

Why do Catholics Call Priests "Father"? *

"Call no one on earth your father," Jesus teaches. "You have but one Father in heaven" (Mt 23:9). In light of these words from the Gospel, many non-Catholic Christians object to Catholics calling priests "Father." How do Catholics understand this passage?

In this situation, Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees for their spiritual pride (see Mt 23:2-10). He reminds them that God alone--God the Father--is ultimately the source of all authority, even the authority these men wield within the religious community.

Is this simply an admonition to the proud, or does Jesus actually mean that under no circumstances are we ever to refer to anyone as "father"? Just consider: If the latter is true, then we could never legitimately speak of Church fathers, or founding fathers of a country, or even biological fathers.

This cannot be Jesus' intent, given the words of Jesus on other occasions reported in the gospels. The truth is that our Lord himself uses the term "father" numerous times (see, for example, Mt 15:4-6; 19:5, 19, 29; 21:31-33; Jn 8:56). In telling the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus even has the rich man use the title "Father Abraham" three times to refer to the ancient patriarch (see Lk 16:24, 27, 30). Later on, St. Paul certainly has no qualms about calling himself a "father" to other Christians (see Phil 2:22; 1 Cor 4:15).

All this can be said as well of Jesus' instruction immediately before his words about not calling anyone "father." He warns, "Do not be called 'Rabbi (literally, "Teacher" in Jesus' native tongue, Aramaic; see Jn 1:38). You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers" (Mt 23:8). Do those who object to calling priests "Father" refrain from calling anyone "teacher" as well?

Jesus himself speaks of teachers (see Mt 10:24-25; Lk 6:40; Jn 3:10). Paul calls himself a teacher (see 1 Tm 2:7; 2 Tm 1:11) and noted that teachers are in fact one of the ministries God has set in the Church (see 1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 4:11). Any Bible concordance will reveal many other occurrences of the words "father," "fathers," "teacher," and "teachers" throughout Scripture.

Other related scriptures: Mk 11:9-10; Acts 7:2; Rom 4:12; 9:10 (see also Rom 4:16-18); Eph 3:14-15; 1 Thes 2:11; 1 Tm 1:2; Jas 2:2; Jas 2:21; 1 Jn 2:1, 12-14, 18, 28.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: 78; 238-242; 270; 688; 1544-1553; 2214.

*Quoted from The New Catholic Answer Bible. Wichita, Kansas, Fireside Catholic Publishing, 2005. www.firesidecatholic.com

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