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## ¿POR QUÉ LOS CATÓLICOS LLAMAN “PADRE” A LOS SACERDOTES?

*Philip Kosloski | Jun 22, 2017*

*¿No dijo Jesús: "no llamen padre a nadie"?*

¿No dijo Jesús: “No llamen padre a nadie”?

Puede ser un poco confuso. Jesús dijo -está registrado en el Evangelio de Mateo-: “No llamen ustedes padre a nadie en la tierra, porque tienen solamente un Padre: el que está en el cielo” (Mt. 23, 9). A primera vista, esto parecería contradecir la costumbre católica de llamar “padre” a los sacerdotes. Aun más: ese versículo suena como que no deberíamos llamar a nuestro padre, “padre”, y que la única persona a la que podemos llamar “Padre” es Dios.

¿Entonces qué vamos a hacer?

En el contexto, Jesús se dirige a la hipocresía de los escribas y fariseos. El padre William Saunders, en un [artículo en Catholic Exchange](#) resume lo que Jesús estaba tratando de decir.

“Nuestro Señor los castiga por no dar un buen ejemplo; por crear pesadas cargas espirituales para los demás con sus diversas reglas y regulaciones; por ser altaneros en el ejercicio de su oficio; y promocionarse buscando lugares de honor, buscando marcas de respeto y usando símbolos ostentosos. Básicamente, los escribas y los fariseos habían olvidado que eran llamados a servir, al Señor y a los que se les había confiado, con humildad y espíritu generoso.

Dado ese contexto, Jesús dice no llamar a nadie en la tierra con el título de “Rabino”, “Padre” o “maestro”, en el sentido de arrogarse a sí mismo una autoridad que descansa en Dios y de olvidar la responsabilidad del título.

Catholic Answers añade una aclaración y explica cómo “[Jesús] estaba usando la hipérbole (exageración para hacer un punto) para mostrar a los escribas y fariseos cuán pecadores y orgullosos eran por no mirar humildemente a Dios como fuente de toda autoridad y paternidad y enseñanza y, en cambio, establecerse como las últimas autoridades, figuras paternas y maestros”.

Esto ayuda a entender por qué Jesús usó algunas veces el título de padre para alguien que no es Dios, incluyendo “Padre Abraham”, el padre del Hijo Pródigo y otros padres terrenales (ver Mateo 10,37). Jesús se estaría contradiciendo a sí mismo si pretendiera una aplicación estricta de sus palabras a los fariseos. El contexto es siempre la clave para interpretar pasajes difíciles.

Con eso en mente, ¿por qué los católicos llaman a los sacerdotes “padre”?

Los sacerdotes siempre han sido vistos en la Iglesia católica como padres espirituales. San Pablo dejó esto claro al escribir a los Corintios: *“No les escribo esto para avergonzarlos, sino para darles un consejo, como a mis propios hijos, pues los amo. Pues aunque ustedes, como cristianos, tengan diez mil instructores, padres no tienen muchos. Padre de ustedes soy yo, pues les anuncié el evangelio por el cual quedaron incorporados a Cristo Jesús”* (1 Corintios 4, 14-15).

Incluso el Papa desde el principio ha sido conocido como “papa”, que es un término latino para “padre” utilizado por un niño.

El término representa la paternidad espiritual de todos los sacerdotes y cómo somos sus hijos en la fe. Ellos pasan y cultivan la fe y nos aconsejan como un padre aconseja a su hijo o hija. Esta es una de las razones por las cuales la Iglesia Occidental todavía favorece el celibato en el sacerdocio, permitiendo a los sacerdotes la libertad de ser padres espirituales para el rebaño que Dios les ha confiado.

FEBRUARY 5, 2015

## WHY PRIESTS ARE CALLED FATHER

FR. WILLIAM SAUNDERS



***Q: A Baptist friend asked me, “Why do we call priests ‘Father’ when Jesus told us not to call anyone on earth ‘father?’” How would you answer this question?***

This question refers to Jesus’s teaching found in the Gospel of St. Matthew, when He said, “Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only One is your Father, the One in heaven” (Mt 23:9). Taken literally, we would have to wonder why we do use this title “Father” when Jesus seems to forbid it. First, we must remember the context of the passage. Jesus is addressing the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees — the learned religious leaders of Judaism. Our Lord castigates them for not providing a good example; for creating onerous spiritual burdens for others with their various rules and regulations; for being haughty in exercising their office; and for promoting themselves by looking for places of honor, seeking marks of respect and wearing ostentatious symbols. Basically, the scribes and the Pharisees had forgotten that they were called to serve the Lord and those entrusted to their care with humility and a generous spirit.

