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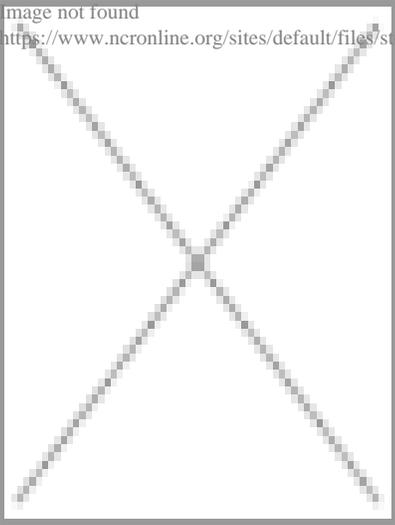
Of breasts, moms and magazine covers

by Heidi Schlumpf

NCR Today

I suppose pretty much everything that needs to be said about this month's controversial *Time* magazine cover (featuring a young mom breastfeeding her almost-4-year-old while he's standing on a stool next to her) has been said, written, blogged, posted and tweeted. Sadly, much of the conversation -- even on Catholic blogs and sites -- has been less than charitable. I will try to be more so in my comments about the cover for a story on attachment parenting.

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First, the disclaimers: I did not breastfeed my children. Some adoptive

mothers do, but I did not choose to. That said, my husband and I did follow a number of so-called "attachment parenting" practices (co-sleeping, "wearing" children in carriers, etc.), in part because experts highly recommend them for adopted children, many of whom do not develop strong attachments in their early months. Some of our decisions put us in the "extreme" camp.

I'm sure there are those who judge how we parent our children, though most people are too polite to say so. (Not so with anonymous online commenters!) Still, I have been spared the wrath that the mom on the *Time* cover, Jamie Lynne Grumet, has received this past week. The difference: My attachment parenting doesn't involve my breasts.

Curiously, people were not that upset about co-sleeping or baby-wearing. It was the breast. Although our culture sees breasts primarily as sexual, it is clear God made them to feed our children. We are mammals, after all. And despite this culture's squeamishness with breastfeeding after children acquire teeth, the World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding "for up to 2 years or more."

Commentaries and comments on a number of Catholic blogs were decidedly negative, if not sanctimonious. One commenter said Grumet "believes God gave her breasts to 'flash' ... which means she willingly chose to use her child in a photograph she knew would be titillating." Others said the mother was too young and sexy, or that the way they both looked at the camera was "mocking."

More than a few religious commentators recognized that pose (at least the looking at the camera part) from religious iconography. In an article about the shooting of the cover, photographer Martin Schoeller admits he used religious images of the Madonna and Child as a reference.

Two others observations about the Breastfeeding Cover Brouhaha, one about the practice of photojournalism; the other about mothering.

Even many supporters of extended breastfeeding deemed the cover photo offensive because it did not illustrate typical toddler breastfeeding (ie, cuddling with the child in the privacy of one's home, etc.). Uh, yeah. For a story that asks whether some mothers are taking the advice of Dr. William Sears (the attachment parenting guru, the focus of the *Time* article and a Catholic, btw) too far, a photo of someone who is "atypical" would be appropriate. As the photographer explains, "I liked the idea of having the kids standing up to underline the point that this was an uncommon situation."

And the cover photo was not meant to be an "environmental portrait," in the lingo of photojournalists -- that is, one in which the subject is in his/her "natural" environment -- but rather a "concept shot" that communicates a message, rather than merely depicts reality. *Time's* story and photo were successful -- they got people talking about the magazine and about the content of the story. And if they sold a few magazines, as some commenters suggested was the publication's somehow nefarious motive, is that so wrong?

Finally, the provocative title that accompanied the photo, "Are you mom enough?", certainly did provoke readers into getting defensive -- and going on the offensive. And most everyone took the bait. I was happy to get a Facebook link to the article from a mom who said she refused to join the "mommy wars." You know, when moms who work outside the home fire ammunition at stay-at-home moms and vice versa (as in last month's Hilary Rosen/Ann Romney tiff), or moms criticize other moms for breastfeeding, or not breastfeeding, or breastfeeding too long, or not long enough. Or not disciplining enough, or too much, or homeschooling, or not, or using cloth diapers, or not, or ... you get the picture.

In high school, the girls who were always judging and talking about other girls were usually the most insecure. I'm afraid that's true of so many grown-up women (and men) too. Are we really that unsure of our own choices that we need to blast anyone who chooses to parent differently? Or have we decided to become the judge and jury for everyone and everything, just because, thanks to the Internet, we can? I seem to remember someone saying, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." (Matthew 7:1). Let the perfect mother cast the first stone.

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