

In the Bible, Jesus says you shall not use the term “Father” because we have only one Father in heaven. So why does the Catholic Church use “Father” to address priests?

And by what name do you call your male parent? ... This question is a common one posed by fundamentalist Christians as they try to attack the hierarchy of the Catholic Church using the verse: Mt. 23:9. But it's important to put the verse in context. Let's start by including the verses before and after: *“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.”* (Mt. 23:8-10) Why do those that object to calling priests *father*, not also object to referring to others as *teacher* or *master*. (The word *mister* is a variant of the word *master*.)

It's okay to call your educator at school *teacher* and also call him *Mr. Brown*. And obviously, Jesus didn't intend for us to avoid calling our biological fathers by the word *father*. So what does this passage mean? This passage is a teaching on humility. In the verses prior to the passage, Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for lording it over the people. He says: *“They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation ‘Rabbi.’”* (Mt: 23-7) Jesus tells his disciples not to act like the Pharisees; not to look for titles of honor. He says: *“The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”* (Mt. 23:11-12)

It is clear that Jesus is not speaking literally when He says: *“Call no one on earth your father.”* The idea of spiritual fatherhood can be seen all through the New Testament. For example, St. Paul says: *“I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment”*. (Philemon 10) And St. John calls the men of his community fathers: *“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.”* (1 John 2:13) Does it seem possible that Paul and John would write words of scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that were inconsistent with the intent of the Gospels?

Deacon Joe