inconveniences to be avoided, or worse, problems that can be solved by abortion.

Indeed we're so immersed in this poisoned mindset that *it makes the news* when the Pope says the sound of babies crying is more beautiful than the music of the choir singing and urges mother to feed their babies if they are hungry. The Holy Father's words are a startling reminder that those squawks and cries are precious sounds to Our Lord and should be the same to all of us. They remind us that we should rejoice that our churches are filled with life and encourage parents to care for those children, not show young families the door because they're bugging us.

Whether we realize it or not, our attitude at Mass can serve or hinder a culture of life. If we hear a fussy baby in Mass and groan and fume because she's bothering us, we must re-evaluate our priorities. If we are infuriated because a new mother nurses during the Consecration, we should remember that we are ourselves helpless infants preparing to receive the grace of Our Lord. If you seek to further the culture of life, I urge you to consider how you can love and encourage young families at your parish and beyond. A revolutionary stand for life in the culture of death might begin with something so simple as a pat on the shoulder and a "we're so glad you're here today."

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Haley Stewart lives in the deep south with her bearded husband, three kids, and seven backyard chickens. She went to a Baptist college and surprised herself by coming home Catholic. When she gets a moment to herself, she loves to read Austen, Waugh, and O'Connor with a strong cup of coffee in hand. Haley muses about cultivating a Catholic family through literature, liturgical living, and urban homesteading at her blog [Carrots for Michaelmas](#) and just released her first ebook: [Feast! Real Food, Reflections, and Simple Living for the Christian Year](#).

