

Homily for February 27, 2018

So why do Catholics address their priests as “father” when Jesus says explicitly in Matthew 23:

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one father, the one in heaven.

The key to understanding this verse is to read it in the context of Jesus’ words in Matthew 23. In the verses immediately preceding the one I just quoted, Jesus has been talking about how the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees are drawing people away from God by setting themselves up as superior to those they are teaching. Their whole attitude is one where they are using honorific titles and privilege described by Jesus this way:

They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogue and to be greeted with respect in the market place and to have people call them rabbi.

In other words, they are using their positions to exert their power over others in a controlling and manipulative manner. Kind of like the power a biological father might use to intimidate and coerce his children, so to use his position to dominate them.

Jesus wants us to understand there is a fundamental equality between his disciples so that there should not be the manipulating of position in a self-serving way.

The earliest Christians did not understand Jesus to forbid referring to people as father. Both Stephen and Paul address Jewish crowds with the words, “Brothers and fathers” (Acts 7:2; 22:1), and the word father appears in other New Testament passages. Here are two referring to natural fathers.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. (Col 3.21)

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6.4)

Notice both verses emphasize that fathers are not to take advantage of their position in relation to their children.

Then there are these references to spiritual fathers. St Paul says to the Corinthians:

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

Of Timothy, St Paul writes to the Philippians:

But Timothy’s worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel

Likewise, spiritual leaders in the ascetic movement of the third and fourth centuries were addressed as Father, just as tradition commonly refers to the great teachers of the early centuries as the “Church Fathers”. The practice of the Catholic Church is consistent with these biblical and historical precedents.

Nevertheless, Jesus' words contain a salutary warning against a sinful desire or affection for honorific titles. Even the greatest spiritual fathers and teachers among us should never be (or want to be) esteemed in a way that compares to our reverence for the Father in heaven or the world's true Teacher, the Messiah. Likewise, those of us who are called Father or Teacher (Professor or Doctor) must not love those expressions of honor or let them cause us to forget that our fundamental relationship to other Christians is that of fellow disciple, brother, or sister.

The first Pope, St Peter counselled spiritual fathers this way when he wrote in his first letter:

Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, 3 not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory

Those who are spiritual fathers are called to truly reflect our Father in heaven and the chief shepherd Jesus.

Therefore, Jesus does not contest your calling me "father." What he calls us ordained to this office is to be the kind of father in God worthy of this address.