

“Call No Man Father”?: Understanding Mt. 23:9

ISSUE: Why do Catholics call priests “Father,” since Jesus says “call no man your father on earth” (Mt. 23:9)?

RESPONSE: To interpret Scripture correctly, we need to “think with the Church” and understand particular passages in light of the rest of Scripture (cf. 2 Pet. 1:20; 3:16). This interpretative principle is called the “analogy of faith” (Catechism, no. 114).

In Mt. 23:9, Jesus emphasizes the unique role of our Heavenly Father. It is He who created us in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-28) and made us His sons and daughters through our baptism into the death and resurrection of His Son (Rom. 5:12-21; 6:3-4; 8:12-17). Therefore, our fidelity belongs first and foremost to our eternal Father.

Yet this passage cannot be interpreted as prohibiting reference to Dads or priests as “fathers” without contradicting other scriptural passages in which the word “father” is used for human fathers. Such an interpretation would render the commandment “honor your father” meaningless.

Rather, the proper sense is that all fatherhood comes from God the Father, such that men rightly exhibit fatherhood only to the extent that they participate in the one paternity of God.

DISCUSSION: The title “father” does not confer upon priests the same status that is proper to Our Heavenly Father alone, nor does it diminish God’s absolute and universal fatherhood. It is incorrect to interpret Mt. 23:9 in an exclusively literal sense. In 1 Cor. 4:15, St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says, “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.” St. Paul calls himself “father” because he recognizes his cooperation with God in begetting or giving spiritual life to the community entrusted to his care. There are several other passages, such as 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Jn. 2:12; Acts 7:2, and Acts 22:1, which show that the title “father” was applied to others besides God in the New Testament. Indeed, even the Old Testament recognizes that priesthood is spiritual fatherhood. Upon his conversion Micah meets a Levite and says, “Dwell with me and be a Father and a priest to me” (Judg. 17:10).

This teaching is further attested in the ancient writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 100), a man trained by the Apostles, who is quoted in Catechism, no. 1554: “Let everyone . . . revere the bishop as the image of the Father.”

Following the example of Scripture and Tradition, Catholics call priests “father” because they acknowledge the special participation priests share in God’s Fatherhood. Like St. Paul, they are spiritual fathers cooperating with God, giving spiritual life to the people of God. They do this through the dignity of their office by preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.

The misinterpretation of Mt. 23:9 is even more obvious when we consider that we routinely and correctly apply the title “father” to our earthly fathers who procreated us with our mothers and God. Jesus Himself does so in Mt. 21:31. Another example can be found in St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In Eph. 4:6, St. Paul professes that there is “one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Yet in Eph. 6:6 St. Paul writes: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger. . . .”

On a practical level, interpreting Mt. 23:9 in an exclusively literal sense would undermine the Fourth Commandment. How can we “honor our father” while at the same time deny his fatherhood? It is proper to call our fathers “father” because this acknowledges their earthly paternity of us as their children. As Catechism, no. 2367 provides, “Called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God.” In no way does this title take away from God the ultimate power and authority He has over human life: “Thou knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13). Rather, we recognize that all fatherhood comes from God, as St. Paul teaches in Eph. 3:14-15: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. . . .”

The New Testament illustrates that Mt. 23:9 is not to be interpreted in an exclusively literal manner. Otherwise, there would be a clear contradiction between Mt. 23:9 and the other passages cited above. We must remember that God is the author of Scripture and God cannot contradict Himself, just as truth cannot contradict truth.

Rather, the context in Mt. 23 reveals that Jesus is rebuking the illicit, sinful leadership of the scribes and Pharisees. He is emphasizing that their spiritual fatherhood (and teaching authority, v. 8) is not their own, but comes from God. This is another example of how we have the privilege to participate in salvation history, because God works through us. For instance, when we pray for others we participate in the one mediation of Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). Priests don't exercise their "own" priesthood, but participate in the one priesthood of Christ (*see* Catechism, nos. 1544-45). And as God's sons and daughters through Baptism, we do not literally become gods ourselves, but participate in the very life of the one true God.

Similarly when we understand priests and Dads to be participating in the one Fatherhood of God, we understand more deeply that we are to be spiritually fruitful, and that we are to play active roles in bringing the life-changing message of Jesus Christ and His Church to others. Fatherhood is a gift from God, and must be lived in a godly manner.

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