

Call No Man Father

by Sebastian R. Fama

Catholics are accused of violating the word of God whenever they address a priest as Father. This argument is based on a verse from the Gospel of Matthew which reads: "**Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven**" (Matthew 23:9). A close look at the passage this verse came from quickly dispels any misunderstanding one might have concerning Jesus' words:

Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for **they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they 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.** 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. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; **whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted** (Matthew 23:1-12).

Jesus is pointing out the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees. They teach the faith yet they fail to practice it. They enjoy the limelight and are very prideful concerning their positions. They enhance the outward appearances of their religion to make sure that they are noticed. In short, they thought they were something special and they wanted everyone else to think so too. Note what Jesus says in verses 6 and 7 which immediately precede the rejection of the titles of honor: "And they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the Synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi." The Scribes and Pharisees have effectively set God aside and put themselves in His place. True religion always points to God and not to self. That's why Jesus closes His remarks with the comments on being humbled and being exalted (see also verses 12-36). Jesus didn't object to titles but to the way they were used by the Scribes and Pharisees.

Many times in the Gospels Jesus refers to our earthly fathers as well as our Heavenly Father. Father Mitch Pacwa points out that "There are 144 occasions in the New Testament when the title of father is used for someone other than God. It is applied to the patriarchs of Israel, the fathers of families, to Jewish leaders and to Christian leaders" (*Call no Man Father, This Rock* January 1991).

If the command to call no one on earth father were meant in the strict literal sense, why would God sanction it in Scripture? The Ten Commandments tell us to: "Honor your **father** and mother" (Exodus 20:12). I think it is pretty obvious that the father spoken of here is not God the Father but the guy your mom fell in love with.

In Matthew 10:37 Jesus says: "He who loves **father** or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." And in Matthew 19:5 He says: "For this reason a man shall leave his **father** and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." Is Jesus violating his own command? Why would He do something that He supposedly forbade? The only answer is that He didn't forbid it. At least not in the strict literal sense.

The apostles themselves had no problem using the title of father for someone other than God. Paul calls himself the father of the Corinthians. "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 Corinthians 4:14-15).

So if we can call priests father and the guy who impregnated our mother father why couldn't we call the Scribes and the Pharisees father? Well, actually we can as long as it is done in the proper sense. And Scripture does just that. In Acts 7:2 Stephen refers to the leaders of Israel as fathers. He said: ""Brethren and **fathers**, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our **father Abraham**, when he was in Mesopotamia..." Paul addresses the crowd in Jerusalem in the same manner: "Brethren and **fathers**, hear the defense which I now make before you" (Acts 22:1).

As we noted earlier the Scribes and Pharisees effectively put themselves in Gods place. Thus Jesus'

statement: "**for you have one Father, who is in heaven.** I am sure the Scribes and Pharisees never said or thought that they were equal to God. But the fact remains that your God is whatever you think about most. And it is obvious that the Scribes and Pharisees were obsessed with themselves.

We call our priests father because they perform the role of spiritual fathers. Just as our biological fathers guide us in temporal matters our spiritual fathers guide us in spiritual matters. In the words of Philip Gray:

Our lives of faith are conceived by the acts of those who sow the seeds of faith. The apostles and their successors were commissioned by Christ Himself. They bear His Word in our lives and are ministers of His grace through the sacraments of the Church, beginning with our spiritual rebirth in Baptism. By sharing in the high priesthood of Christ, bishops and priests share in the attributes of the Father. As there is no father but the one Father in heaven, and no teacher or master but Christ, we properly understand that these men, having been commissioned by Christ to act in His person, also represent the Father, whom the Son reveals (cf. Jn. 1:14-18). Insofar as they uniquely participate in the spiritual begetting of God's children, bishops and priests are our fathers. For they share in the mission of Christ who reveals the eternal Father. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who knew the apostles, expressed this well when he wrote: "Let everyone revere . . . the bishop as the image of the Father" (as quoted in Catechism, no. 1554) (*Call No Man Father: Understanding Matthew 23:9*, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/>).

Are Protestants wrong to call their ministers "Pastor?" **Pastor is actually a Latin word and it means shepherd.** In John 10:14-16 **Jesus said:**

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So **there shall be one flock, one shepherd.**

If we reason that we cannot call a priest Father because we "have one Father who is in heaven," then can we not also reason that we cannot call a minister Pastor because there is only "one Shepherd?" Pastors are called shepherds because that is what they are. God is Father and Jesus is Shepherd in the ultimate sense. Church leaders are shepherds and fathers in a lesser sense. Why else would Peter say:

Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the **chief shepherd** is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:2-4).

The term "Chief Shepherd" indicates that there are subordinate shepherds. One scripture verse clarifies another, and so it is with the different verses pertaining to the title of father. When assuming these titles in their proper sense we share, in a subordinate way, in the priesthood of Jesus. As practiced by the Scribes and Pharisees, however, it was a way of exalting self while pretending to serve God. Practicing our faith should always result in our Glorifying God and showing others the way. It should never be an occasion for us to glorify ourselves.

Isolating and grabbing hold of one scripture verse is risky. It can be misleading or even dangerous. Even an honest and well-intentioned Christian can subconsciously bend a verse to suit his or her own needs. It is vitally important to understand the Bible as God intended. St. Augustine once said, "Not what one scripture says, but what all of Scripture says." When reading any verse of Scripture we must always consider its context. Furthermore, we must consider what the rest of Scripture says about the subject in question. If we fail to do this we run the risk of stripping the Word of God of its meaning and consequently its power. Our reading of Scripture should never be motivated by a personal agenda. Rather it should be the result of an honest thirst for truth.

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