

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

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Why are Catholic priests called “father”?

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven” (Matt 23:9).

Catholics who read or hear this statement often wonder if the Church is violating Jesus’ command since our priests are referred to as “father.” Is the Catholic tradition of calling priests “father” a violation of Jesus’ statement?

The answer is no, we are not ignoring or violating a command from our Lord when we refer to priests as “father.”

If you focus only on the single statement made by Jesus, it might seem that He is giving an absolute command: never, ever use the title “father” when referring to any man. But if that were the case, we have to ask if St. Stephen was in violation Jesus’ absolute command when he said, “Brothers and fathers, listen to me!” (Acts 7:2).

Or St. John the Evangelist, was he violating Jesus’ command in his first epistle: “I write to you, fathers, because you have known him...” (1 John 2:13)? How about St. Paul? Was he violating Jesus’ command when he wrote, “In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:15)?

What about Jesus Himself? In Matthew 15:4, quoting the Old Testament, Jesus said, “Honor your father and mother.” Was Jesus violating His own command about calling someone “father”? Was Jesus confused?

It is obvious that neither Stephen, John, Paul, nor especially Jesus Himself, were confused or in violation of a divine command when they referred to people as “father.”

So what exactly did Jesus mean when He made the statement, “Call no one on earth your father”? Well, as with most proper understandings of biblical teachings, it is important to look at the entire episode in context, rather than focus only on a single word or phrase or sentence.

In the 23rd chapter of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus criticized the Pharisees for being obsessed with titles and honors. He said, “The Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses....they preach but they do not practice....All their works are performed to be seen....They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation ‘Rabbi’” (Matt 23:2-3, 5-7).

Then Jesus gave the instruction that His followers should not be concerned with titles and honors, and said they should not call anyone “father” or “teacher” or “rabbi.” He summarized His message by saying, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt 23:12).

We don’t think twice when we call a Rabbi “rabbi.” We don’t have a problem calling a teacher “teacher.” And we should not be concerned about calling a priest “father.” That is not Jesus’ main point in Matthew, chapter 23.

When statements in Scripture are taken out of context, when the words of Jesus are interpreted literally and absolutely, it can cause problems. For example, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away....if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away” (Matt 5:29-30).

If Christians took this statement by Jesus literally, we would be in a lot of trouble. It is clear that all of us commit sins during our lives. (That’s why we have the sacrament of Reconciliation.) Therefore, an absolute interpretation of this statement means that most people at church each Sunday should be missing their right eyes and right hands.

Obviously Jesus is not commanding that we need to maim ourselves whenever we commit a sin. He was using symbolic and quite graphic language to make an important point. In chapter 23, He also was employing symbolic language to make an important point when He said to call no one “father” or “teacher” or “rabbi.” The main point was a warning against pride and self-centeredness.

The Church teaches that just as St. Paul called himself the spiritual “father” of the Corinthians, Catholic priests are called “father” because they nurture the spiritual life of the flock by preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.

It is unfortunate that many Catholics become concerned when they read that Jesus said, “Call no one on earth your father.” This is another example that the Bible is not a self-interpreting book. We need the teaching Magisterium—the pope and bishops, guided by the Holy Spirit—to interpret the true meaning of the Scriptures and teach it to the faithful.

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