

"What Do You Mean *Father* Mario Romero?"



A True Story

Recently, I purchased a radio from a local department store and, upon returning to the Church rectory, I discovered that it didn't work properly. I returned, once again, to the store where I had bought it and asked the sales clerk if I could exchange it for another one. She said that that would be fine but first she had to fill out a defective goods return form. "What is your name?" she asked me as she began to fill out the paperwork. "Father Mario Romero," I replied. She paused a little while and responded, "What do you mean *Father* Mario Romero? Aren't you Catholics aware that in the Bible Jesus says, 'Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven' (Matt 23:9)? I'll record your name as *Reverend* Mario Romero. O.K.

A Catholic Response

A widely-accepted approach that Catholic and Protestant Bible Scholars often use to determine the meaning of a particular passage from Scripture is to do a "word study." A "word study" is a search of the Scriptures to see if key words in the particular passage being considered appear elsewhere in the Bible and, if they do, discovers what meaning(s) these words have when they are used in these other places. If Jesus' words in Matt 23:9 are supposed to mean that He has forbidden Christians to use the title "father" (Greek: *pater*) to refer to another human being, there shouldn't be any other places in the New Testament where that title is used to refer to a person—right?

If one opens a Bible concordance and looks under the word "father," one will discover 124 instances in the New Testament alone where human beings are called "father" (Greek: *pater*)! A small sampler include the following:

- Jesus Christ Himself calls human beings "father" (Greek: *pater*) numerous times:

- "What *father* [Greek: *pater*] among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish" (Luke 11:11)?
- "...a *father* [Greek: *pater*] will be divided against his son and a son against his *father* [Greek: *pater*]..." (Luke 12:53).
- "If anyone comes to me without hating his *father* [Greek: *pater*] and mother ... he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).
- "honor your *father* [Greek: *pater*] and your mother " (Matt 19:19).
- In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul calls Abraham (a human being) "father": "...[F]ollow the path of faith that our *father* [Greek: *pater*] Abraham walked..." (Rom 4:12).
- In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Stephen calls human beings "father": "...My brothers and *fathers* [Greek: *pater*], listen. The God of glory appeared to our *father* Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia..." (Acts 7:2).

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul, an early celibate Christian minister who did not have any natural-born children of his own (cf. 1 Cor 7:8), uses the title "father" to refer to himself: "Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for I became your *father* in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you, be imitators of me. For this reason I am sending you Timothy, who is *my beloved and faithful son in the Lord*..." (1 Cor 4:15-17).

From the incredible number of times that human beings are called "father" (Greek: *pater*) in the New Testament, it appears that there is absolutely nothing wrong with the title in-and-of-itself. Why, then, did the unmarried St. Paul call himself "father" (cf. 1 Cor 4:15-16) and why do Catholics often call their priests "father"?

- Traditionally, a father provides food for his family. In calling a priest "father" the Catholic community is recognizing that he is feeding them with God's Word in the Holy Scriptures (cf. Acts 6:4) and with Jesus' Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist (cf. Luke 22:19-20).
- Traditionally, a father brings new life into the world. In calling a priest "father" the Catholic community is recognizing that, at the baptismal font, he, in the name of God (whom Jesus reveals in Matt 28:19 to be *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*),² is, supernaturally, bringing new Christians into the world (cf. John 3:1-5, 22).
- Traditionally, a father counsels and encourages members of his family to lead good and upright lives. Scripture speaks about St. Paul performing this important aspect of fatherhood for the Christian community: "As you know, we treated each one of you *as a father treats his children*, exhorting and encouraging you

and insisting that you conduct yourselves as worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:11-12). One can clearly see how Catholic priests "father" in the spiritual realm in much the same way that natural fathers "father" in the secular realm.³

Note that in the Scriptures, Jesus makes the clear statement that He is *the Good Shepherd* (cf. John 10:14) while at the same time he also commissions *certain human beings* to shepherd His People in His physical absence (cf. John 21:15-17; Eph 4:11). In the Scriptures, Jesus is identified as *the great High Priest* (cf. Heb 3:1) while at the same time we read that *all* Christians are invited to share in Christ's priesthood (cf. 1 Pet 2:5-9; Rev 1:6). In the Scriptures Jesus is identified as *the King of kings* (cf. 1 Tim 6: while at the same time the Bible says that Jesus will share Kingship with *all* faithful Christians (who in Rev 3:21 are pictured wearing crowns and sitting on thrones and "reigning" right next to Jesus, the Lord of lords and the King of kings). In exactly same way, a Catholic "father" (a priest) shares in a small and tally subordinate way in the Fatherhood of God as he exercises ministry, in Jesus' name, to God's people.⁴

Actually, in speaking about the often-hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23:1-10, Jesus prohibits the use of *three* titles in reference to them: "rabbi" (*meaning: "teacher"*); "father" (*in the spiritual sense*); and "master" (*meaning: "leader"*).⁵ Jesus tells the sometimes spiritually-misguided Scribes and Pharisees that, since they were presently failing to carry out their appointed roles of *teaching* Divine truths to God's people, spiritually *fathering* them and *leading* them in the pursuit of holiness, they are currently undeserving of their titles of "father," "master," or "rabbi."

