

The first thing I want to do is to clear the air regarding a particular phrase from today's Gospel reading that is so often misconstrued and taken out of context.

There is a principle of biblical interpretation that the Catholic Church holds and expects all Catholic bible scholars, clergy and catechists to keep and to practice. The principle is that every passage of Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in relation to all the others. In Catholicism, the Bible is indeed accepted as inerrant. Holy Scripture is the Word of God and it is without error – that is, in its entirety, as a whole. As Catholics we may not lift any individual passage out of Holy Scripture and build a theology around it, nor can we take any passage of Holy Scripture out of context.

There's an anecdote that is usually used by English teachers to make a point about comma usage, but I think it applies here as well. The Smith family has gathered together at the Smith's house for dinner. All the aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents are there. When it is time to serve dinner, Mrs. Smith tells her son to gather everyone to the table and particularly to make sure his grandmother gets the message. So little Johnny goes to the back door and calls out, "It's time to eat, Grandma!" The next door neighbor who is also sitting on his back porch hears this and concludes that the Smiths are cannibals because he heard the boy say that it was time to eat Grandma. Johnny did in fact say those words, but not in the context that the neighbor has misconstrued.

Additionally in biblical interpretation, we must, as Catholics dig a little deeper into and behind the text to find the meaning that the original author intended. Yes, Holy Scripture is indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was also written down by human authors at a specific time and place and is conditioned by the cultural norms of that time and place. The task of Catholic biblical interpreters is to do some research

about these things so that we in the 21st century can understand what was being said at the time, and then apply the truth conveyed in a reading of Scripture to our present times.

As you might expect, the phrase I am talking about is when Jesus says, “Call no one on earth Father”. Not all, but some Protestants perceive that this command of Jesus is ignored by Roman Catholics who, in spite of Jesus’ clear prohibition, go right ahead and call their priests “Father” anyway.

Maybe some of you have had to deal with this indictment from your Protestant friends. Or maybe some Protestants have challenged you about other Roman Catholic doctrines. Just last week, a parishioner here asked me about a conflict she was having with some of her former Catholic, now Protestant family members.

Now, make no mistake: Protestants have a great love for the Lord and for the Bible. And when they read in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus says not to call anyone on earth “father”, and then they look at the Catholic Church and see us calling our priests “father” they believe our souls are in danger because for some reason we are disobeying the Lord.

If we take the time to look at what Jesus is really saying, it refers to the Pharisees in NT times. To understand what a passage of Scripture is saying, we have to consider what comes before it, and what follows after it. What is Jesus talking about just before He says not to call anyone on earth “father”? The Pharisees. Some of the Jews were in the practice of calling them “Father”. There were no Roman Catholic priests at the time, so it couldn’t possibly refer to them. Jesus was forbidding His listeners from looking to the Pharisees as father figures, and not to be their children figures. In other words, they were not to grow up in the Pharisees’ teachings, which were false and would only lead people away from God their true Father.

Jesus' remark is not a general prohibition. Even on the Protestants' false assumptions, it could not be the case that Jesus would forbid His followers from doing something, and then we find, in Holy Scripture itself, some others actually doing the very thing He said not to do. In St. Paul's letter to Philemon, we read, ¹⁰ I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose **father** I have become in my imprisonment, ¹¹ who was once useless to you but is now useful^[i] to [both] you and me." These are St. Paul's own words. Saul was chosen by Jesus Christ Himself, on the road to Damascus, to become Paul, His missionary to the Gentiles. Didn't St. Paul get the message to call no one on earth father? Would Jesus call Paul into His service as a missionary to the Gentiles in such a dramatic way, but neglect to mention that he was forbidden from calling someone on earth "father" especially himself as father of Onesimus?

And from St. Paul's letter to the Romans, we read:

Now we assert that "faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." Thus he was to be the **father** of all the uncircumcised who believe, so that to them [also] righteousness might be credited, ¹² as well as the **father** of the circumcised . . ."

He goes on to say, ". . . to those who follow the faith of Abraham, who is the **father** of all of us, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you **father** of many nations." He is our **father** in the sight of God, in whom he believed, . . ."

And from First Corinthians, 4:4-16, St. Paul says,

¹⁴ I am writing you this not to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.^[a] ¹⁵ Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your **father** in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

¹⁶ Therefore, I urge you, be imitators of me.

How could it possibly be that Jesus warns not to call anyone on earth father, but Paul does that very thing, and calls Abraham “the father of us all”?

Besides, a Catholic priest represents and obeys God the Father, teaches His truths and guides the people of God to Him. The Pharisees weren't doing that, and that is why Jesus says not to call them father.

The other thing that tried Jesus' patience was that the Pharisees were pretenders. They were hypocrites. Jesus has little or no patience with hypocrisy.

In New Testament times, **Phylacteries** were boxes holding Scripture verses that people had during prayer. These were worn by strapping them to the forehead with leather cords. **Tassles** were worn on the fringes of the robes, and were reminders to the wearer of keeping the commandments – the longer the tassel, the better.

These things were plainly visible and could be abused to give a false impression of piety to the witnessing public, while at the same time, the wearer of these items couldn't care less about memorizing Scripture verses or keeping any commandments. But he wanted others to think that's what he was about, and so he pretended.

The Pharisees also loved glory, namely their own. They loved the attention, they loved the honor and praise they got from people. Imagine if they had Facebook back then – the Pharisees would be constantly logging on to see how many Likes they got.

Of course, not only were some people of that time calling them “Father”, but they very likely wanted to be like them. Others saw the Pharisees in these places of honor at banquets, synagogues and in the marketplaces, and they probably wanted

that for themselves, too. It's kind of like some people in our times who want us to notice the kinds of houses they live in, or the cars they drive, or the kind of watch they have, or what position in society they hold.

One problem with all of this is that it runs contrary to the truth. People who put up a front, an appearance of being pious, when in fact they're not pious at all, know the truth about themselves, even though they are deceiving others. I've often heard actors say that their greatest fear is people finding out they actually don't know how to act. Pretenders have to live with this deception. It's not okay. Their consciences do bother them. It's not good.

Secondly, those who seek comfort or love or satisfaction and fulfillment in anything other than the love and mercy of God will ultimately not only be disappointed, but there is the very real possibility that they will be eternally lost, unless they change and come around to the Truth.

As the Savior of humanity, as the One who came to Reconcile God and Man, Jesus cannot let His beloved people persist in wandering away from God. He cannot force us to drop the pretense and the self-aggrandizement, nor can He force us to repent and to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves, but you can be certain going He's to make sure we hear the Truth.

It seems to me that it's the nature of humility that it is exalted and that self-exaltation is naturally humbled. How do most of us react when we encounter someone who is egotistical, arrogant, or who constantly boasts of his own achievements and worthiness? What do most of us think of someone who only thinks of himself, and wants you to think of no one but himself? On the other hand,

how do we generally regard the selfless, those who sacrifice their own interests for the sake of others?

To the best of my knowledge, Mother Theresa never boasted of her achievements or called attention to herself in an attempt to gain the world's honor and respect. It's probably safe to say that Mother Theresa wasn't the least bit concerned over what the world thought of her, but she was rather keen on what Jesus thought of her.

When we exalt ourselves, we leave no room within us for the Lord to exalt us.

When we empty ourselves of ourselves, there is space within our souls for the Lord to come and make a dwelling there fit for Himself and the Father. There is no greater exaltation than that. Amen.