

## Question 92

### **Why are priests called “Father”?**

Priests have been addressed as “Father” since ancient times. The term emphasizes spiritual generation and family relationships. How can we reconcile this with the biblical passage in which Jesus admonishes His followers to never call anyone father? There was also an admonition not to call anyone teacher or rabbi. In reality, these admonitions are more regarding relationship than language. Rightful place must be given to God the Father, and no one can ever replace God’s role in our lives. Therefore, when referring to a priest as Father, you are referring to his function as spiritual leader and shepherd, which he exercises in union with Jesus as priest. If the admonition of Jesus referred to any unearthly title, why Jesus Himself have used the term father in referring to his foster father, Saint Joseph? Jesus even used the title to refer to “Father” Abraham, yet he himself said “call no man ‘father.’” He still referred to the commandment to honor your father and mother, though. Jesus also said “call no one ‘teacher,’” yet what do we call the instructors of our children? Evidently, the prohibition not to call any man on Earth “father” must be understood in context. A principle of Catholic interpretation of Sacred Scripture is to never take a verse of the Bible out of context; otherwise you get a pretext. If the husbands of our mothers can be called “father,” then calling priests “father” is no different. There are 144 places in the New Testament when the title of “father” is used for someone other than God.

Saint Paul used the term for himself in 1 Corinthians 4:15 when he said, “Granted that you ten thousand guardians in Christ, you have only one father. It was I who begot you in Christ Jesus through my preaching of the Gospel.” Saint Paul was explaining the spiritual relationship a priest has with his flock. He also referred to Timothy as his son: “This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare” (1 Timothy 1:18). Timothy was not the biological son of Paul; rather, Paul was Timothy’s spiritual “father.” Clearly, the term “father” that Saint Paul is using in no way takes away from the supreme reverence we owe to God. Rather, it refers to a symbolic function of his office.

What Jesus was forbidding was the improper use of the word “father.” At the time of Christ, His fellow Jews had the practice of giving the title “father” to a founder of a school of thought for rabbinical teaching, and rival traditions often fought with each other based on who followed which “father.” Christ condemned the misuse of the word “father” in that context, but he did not forbid its analogous use. The Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees would enjoy the privileges and the honor of being considered the “fathers” of Israel, but they did not act like spiritual fathers, who loved and cared for their spiritual children, when they misused their authority for personal aggrandizement. That abuse of fatherhood is what was being condemned.

Friar Lacordaire wrote a beautiful poem about the duty, dignity, and role of priests. This poem makes it clear why priests called ‘father.’ “To live in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures; to be a member of each family, yet belonging to none; to share all sufferings; to penetrate all secrets; to heal all wounds; to go from men to God and offer Him their prayers; to return from God to men to bring pardon and hope; to have a heart of fire for charity and a heart of bronze for chastity; to teach and to pardon, console and bless always – what a glorious life! And it is yours, O Priest of Jesus Christ!” Friar Lacordaire points out the fact that a priest’s parish is his spiritual family and like a natural father, he

must guide, protect, nourish, and raise it up according to the dictates of the faith. It is in this shepherding role that a priest is a father.

When addressing a priest by mail or by another official method, then "Reverend" is used. Father is a familiar phrase usually said when addressing a priest in conversation. Priests may also receive the honorary title of Monsignor from the Pope via the bishop of the diocese.

Finally, if a priest has an important position "Very Reverend" is used.

- From "The Catholicism Answer Book - The 300 Most Frequently Asked Questions"