

Responding to False Ideas About Ordination Part 2: Misunderstanding “Call no man ‘Father.’”

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In Matthew 23:9 Our Lord says: “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.” Based on this verse some Protestants have rejected this form of address for clergy. To call a priest “Father,” they say, is a violation of Jesus’ direct command! Yet it isn’t, it has never been understood that way, and to insist on this prohibition is to fall into an attack on Our Lord as the Author of Scripture.

What do we find in the God-breathed (“inspired”) Scriptures? Our Lord, in Mark 7:9-13, criticizes the Pharisees and scribes for not honoring their “fathers.” St. Paul and St. John, on the reasoning which rejects the use of “Father” as form of address for spiritual fathers, seem to be heretics. In 1 Corinthians 4:14-17 St. Paul writes: “I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.” Paul, Christ’s “Apostle to the Gentiles,” chosen by Jesus and instructed by Him and led by the Holy Spirit, is not mistaken! In Acts 22:1, St. Paul begins his sermon this way: “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.” St. Paul addresses the recipients, the church under his charge, as his children (cf. 1 Thess 2:11; Phil 2:22). He is their father. There are many other verses which refer to fatherhood, using the title, both as a way to refer to biological fatherhood and the roles of being a father (e.g., 1 Cor. Eph 5:31; 6:2) and to spiritual fatherhood. In the same way, 1 John 2:12-14, 28 shows St. John using this form of address. St. Stephen, as he begins his address in Acts 7:2 says: “Brethren and fathers, listen...”

So, how are we to understand Our Lord’s Words in Matthew 23? We must understand them in context. We have just seen the broader context, but the immediate context of Our Lord’s sermon has to do with humility, exercising authority as a representative of God in a way not directed to self-glorification, but to service and to honoring one’s parents. In Deut. 5:16, God commands, “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you.” God made this command after telling us to honor Him. Jesus upholds this commandment in Mark 7:9-13. In this passage, He berates the scribes and Pharisees who used traditions to rationalize not providing assistance to their fathers. Similarly, in

Matthew 19:16-19, Jesus includes honoring one’s human father as a prerequisite to attaining eternal life.

More broadly, we understand not only the broad biblical context and the context of the immediate passage in Matthew 23, but also the context of the Church’s understanding of those Scriptures from the beginning, in the light of the Analogy of Faith, according to the Vincentian Canon, what the Church has always believed. The designation “father” has been used from apostolic times onward for clergy.

In addition, we have to ask what the word “father” means. A father is one who begets children. Biologically, a man begets and a woman conceives. In the act of begetting, the man shares in the attributes of God’s perfect Fatherhood (Eph. 3:14-15) by participating in the creation of new life. In turn, God is the Author of life Who actively creates and infuses a soul into the child at conception. Just as God gives life to all men and so deserves our honor and reverence, so a child owes its life to its father and the father deserves honor from the child.

Besides biological fatherhood there is also spiritual fatherhood. In John 8:44-49, Jesus identifies spiritual fatherhood in terms of whom one honors. If we honor the father of lies, the devil is our father; if we honor God, He is our Father. Those alive in Christ owe their new life to God. But those who are in bondage to sin owe their enslaved existence to Satan. All this contextualizes what Our Lord says in Matthew 23.

Our lives of faith are conceived by the acts of those who sow the seeds of faith. The apostles and their successors were commissioned by Christ Himself. They bring His Words and are ministers of His grace through the Sacraments of the Church, beginning with our spiritual rebirth in Baptism. By sharing in the high priesthood of Christ, bishops and priests share in the attributes of the Father. As there is no ultimate father but the one Father in heaven, we properly understand that men ordained by Christ to act in His Person also represent the Father, Whom the Son reveals (cf. Jn. 1:14-18). Insofar as they uniquely participate in the spiritual begetting of God’s children, bishops and priests are our fathers. They share in the mission of Christ. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who knew the apostles, reflects this in his *Letter to the Trallians* 3:1, “Let everyone revere ...the bishop as the image of the Father.” Fatherhood and the offices Jesus instituted are bound up with one another in an essential way.

So we honor spiritual and earthly fathers and pray for them to be the icons of THE Father, according to God’s calling. For more details, see *Call No Man Father?* by Fr Jonathan Munn, available through LuLu or at Amazon.