Given that context, Jesus says not to call anyone on earth by the title “Rabbi,” “Father,” or “teacher,” in the sense of arrogating to oneself an authority which rests with God and of forgetting the responsibility of the title. No one must ever take the place, or usurp the privileges and respect that belongs to the heavenly Father. As Jesus said, only the heavenly Father is the true Father, and only the Messiah is the true teacher and rabbi. In a similar vein, Jesus said, “Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt 10:37). Because of the authority of the heavenly Father and the respect due to Him, Jesus freely referred to His heavenly Father as “Father,” and taught us to pray the “Our Father” (Mt 6:9-13).

Moreover, our Lord Himself used the title “father” for several characters in His parables: In the parable of the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, the rich man, cries out from the depths of Hell, “Father Abraham, have pity on me,” and the usage of the title “father” occurs three times (cf. Lk 16:19-31). One has to wonder: if Jesus prohibited the use of the title “father,” why does He instruct the people with a parable in which the characters use the title? To do so seems to be contradictory and actually misleading to the audience. The same is true in the parable of the Prodigal Son: The young prodigal son, upon his return, says, “Father, I have sinned against God and against you” (cf. Lk 15:11-32). Given the way our Lord used the title “father” in so many teachings, including when repeating the fourth commandment, our Lord did not intend to prohibit calling a father by the title “father”; rather, He prohibited misusing the title.

We do use these titles in our common parlance: We call those who instruct us and others “teacher”; our male parent, “father”; and Jewish religious leaders, “rabbi.” Especially in a religious sense, those who serve the Lord and represent His authority, as a teacher, parent and especially a priest, must be mindful of exercising it diligently, humbly and courageously. To use this authority for self-aggrandizement is pure hypocrisy. Jesus said at the end of this passage, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, but whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Since the earliest times of our Church, we have used the title “Father” for religious leaders. Bishops, who are the shepherds of the local Church community and the authentic teachers of the faith, were given the title “Father.” Consequently, St. Peter may well have been addressed as “Father Peter,” in that sense of spiritual father. The likelihood of this address is supported by St. Paul who identifies himself as a spiritual father. In writing to the Corinthians, he said, “I am writing you in this way not to shame you but to admonish you as my beloved children. Granted you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you have only one father. It was I who begot you in Christ Jesus through my preaching of the Gospel. I beg you, then, be imitators of me. This is why I have sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful son in the Lord” (1 Cor 4:14-17).

Until about the year 400, a bishop was called “father” (“papa”); this title was then restricted solely to addressing the Bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter, and in English was rendered “pope.” In an early form of his rule, St. Benedict (d. c. 547) designated the title to spiritual confessors, since they were the guardians of souls. Moreover, the word “abbot,” denoting the leader in faith of the monastic community, is derived from the word *abba*, the Aramaic Hebrew word father, but in the very familiar sense of “daddy.” Later, in the Middle Ages, the term “father” was used to address the mendicant friars — like the Franciscans and Dominicans — since by their preaching, teaching and charitable

works they cared for the spiritual and physical needs of all of God's children. In more modern times, the heads of male religious communities or even those who participate in ecumenical councils, such as Vatican II, are given the title "father." In the English-speaking world, addressing all priests as "Father" has become customary.

On a more personal note, the title for me is very humbling. As a priest, "Father" reminds me that I am entrusted with a grave responsibility by our Lord — His faithful people. Just as a father must nourish, instruct, challenge, correct, forgive, listen and sustain his children, so must a priest do so for his spiritual children. The priest must especially meet the spiritual needs of those entrusted to his care, providing them with the nourishment of our Lord through the sacraments. He must preach the Gospel with fervor and conviction in accord with the mind of the Church, challenging all to continue on that path of conversion which leads to holiness. He must correct those who have erred, but with mercy and compassion. In the same spirit as the father with his prodigal son, the priest must reconcile sinners who have gone astray but seek a way back to God. As a father listens to his child, so must a priest listen to his spiritual children, providing counsel and consolation. A priest must also be mindful of the "physical" needs of his flock — food, housing, clothing and education.

While priests may be celibate, the words of our Lord to His Apostles ring true: "I give you my word, there is not one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother or father, children or property, for me and for the Gospel who will not receive in this present age a hundred times as many homes, brothers and sisters, mothers, children and property — and persecution besides — and in the age to come, everlasting life" (Mk 10:29-30). Actually celibacy frees a priest to be a generous father for his spiritual children. All of us must pray for our priests, especially those who serve in our own parishes and those newly ordained for our diocese, that by God's grace they may strive to fulfill the responsibility of being "Father."

