Columns
Ministry



The newly opened breastfeeding room at Our Lady of Periyanayagi Shrine in Konankuppam, Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu, India (Donald Reegan)



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Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child in her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands (Isaiah 49:15-16).

These are the words written in a new breastfeeding room, which was opened on Feb. 20 at Our Lady of Periyanayagi Shrine. The shrine is in Konankuppam, Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu, south India, and was constructed by an Italian Jesuit, Fr. Constantine Joseph Beschi (1680-1747).

The special room for feeding babies was inaugurated by Elizabeth, mother of nine, and by Chinnamma, mother of eight children, both from the Konankuppam parish. They were assisted by Father Jayaseelan, a Jesuit who does pastoral ministry at the shrine.

It is indeed a turning point to see the needs of these women met.



Elizabeth, mother of nine, inaugurates the breastfeeding room at Our Lady of Periyanayagi Shrine Feb. 20 in Konankuppam, Tamil Nadu, India. (Donald Reegan)

We need to create a mother-friendly and child-friendly environment everywhere, especially in churches, because the church should be a place where people come to find solace and peace for all their problems. It should be a "mother's house" for all people.

We come to the church to feel the presence of God and experience his mercy, compassion and peace.

Motherhood is the most caring and sacrificial ministry in the world, because mothers can die and live only for their children without expecting anything in return.

I have seen the situation of lactating mothers in India. It is always with great difficulty that they must find privacy to feed their children, unlike breastfeeding mothers in Western countries.

While traveling on the bus or train, the mothers must attend to their babies crying for milk, but the whole world will be looking at them, and it is embarrassing for the women. They wonder if they must check on their baby or worry about the people who are looking at them.

Women in India lack safety and privacy, especially in public spaces.

"When I was a young boy, I used to notice that my mother and other women used to go to the toilet at night or at dawn, when there were no toilet rooms either in the village or at home," said Fr. Devasagayaraj M. Zackarias, the rector and parish priest of the Our Lady of Periyanayagi Shrine.

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Breastfeeding babies in the one-room houses of people living in poverty is an equally difficult situation for mothers. When there is only one room in the house and neighbors are visiting the house, it is an embarrassing situation for the breastfeeding mother, commented Zackarias.

Inclusion is important in churches in India. The Shrine of Our Lady Perianayagi is known for blessing childless parents who want children. Even after many years, people who received the blessing as they prayed for children come with their babies to thank Mother Mary.

"We thought they needed privacy to breastfeed the babies. We are sure that this will be useful for breastfeeding mothers," said the rector.

The church is 303 years old and invites a million pilgrims every year. It has 200 rooms for the pilgrims to stay in, a canteen, drinking water, a conference room, and a higher secondary school for hearing-impaired children. A soup kitchen was started during COVID-19.



A young woman is seen at the door to the breastfeeding room at Our Lady of Periyanayagi Shrine in Konankuppam, Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu, India. (Donald Reegan)

Devotion to the Blessed Virgin has spread across countries. She is invoked for childbirth and a good marriage.

The history of the shrine explains why it is a place of prayer for childless couples. Kachirayar, a man in Mughasa Parur, had no child, and prayed to God for one every day. One day, Mother Mary appeared to him in his dream and said, "Kachirayar, I'm alone in the forest. If you build a chapel for me, I'll give a child to you."

After that, she disappeared. The man was happy to hear that promise and started searching in the forest. Cutting back the bushes and trees, he found a statue — the same statue that is in the shrine today. People constructed a small chapel for the statue and pilgrims began to pray there.

After some time, Beschi came to Konankuppam, and saw the small chapel built for the statue. He was delighted and decided to work at Konankuppam, and constructed the shrine that exists today.

It is said to have been the first place of worship he erected. When it was completed, he went to Madras, state capital of Tamil Nadu, and asked the bishop of Mylapore to procure for him a statue from Manila, the Philippines, an image of the Virgin, dressed in the native dress of Tamil Nadu and bearing the Child Jesus in her arms, fashioned after a model he had made. The image eventually arrived and was also set up in the church.

May all our churches be places of reaching out to women, the elderly, the poor and needy — especially the orphaned — and differently abled men and women.