

Calling Priests Father

by Jim Seghers

Catholics call their priests fathers. Is this a violation of Jesus' command "call no man father" (Mt 23:9)? Before answering this question it will prove helpful to quote the entire relevant passage.

"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" (Mt 23:8-12).

Scriptural passages do not stand-alone. They must be understood in the context of the entire Bible and the surrounding passages. In Chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel Jesus gives a ringing denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees climaxing in the frightful covenantal curses of verses 13-31.

More emphasis in the passage is placed on "rabbi, teacher, and master" rather than the word "father." However, did Jesus intend this as a prohibition of words or does the passage have a deeper meaning? If one argues that these three words are the issue, then a whole series of synonyms are also prohibited. This would include not only "teacher" and "master," but also: educator, instructor, doctor, tutor, professor, mentor, trainer, schoolmaster, schoolmarm, coach, counselor, and guru. Similarly, not only would "father" be prohibited, but so would: dad, daddy, papa, pa, sire, forefather, and progenitor. Clearly, this is a silly interpretation of Sacred Scripture to which no serious student of the Bible adheres.

The key to the proper interpretation of the passage is found in Jesus' admonition: "He who is the greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Mt 23:11-12). Jesus' point is not the titles, but the showy arrogance of the scribes and Pharisees. Their pride in seeking these titles expressed their imagined superiority over others while they usurped authority that comes from God.

Furthermore, the Catholic practice of calling priests fathers is quite biblical. In both testaments priest and father are used interchangeably. In Judges 17:10 Micah addresses the Levite: "Stay with me, and be to me a **father** and a **priest**." Subsequently, the Danites request that the same Levite "come with us, and be to us a **father** and a **priest**" (Jdgs 18:19). The idea of spiritual fatherhood is also seen in the relationship between Elijah and Elisha.¹

Similar uses are found in the New Testament. St. Paul writes: "For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many **fathers**. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your **father** through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:15). In addressing the Thessalonians Paul makes a similar statement: "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a **father** with his children"

¹ 2 Kgs 2:12; 6:21; 13:14.

(1 Thess 2:11). In his letters to Timothy he uses the expression “my child” (1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 1:2; 2:1). In Philemon 10 he writes: “Onesimus, whose **father** I have become.”²

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² Other examples of the New Testament use of the word “father” can be found in Acts 21:40; 22:1; Rom 4:16-17; 1 Cor 4:14-15; Heb 12:7-9. John uses the word “father” twice (1 Jn 2:13-14). In Acts 7:2-53 Stephen uses the word “father” many times.