From looking at the *whole* of the New Testament, it appears that what Jesus is saying in Matthew 23:9 is simply a restatement of the First Commandment: "You shall not have other gods besides me" (cf. Exodus 20:3; Deut 5:7). Or, in other words, remember that there is only one *heavenly* Father (who is the source of all earthly fatherhood).⁶

When Catholics call their priests "father" they are certainly not saying that they are equal to God the Father in heaven (*believe me, I am far from it!*). It simply says that, like St. Paul in his God-given role as spiritual "father" of various early Christian communities (cf. 1 Cor 4:15-16), the priest is also exercising a spiritual "fatherly" role as he feeds his congregation with the Holy Eucharist and with the Word of God, as he brings new Christians into the world through the waters of Baptism, and as he encourages and exhorts members of his spiritual "family" to lead holy and upstanding lives.⁷

The minute that any Catholic priest starts to become hard-hearted and begins to behave like a little "god" himself, Jesus would give to him the same message that He gave to the Scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23:9: "Since you are not now acting as the true spiritual 'father' that you were called by God to be, you are presently undeserving of the title that the members of your faith community use to address you."⁸

Let us pray for all Catholic priests and ministers of all Christian denominations. May we never be "pharisaical" but always live like the committed spiritual "fathers," "leaders," and "teachers" that God calls us to be.

Did the Early Christians Use the Title "Father" (Greek: *pater*) to Refer to Both Natural Human Fathers AND "Spiritual Fathers" of the Christian Community?

- As was discussed previously, the New Testament authors called human beings "father" (Greek: *pater*) an amazing 124 times in their Biblical writings!: Cf. Matt 3:9; Luke 1:32; John 4:12, etc. Refer to any Bible concordance for a complete listing of the remainder of these Scriptural citations.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. *The Eerdmans Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (compiled by Richard E. Whitaker), (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 360-362.

² To read more about the Biblical reality of the Blessed Trinity cf. John 14:25-26; Matt 28:19; Luke 3:21-22; 2 Cor 13:13; Jude 1:20-21; Gen 18:1-2; Gen 1:26. (Cf. also Chapter 22 of this book.)

³ Although they are usually not called "father" by members of their congregation, most Protestant ministers spiritually "father" their congregation in many of these same ways.

⁴ St. Paul's role of spiritual "father" is clearly displayed as he writes to Timothy: "[T]o Timothy, *my true child in faith*: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Tim 1:2).

⁵ In response to a correspondent who told Catholic apologist Jimmy Akin of a fundamentalist friend who refused to call priests "father", citing Mt 23:8, but instead always referred to them as "Mister", Akins replied: "Well, if that's the way he takes Matthew 23:8 then he is in violation of Matthew 23:10, which says, 'Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ.' If he is calling priests (or anybody else) 'Mister' then he has a problem because 'Mister' is just another form of the word 'Master' (arising around 1545). He can check a dictionary on that. Point out to him that if, contrary to the example of the apostles referring to themselves as the spiritual fathers of those under their care (1 Cor. 4:14-15, 2 Cor. 12:14, Phil. 2:22, Philem. 10), whom they regarded as their spiritual children (1 Cor. 4:17, 1 Tim. 1:2, 18, 2 Tim. 2:2, 2 Tim. 2:1), the title 'Father' is strictly forbidden then the term 'Mister' is equally forbidden by Matthew 23."

⁶ St. Paul writes about God the Father being the source of all earthly fatherhood: "...I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named..." (Eph 3:14-15). Note how, in the Old Testament, priesthood involved spiritual "fatherhood": "...Be a father and priest to me..." (Judges 17:10); "Come with us and be our father and priest..." (Judges 18:19).

⁷ Note that Jesus' prohibition regarding the use the title "father" to refer to the often self-serving Jewish Scribes and Pharisees (cf. Matt 23:9) could not have possibly referred to New Testament priests since, at that point in Jesus' ministry, the New Testament priesthood had not

yet been established by Him. Only later do we read the Scriptural account of Jesus commissioning ("ordaining") the twelve Apostles and commanding them to offer the Eucharistic Bread and Wine (which He declared to be His Body and Blood) "in memory of [Him]" (cf. Matt 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20). [Elsewhere Father Romero talks about the sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic Meal established by Christ—which would necessitate the ministry of a priest.]

⁸ As a Catholic priest, I personally have no problem with a non-Catholic Christian refusing to refer to me as "father." Since I am not currently feeding him with Jesus' Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist (cf. John 6:48-68) and God's Word in the Holy Scriptures (Acts 6:4), since I am not currently baptizing him and the other members of his family so that they can become "born again" as children of God (cf. John 3:1-5, 22), and since I am not currently counselling and encouraging him to lead a holy and upright life (cf. 1 Thess 2:11-12), I am not presently spiritually "fathering" him. The non-Catholic Christian should not deny, though, that I, in Jesus' Name, rightfully spiritually "father" the members of the Catholic Christian community.

From: Fr. Mario Romero, *Unabridged Christianity: Biblical Answers to Common Objections About the Roman Catholic Faith* (Queenship Publ. Co., 1999), Chapter 1 (pp. 1-6).