## CALL NO MAN "FATHER"?

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Many Protestants claim that when Catholics address priests as "father," they are engaging in an unbiblical practice that Jesus forbade: "Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 23:9).

In his tract *10 Reasons Why I Am Not a Roman Catholic*, Fundamentalist anti-Catholic writer Donald Maconaghie quotes this passage as support for his charge that "the papacy is a hoax."

Bill Jackson, another Fundamentalist who runs a full-time anti-Catholic organization, says in his book *Christian's Guide To Roman Catholicism* that a "study of Matthew 23:9 reveals that Jesus was talking about being called father as a title of religious superiority . . . [which is] the basis for the [Catholic] hierarchy" (53).

How should Catholics respond to such objections?

### The Answer

To understand why the charge does not work, one must first understand the use of the word "father" in reference to our earthly fathers. No one would deny a little girl the opportunity to tell someone that she loves her father. Common sense tells us that Jesus wasn't forbidding this type of use of the word "father."

In fact, to forbid it would rob the address "Father" of its meaning when applied to God, for there would no longer be any earthly counterpart for the analogy of divine Fatherhood. The concept of God's role as Father would be meaningless if we obliterated the concept of earthly fatherhood.

But in the Bible the concept of fatherhood is not restricted to just our earthly fathers and God. It is used to refer to people other than biological or legal fathers, and is used as a sign of respect to those with whom we have a special relationship.

For example, Joseph tells his brothers of a special fatherly relationship God had given him with the king of Egypt: "So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 45:8).

Job indicates he played a fatherly role with the less fortunate: "I was a father to the poor, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know" (Job 29:16). And God himself declares that he will give a fatherly role to Eliakim, the steward of the house of David: "In that day I will call my servant Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah . . . and I will clothe him with [a] robe, and will bind [a] girdle on him, and will commit . . . authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (Is. 22:20–21).

This type of fatherhood not only applies to those who are wise counselors (like Joseph) or benefactors (like Job) or both (like Eliakim), it also applies to those who have a fatherly spiritual relationship with one. For example, Elisha cries, "My father, my father!" to Elijah as the latter is carried up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kgs. 2:12). Later, Elisha himself is called a father by the king of Israel (2 Kgs. 6:21).

### **A Change with the New Testament?**

Some Fundamentalists argue that this usage changed with the New Testament—that while it may have been permissible to call certain men "father" in the Old Testament, since the time of Christ, it's no longer allowed. This argument fails for several reasons.

First, as we've seen, the imperative "call no man father" does not apply to one's biological father. It also doesn't exclude calling one's ancestors "father," as is shown in Acts 7:2, where Stephen refers to "our father Abraham," or in Romans 9:10, where Paul speaks of "our father Isaac."

Second, there are numerous examples in the New Testament of the term "father" being used as a form of address and reference, even for men who are not biologically related to the speaker. There are, in fact, so many uses of "father" in the New Testament, that the Fundamentalist interpretation of Matthew 23 (and the objection to Catholics calling priests "father") must be wrong, as we shall see.

Third, a careful examination of the context of Matthew 23 shows that Jesus didn't intend for his words here to be understood literally. The whole passage reads, "But you are not to be called 'rabbi,' for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called 'masters,' for you have one master, the Christ" (Matt. 23:8–10).

The first problem is that although Jesus seems to prohibit the use of the term "teacher," in Matthew 28:19–20, Christ himself appointed certain men to be teachers in his Church: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you." Paul speaks of his commission as a teacher: "For this I was appointed a preacher and apostle . . . a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth" (1 Tim. 2:7); "For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher" (2 Tim. 1:11). He also reminds us that the Church has an office of teacher: "God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers" (1 Cor. 12:28); and "his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11). There is no doubt that Paul was not violating Christ's teaching in Matthew 23 by referring so often to others as "teachers."

Fundamentalists themselves slip up on this point by calling all sorts of people "doctor," for example, medical doctors, as well as professors and scientists who have Ph.D. degrees (i.e., doctorates). What they fail to realize is that "doctor" is simply the Latin word for "teacher." Even "Mister" and "Mistress" ("Mrs.") are forms of the word "master," also mentioned by Jesus. So if his words in Matthew 23 were meant to be taken literally, Fundamentalists would be just as guilty for using the word "teacher" and "doctor" and "mister" as Catholics for saying "father." But clearly, that would be a misunderstanding of Christ's words.

### **So What Did Jesus Mean?**

Jesus criticized Jewish leaders who love "the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called 'rabbi' by men" (Matt. 23:6–7). His admonition here is a response to the Pharisees' proud hearts and their grasping after marks of status and prestige.

