



In the Catholic Church, it is common to call priests “Father,” but this practice raises questions and objections, especially among some Protestant groups who cite Matthew 23:9: **“Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.”**

So, is it wrong to call a priest “Father”? Does this title have biblical and theological foundations? In this article, we will explore the origin, history, and deep meaning of this title, dispelling myths and offering clarity on its legitimate use within the Christian tradition.

1. A Title Rooted in Sacred Scripture

To understand why we call priests “Father,” we must first examine how this term is used in the Bible. Despite objections based on Matthew 23:9, Scripture itself uses the term “father” in various contexts without contradicting Christ’s teaching.

1.1. The Use of “Father” in the Bible

God is our Father above all, but the Bible also acknowledges human figures with spiritual authority as “fathers”:

- **St. Paul refers to himself as the “father” of the faithful:** “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 Corinthians 4:15).
- **Abraham is called the “father” of believers** (Romans 4:16).
- **The prophet Elisha addresses Elijah, saying:** “My father, my father!” (2 Kings 2:12).
- **The title “father” is used for elders and spiritual leaders** in the Old Testament (Judges 17:10; Genesis 45:8).

If the Bible itself calls spiritual leaders “father,” clearly Christ was not prohibiting the use of the term in an absolute sense.

1.2. What Did Jesus Mean in Matthew 23:9?

When Jesus said, **“Call no man your father on earth,”** He was condemning the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who sought honorific titles for their own pride rather than to serve God. The context of the passage (Matthew 23:1-12) shows that Christ was criticizing those who sought personal glory through titles, not the legitimate use of “father” for spiritual figures.



If we interpreted Matthew 23:9 in a strictly literal way, we would also have to avoid calling anyone “teacher” or “doctor,” since Jesus also says:

“Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ” (Matthew 23:10).

However, in other passages, Scripture speaks of “teachers” in the Church (Ephesians 4:11; James 3:1). Thus, the problem is not the use of the title itself but the abuse of spiritual authority.

2. Priesthood as Spiritual Fatherhood

The title “Father” for priests is not merely a formality but reflects a profound theological reality: the priest participates in God’s fatherhood through his ministry.

2.1. The Priest as an Instrument of God in Spiritual Generation

St. Paul told the Corinthians: **“I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel”** (1 Corinthians 4:15). Priests do the same: they generate spiritual children through preaching, baptism, and the sacraments. They are not “fathers” in a biological sense but as spiritual guides who lead the faithful to God.

2.2. The Priesthood as a Reflection of God’s Fatherhood

God reveals Himself as Father, and Christ, in His humanity, shows us the face of the Father. However, He desired to have His representatives on earth. Priests, acting **in persona Christi** (in the person of Christ), reflect this fatherhood.

When a priest absolves sins, baptizes, or consecrates the Eucharist, he acts as Christ, who is the image of the Father. His fatherhood is not by his own right but because God has made him a mediator of His grace.



3. A Title with a Strong Tradition in the Church

From the earliest centuries, Christians have called their spiritual leaders “Father.” Here are some historical examples:

- **St. Ignatius of Antioch (1st century)** urged the faithful to obey their bishops and presbyters as spiritual fathers.
- **The Egyptian monks (3rd-4th centuries)** called their superiors “Abba” (Father).
- **St. Benedict (6th century)** established that monks should call their abbot “Father.”

The Church has always understood that spiritual fatherhood is not an empty title but a sacred mission.

4. Protestant Objections and How to Respond

Many Protestants object to calling priests “Father,” but their arguments are based on misinterpretations. Let’s address the most common objections:

4.1. “Jesus Forbade Calling Anyone ‘Father’”

As we have seen, Matthew 23:9 should not be understood in an absolute, literal sense. If it were, we would not be able to call our biological fathers “father,” which would be absurd and contradict the Fourth Commandment:

| *“Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).*

4.2. “The Catholic Priesthood Is Not Biblical”

The priesthood has roots in the Old Testament (Leviticus 21) and is fulfilled in the New Testament with the apostles. Jesus instituted a ministerial priesthood when He said:

| *“Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19),*



giving the apostles the power to consecrate the Eucharist. St. Paul also speaks of the priestly ministry:

“To be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God” (Romans 15:16).

4.3. “Only God Is Father”

God is the ultimate Father, but that does not exclude the spiritual fatherhood of priests. Paul himself called himself “father” of his communities (1 Corinthians 4:15).

5. Conclusion: A Title That Expresses a Deep Truth

Calling a priest “Father” is neither an error nor a heresy but a recognition of his spiritual mission. It is not an empty honorific but a reflection of his role as a guide, protector, and mediator of God’s grace.

When a Catholic calls a priest “Father,” he is not taking away God’s glory but acknowledging that God works through His ministers. As St. Paul said:

“What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5).

May this knowledge help us appreciate and respect our priests, true spiritual fathers on our journey to eternal life.