

## Why Do Catholics Call Their Priests “Father”?



Fr. Dwight Longenecker  
Pastor, Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church

One of the most common questions asked by non-Catholic Christians is, “Why do you Catholics call your priest ‘Father’ when Jesus clearly says in Matthew 23:9 ‘Call no man on earth your Father.’ “? It’s a good question, and the answer is another question right back at ya. “Why do you have eyes and hands?” The non-Catholic might well scratch their heads at the return question, but I would add, “Jesus said, ‘If your hand offends you cut it off and if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out.’ Have you really never sinned with your hands and your eyes?”

Obviously there are a good number of Jesus’ sayings that none of us understand as literal commandments for all time and for all Christians everywhere.

To understand the Scriptures fully we need to understand their context. Jesus follows in the traditions of Jewish teachers who used exaggeration to make their point. Just as he did not literally expect his disciples to cut off their hands and pluck out their eyes, so he did not intend his instruction about calling men “Father” to be taken literally.

We know this is the case because in the same passage he tells his disciples not to accept the title “Rabbi” but he himself does not object when he is called by that name. He also tells them not to call anyone “teacher” or “master”. Do non-Catholics who object to Catholics calling their priest “Father” refer to their school teachers with some other term than “teacher”? Do their colleges and universities refuse to hand out Master’s degrees? I don’t think so.

In Jesus’ society some rabbis gathered an adoring group of devotees who gave them titles of honor, but just as some pastors today become the domineering leader of a cult or sect, so it was in Jesus’ time. These religious leaders demanded an unreasonable level of loyalty and lived lofty lives of self righteousness and hypocrisy. That is what Jesus is attacking--not just the outward sign of calling someone “Father, Rabbi, Teacher or Master.”

In all our churches we should be on the lookout for the kind of leader who puts himself on a pedestal, demands unreasonable loyalty, dominates his flock and manipulates and abuses his people. These religious hypocrites will gather wherever there is religion, and insecure people who long for religious certainty will always be their gullible sheep.

On the other hand, the positive religious leader is one who is a Good Shepherd and a wise father. The idea that the pastor is a good and loving father is woven throughout the rest of the New Testament where we see that

the apostles saw themselves as spiritual fathers.

Paul regularly referred to Timothy as his child and son, “To Timothy, my true child in the faith: grace, mercy, and

and John repeatedly refers to his flock as his children (1 John 2:1); “No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children follow the truth” (3 John 4).

By referring to these people as their spiritual sons and daughters, Peter, Paul, and John acknowledge their own roles as spiritual fathers. In support of this truth we see that Paul explicitly refers to himself as a spiritual father to the believers in Corinth, “I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 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” (1 Cor. 4:14–15).

Since the Bible frequently speaks of this spiritual fatherhood, we Catholics acknowledge it and follow the custom of the apostles by calling priests “father.” Catholics know that as members of a parish, they have been committed to a priest’s spiritual care, consequently they have great respect and affection for priests and call them “father.” Priests, in turn, follow the apostles’ biblical example by referring to members of their flock as “my son” or “my child”.

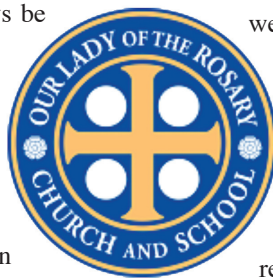
This affectionate and respectful relationship is a reminder to the priest to be the right kind of spiritual father and good shepherd. At the heart of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 23 is also the hard truth that believers must avoid the temptation to idolize their religious teacher. All of us--Catholic and non-Catholic alike--should remember that the priest points us to Christ the True High Priest. The pastor points us to Jesus the Good Shepherd, and our fathers in the faith should reflect on earth the strong and radiant love of our Father in heaven.

*If you have questions regarding Catholic beliefs and practices, Father Longenecker will try to answer them in future columns. Please send your questions to [olr@charlestdiocese.org](mailto:olr@charlestdiocese.org).*

Father Longenecker’s book, *More Christianity*, is a friendly explanation of the Catholic faith for Evangelical Protestants. The book retails for \$16.95, but is offered to readers of this ad for \$10.00. Reply to the email address above to order your copy.

converts in this way: “To Titus, my true child in a common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior” (Titus 1:4); “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become...” (Philem. 10). These men were not Paul’s literal, biological sons. Instead he is writes to them lovingly as their Father in God.

Peter followed the same custom, referring to Mark as his son: (1 Pet. 5:13). Paul referred to the Christians at Corinth and Galatia as his children. (2 Cor. 12:14) (Gal. 4:19)



*Our Lady of the Rosary*  
**CATHOLIC CHURCH**  
[olrgreenville.com](http://olrgreenville.com)