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# University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



## Theology of Breast Milk

05.19.2014 | Catholic, Research, Faculty

A University of Dayton professor has received \$40,000 from the Louisville Institute to write a book on Christianity and breast milk.

Assistant professor of religious studies Neomi DeAnda said her book, *A Theology of Breast Milk: A Latina Perspective*, will draw upon publications, art, personal narratives and popular devotions to examine the topic of breastfeeding in the Bible and throughout church history.

"It's a way to talk about something that is so 'everyday,' but we mystify it and try to cover it up," DeAnda said. "My hope is that it will lead to good discussions about women breastfeeding today and what it means practically and spiritually."

In January, Pope Francis made headlines during a baptismal ceremony in the Sistine Chapel when he encouraged mothers to feed their children if they were hungry "without thinking twice."

He was dubbed by many as an unlikely advocate for public breastfeeding, but his expression should not come as a surprise, DeAnda said.

She said devotions to Mary, the mother of Christ, as a nursing mother have existed since almost the inception of Christianity. In Latin, she is called *Maria Lactans*; in Spanish, *María de la Leche*.

In her research, DeAnda found most of the images of *Maria Lactans* throughout Europe were either destroyed or covered up during the Middle Ages.

"They became relegated following the Council of Trent in the 16th century, which looked at the whole of religious art and eliminated artistic motifs that were too worldly or influenced by the Renaissance period," said the Rev. Johann Roten, S.M., director of research at the University of Dayton's Marian Library, which holds the world's largest collection of materials on Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But Spain was not a part of this purge, and images of *María de la Leche* persisted, carrying over to the New World. DeAnda's book focuses primarily on this Latin American image of nursing Mary, and in particular the work of Sor María Anna Águeda de San Ignacio, an 18th century nun living in Mexico who wrote extensively about *María de la Leche*.

The book's five chapters will focus on:

- Images of nursing in the Bible, particularly in *Song of Songs*
- Images of *María de la Leche* and how they were used in medieval perspectives
- Sor María Anna's writings about *María de la Leche*
- Images of *María de la Leche* in Latin America
- Interviews with Latinas in the U.S. and their perspectives on breastfeeding and how they view it theologically

"The book will be the first of its kind to develop a constructive theology of breast milk; to engage writings from Sor María Anna, a Mexican female author previously unknown in theological discourse in the U.S.; and to include narratives from contemporary women around conceptualizations of breast milk, breastfeeding and divinity," DeAnda said.

She plans to have the book published by 2016.

The Louisville Institute's First Book Grant for Minority Scholars enables junior, tenure-track religion scholars of color to complete a major study that contributes to the vitality of Christianity in North America. Grants of up to \$40,000 support year-long research projects that will lead to the publication of a first (or second) book.

Louisville Institute is funded by the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment and based at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary (Louisville, Kentucky). The Institute's fundamental mission is to enrich the religious life of North American Christians and to encourage the revitalization of their institutions by bringing together those who lead religious institutions with those who study

them so the work of each might inform and strengthen the other.

For more information on María de la Leche, visit the Marian Library at the related link.

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