

## A Catholic Response to Matthew 23:9

The use of titles for those who have been properly installed in the offices of the Body of Christ is an appropriate way to honor the authority of Christ which these persons carry. This includes the title used to reference our spiritual fathers, the priests.

*Current misunderstandings:* Since Jesus forbade the title “Father” to anyone but God. Catholic use of this title in reference to men is a violation of Scripture.

<sup>1</sup> Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; <sup>3</sup> so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. <sup>4</sup> They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, <sup>6</sup> and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup> and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. <sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. <sup>9</sup> **And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.** <sup>10</sup> Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. <sup>11</sup> He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; <sup>12</sup> whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Mt 23:1-12)

Jesus tells us not to use the title “Father” [is the claim].

<sup>24</sup> And he called out, `Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' (Luke 16:24)

However, He uses the word in parables.

<sup>22</sup> Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the **fathers**), and you circumcise a man upon the Sabbath. (John 7:22)

He calls other human beings “father.”

<sup>9</sup> And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!  
<sup>10</sup> Blessed is the kingdom of our **father** David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!" <sup>11</sup> And he entered Jerusalem, and went into the temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. (Mark 11:9-10)

And He allows others to use it as well without rebuke.

<sup>1</sup> And the high priest said, "Is this so?"<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said: "Brethren and **fathers**, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our **father** Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, (Acts 7:1-2)

Stephen, the first martyr, uses the title right before he sees a vision of Jesus beckoning him to heaven.

<sup>1</sup> What then shall we say about Abraham, our **forefather** according to the flesh? (Rom. 4:1)

<sup>16</sup> That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants -- not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the **father** of us all, <sup>17</sup> as it is written, "I have made you the **father** of many nations" -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup> In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the **father** of many nations; as he had been told, "So shall your descendants be." (Rom. 4:16-18)

Paul uses the term repeatedly. Some say the prohibition is not on naming biological fathers such as Abraham and David, but on naming anyone a spiritual father. [Paul refers to many spiritual leaders as father.]

<sup>14</sup> I do not write this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> *I urge you, then, be imitators of me.* (1 Corinthians 4:14-16)

Yet Paul calls himself a spiritual “father,” and urges us to imitate him.

<sup>11</sup> for you know how, like a **father** with his children, we [the elders] exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you <sup>12</sup> to lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:11)

In fact, he refers to all the elders [aka. the presbyters, aka. the priests] of the Church as “father”.

<sup>13</sup> I am writing to you, **fathers**, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. <sup>14</sup> I write to you, **fathers**, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1 John 2:13-14)

And Paul acknowledges they are fathers because of their knowledge of God. In fact, it is from God that the designation “father” derives.

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, (Ephesians 3:14-15)

The spiritual fatherhood of the priest is derived from the same place biological fatherhood draws its power—both are a participation and a sharing in the Fatherhood of God.

Therefore:

**Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope**, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, **those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame**. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the will of God, than for doing evil. (1 Peter 3:15-16)

Source:

Kellmyer, Steve. *Bible Basics: An Introductory Study Guide to the Catholic Faith*. (Basilica Press: Granville Ohio), 2000.