

<https://www.catholic.com/tract/call-no-man-father>

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).

How should Catholics respond?

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 Hilkiah . . . 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” (Isa. 22:20–21).

This type of fatherhood applies not only 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 Protestants 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 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, 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). He was using hyperbole (exaggeration) 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).

Jesus is not forbidding us to call men “fathers” who actually are such—either literally or spiritually. 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. 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 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.

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

IMPRIMATUR: In accord with 1983 CIC 827

permission to publish this work is hereby granted.

+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, August 10, 2004