

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS 101

Who's Your Father?

Poor Scriptural interpretation is rampant in our society, especially in the “Bible Belt” where many fundamentalists attempt to read and understand Scripture *literally* despite the many conflicts and contradictions that occur thru this type of interpretation. Because of this, Catholics frequently have to defend their faith against a storm of misunderstanding and misinformation. Therefore, I am going to offer for the next twelve months a series of “Catholic Apologetics,” or defenses of the faith. These will cover topics and questions that frequently come up in regards to Catholic teaching and practice. Without further ado, I present to you our first question—

“Why do Catholics call their priests ‘Father’ when Jesus told us in the New Testament to call no man ‘Father’?”

Many non-Catholics take offense at priests being called “father” since Jesus states in the Gospel of Matthew, “call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (23:9). However, the meaning of this verse does not have to do with how we address another person. Rather, Jesus is trying to make the point that no one on earth should seek after prestige or ever try to take the place of our Heavenly Father

If Jesus was literally meaning that it is a sin to call a human being “father,” then Jesus himself would be a sinner! In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to Abraham (a mere human being) as our “father” (John 8:56). Despite His doing this, we know that Jesus was without sin. In the Letter to the Hebrews it states— “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrew 4:15). If Jesus was without sin, yet called a human being “father,” then this must not be a sin in and of itself. The same thing can be true for Jesus’ comment that no man should be called “teacher.” The Apostle Paul calls himself the “teacher of men.”¹ What then did Jesus mean when he stated that we should call no man father or teacher?

Put in their greater context, Jesus’ words explain the importance of humility. No human being should seek after “the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men” (Matthew 23:6-7). In the Catholic Church, the word “father” is used, not as a title of prestige, honor, or pride, but rather, it is a familial word reminding us that we are all a family in Christ. The same thing is true for the title “teacher.” It should never be a title of prestige, but rather, a reminder of humility and God’s tremendous goodness. All of this becomes even more apparent by looking at how the Early Church interpreted this afore mentioned Scripture passage from Matthew.

“It is a difficulty that the Apostle against this command calls himself the teacher of the Gentiles; and that in monasteries in their common conversation, they call one another, Father. It is to be cleared thus. It is one thing to be father or master by nature, another by sufferance. Thus when we call any man our father, we do it to show respect to his age, not as regarding him as the author of our being.”

-Saint Jerome, as found in Catena Aurea by St. Thomas Aquinas.

¹ 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11