He was using hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point) to show the scribes and Pharisees how sinful and proud they were for not looking humbly to God as the source of all authority and fatherhood and teaching, and instead setting themselves up as the ultimate authorities, father figures, and teachers.

Christ used hyperbole often, for example when he declared, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:29, cf. 18:9; Mark 9:47). Christ certainly did not intend this to be applied literally, for otherwise all Christians would be blind amputees! (cf. 1 John 1:8; 1 Tim. 1:15). We are all subject to "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16).

Since Jesus is demonstrably using hyperbole when he says not to call anyone our father—else we would not be able to refer to our earthly fathers as such—we must read his words carefully and with sensitivity to the presence of hyperbole if we wish to understand what he is saying.



Jesus is not forbidding us to call men "fathers" who actually are such—either literally or spiritually. (See below on the apostolic example of spiritual fatherhood.) To refer to such people as fathers is only to acknowledge the truth, and Jesus is not against that. He is warning people against *inaccurately* attributing fatherhood—or a particular *kind or degree* of fatherhood—to those who do not have it.

As the apostolic example shows, some individuals genuinely do have a spiritual fatherhood, meaning that they can be referred to as spiritual fathers. What must not be done is to confuse their form of spiritual paternity with that of God. Ultimately, God is our supreme protector, provider, and instructor. Correspondingly, it is wrong to view any individual other than God as having these roles.

Throughout the world, some people have been tempted to look upon religious leaders who are mere mortals as if they were an individual's supreme source of spiritual instruction, nourishment, and protection. The tendency to turn mere men into "gurus" is worldwide.

This was also a temptation in the Jewish world of Jesus' day, when famous rabbinical leaders, especially those who founded important schools, such as Hillel and Shammai, were highly exalted by their disciples. It is this elevation of an individual man—the formation of a "cult of personality" around him—of which Jesus is speaking when he warns against attributing to someone an undue role as master, father, or teacher.

He is not forbidding the perfunctory use of honorifics nor forbidding us to recognize that the person *does* have a role as a spiritual father and teacher. The example of his own apostles shows us that.

### **The Apostles Show the Way**

The New Testament is filled with examples of and references to spiritual father-son and father-child relationships. Many people are not aware just how common these are, so it is worth quoting some of them here.

Paul regularly referred to Timothy as his child: "Therefore I sent to you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ" (1 Cor. 4:17); "To Timothy, my true child in the faith: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Tim. 1:2); "To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (2 Tim. 1:2).

He also referred to Timothy as his son: "This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good

warfare" (1 Tim 1:18); "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1); "But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (Phil. 2:22).

Paul also referred to other of his converts in this way: "To Titus, my true child in a common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior" (Titus 1:4); "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment" (Philem. 10). None of these men were Paul's literal, biological sons. Rather, Paul is emphasizing his spiritual fatherhood with them.

## Spiritual Fatherhood

Perhaps the most pointed New Testament reference to the theology of the spiritual fatherhood of priests is Paul's statement, "I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. *For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel*" (1 Cor. 4:14–15).

Peter followed the same custom, referring to Mark as his son: "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark" (1 Pet. 5:13). The apostles sometimes referred to entire churches under their care as their children. Paul writes, "Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children" (2 Cor. 12:14); and, "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal. 4:19).

John said, "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1); "No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth" (3 John 4). In fact, John also addresses men in his congregations as "fathers" (1 John 2:13–14).

By referring to these people as their spiritual sons and spiritual children, Peter, Paul, and John imply their own roles as spiritual fathers. Since the Bible frequently speaks of this spiritual fatherhood, we Catholics acknowledge it and follow the custom of the apostles by calling priests "father." Failure to acknowledge this is a failure to recognize and honor a great gift God has bestowed on the Church: the spiritual fatherhood of the priesthood.

Catholics know that as members of a parish, they have been committed to a priest's spiritual care, thus they have great filial affection for priests and call them "father." Priests, in turn, follow the apostles' biblical example by referring to members of their flock as "my son" or "my child" (cf. Gal. 4:19; 1 Tim. 1:18; 2 Tim. 2:1; Philem. 10; 1 Pet. 5:13; 1 John 2:1; 3 John 4).

All of these passages were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and they express the infallibly recorded truth that Christ's ministers do have a role as spiritual fathers. Jesus is not against acknowledging that. It is he who gave these men their role as spiritual fathers, and it is his Holy Spirit who recorded this role for us in the pages of Scripture. To acknowledge spiritual fatherhood is to acknowledge the truth, and no amount of anti-Catholic grumbling will change that fact.

***NIHIL OBSTAT:*** I have concluded that the materials  
presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.  
***Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004***

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