

## **Why do Catholics call their priests, “Father”? Doesn’t the Bible say, “call no man your father” [Mt 23:8]?**

This is a common question that Catholics get, but I think it underlines a deeper problem. Specifically, the practice of taking Bible verses out of context and trying to make them mean something other than what they were intended to mean. This is exactly the case here.

In Matthew 23:2-12, Jesus is taking the Pharisees to task because, while they do sit in a position of authority, they have pridefully taken this position as a sign that they are somehow superior to all around them, and even worse, that this superiority somehow comes from themselves, crediting God for none of it. This is what Jesus takes exception to: “the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses... They love places of honor at banquets...synagogues... and the salutation ‘Rabbi.’ As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called ‘Master’; you have but one master, the Messiah.”

In this response, Jesus is also referencing to Malachi 1:6, giving us further incite to this passage: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name." Jesus is making the point that the Pharisees are wanting to be called by these titles, but in the process are usurping, even despising, God and his role – the true Father, teacher and master. Lacking humility, they make themselves appear more important than they are, and fail to acknowledge God’s primacy over them. Instead, they prefer the praise and accolades of the people, greatly offending the true Father in the process.

Jesus then follows this scolding with one of his harshest condemnations in all of Scripture, repeatedly condemning the Pharisees for their hypocrisy: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites...”.

Jesus’ point in all of this is not that we can’t call anyone teacher, rabbi, master or father, but that we shouldn’t make ourselves, or anyone else, somehow equal to or superior to the Heavenly Father. We must recognize that everything we have – our position of authority, our importance as a teacher or a rabbi – all of it comes from the Father. St Paul says it perfectly: I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom all paternity [fatherhood] in heaven and earth is named [Eph 3:14-15]. All earthly fatherhood ultimately comes from the Father in Heaven. It is not wrong to call someone father, as long as we fully acknowledge where that fatherhood comes from!

St Paul proves our point when he refers to *himself* as a father on two different occasions. In 1 Cor 4:15 he writes that “though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus“. But note how he credits his fatherhood as coming through Jesus Christ! And similarly, in Philemon 1:10: “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.” And in Romans 4:16-17, St Paul then refers to Abraham as “the father of us all... the father of

many nations". Turning to John 8:56, Jesus does the same thing: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day". Similarly, in Mark 10:9, Jesus reminds us of the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and mother."

Clearly, Jesus is not teaching that we cannot call anyone on earth father or teacher in Matthew 23:2-12, otherwise he would be contradicting himself in John 8:5-6 and other places. And St Paul would be directly disobeying Jesus by calling *himself* a father! Jesus is simply making the point that we must give proper honor to the Heavenly Father, *the* Father of all fathers, through whom all these titles come.

When people read the Bible and interpret it themselves – apart from the Church that Jesus founded and left his teachings to, and then sent the Holy Spirit to guide into all truth – these are the kinds of errors that can come. And if they then use these erroneous interpretations to try and discredit or lead people out of the Catholic Church – which is unarguably, historically, the Church that Jesus originally founded – the problem becomes even more serious. Jesus warns us that it is a very serious matter to lead even one of his little ones astray [cf Luke 17:2]. If you aren't certain in your accusations, you should proceed very carefully if you intend to criticize the Church Jesus founded!

To call a Catholic Priest, "Father", acknowledges that he shares in the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, given to him by the Heavenly Father, a ministry that began at the Last Supper when Jesus said to the Apostles, "Do this in memory ["anamnesis" in the Greek, meaning to actually make present] of me." It also implies the fatherly care that a Priest is to exercise over the flock that has been entrusted to him. And among other things, it also highlights his share in the roll as a spiritual father to all those who are reborn as children of God through Baptism.

But it is also worth noting a second objection that often accompanies this fatherhood question. Many will quote 1 Tim 4:1-5, claiming that these verses apply to the Catholic Church's disciplines of priests not marrying and of abstaining from meat on certain days: "some will turn away from the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and demonic instructions through the hypocrisy of liars with branded consciences. They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the invocation of God."

But again, such a charge relies on a faulty interpretation of this verse. St Paul was addressing various heresies [mainly Gnostic] in the early Church that essentially taught that there were two gods, one of evil and one of good, that matter was evil, and that only spiritual realities could be good. Following from this, marriage was forbidden as it led to procreation of children – more evil matter! And these sects also taught that many forms of food detracted from spiritual purity – particularly meat – and so were also permanently forbidden.

This has nothing to do with the Church's penitential practice of occasionally abstaining from meat on certain holy days, a practice which is based in large part on the spiritually fruitful

practices of fasting and self mortification, called for throughout Scripture – a practice that strengthens our earthly bodies against temptation and also shares in the suffering of Jesus on the cross.

Add to this the fact that the church has the highest regard for marriage, and has *never* forbidden it. Celibacy is a changeable discipline [not an unchangeable doctrine] in the Roman Rite of the Church, freely accepted by those entering the priesthood. But in other Rites of the Church [like the Byzantine Rite], and in special circumstances [like married Anglican clergy entering the Catholic priesthood], it is permissible to ordain married men.

This practice of a celibate priesthood is also based in Scripture. Both Jesus and St. Paul were not married, and both of them call for this discipline. In Mat 19:12, Jesus teaches that, “Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because *they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.” But note that Jesus then emphasizes that this celibacy is freely chosen, concluding, “whoever can accept this *ought* to accept it”. Similarly, in 1 Cor 7:7,38, St Paul writes that, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God.... he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better. Note that St Paul refers to celibacy here as a “gift”!

In the story of the seven brothers consecutively married to one woman in Mark 12:24-25, Jesus points out that, “When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven.” This is part of the spiritual dimension of priestly celibacy. Priests are “conformed to Christ” in many ways. Included in this is freely choosing to follow Jesus’ example of taking up a celibate life that more closely and perfectly parallels the heavenly life we are preparing for while on Earth – where they “neither marry nor are given in marriage”. They have given up something “good” – marriage – for something even better –total devotion to Jesus and His Church. In a sense, they marry the Church –“the Bride of Christ” [cf Rev 21:3-27]. And in Rev 14:1-5 we read further testimony of some who have renounced marriage to follow Jesus: “on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand... who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”

And so, celibacy is voluntarily accepted by anyone called to the priesthood in the Roman Rite, and any married priest or pastor will tell you that there is great wisdom in this discipline. And while some of the Apostles and Bishops in the early Church were married [remember, celibacy is a changeable discipline in the Church], in 1 Cor 7:32-33, St Paul continues on, giving further incite into the wisdom of priestly celibacy, emphasizing the conflict of service that can exist in the married state: “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife.”

So next time you see your pastor, give him a big hug and say, “Thank you for following the Lamb Father!”