

Father, Teacher, Master
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 23:1-12)

“Call no man on earth ‘father;’ you have one Father in heaven.” This well-known saying of Jesus is often cited by non-Catholics against our Catholic practice of doing this very thing: calling priests “father.” Yet how do we respond?

The simple response would be to retort, “what do you then call your own human fathers?” If this saying of Jesus is a prohibition against calling Catholic priests “father,” then is it also a prohibition against calling anyone whatsoever “father,” and all are guilty of violating it.

This saying is not a prohibition, but an example of the Lord’s teaching style. He deliberately makes provocative – often humorous – statements in order to get the listener’s attention, raise questions, and call attention to something important. “If your eye is the problem, gouge it out...” “If someone steals your tunic, give him your coat also...” “I did not come to bring peace but the sword...”

Even so, the statement qualifies and changes the way we are to understand the title “father,” and it can never again be used except in the sense that Jesus teaches: with reference to God the Father in heaven.

There are actually three roles that Jesus highlights and qualifies for Christians: the role of the “father” (which by extension also includes motherhood),¹ the role of the “teacher”² (especially in the sense of moral and religious guidance), and the role of the “master” (“boss”).³ In each of these roles, man is established in a position of responsibility for others. He has authority and even power ‘over’ their lives; they are ‘under’ him in a dependent way. These are legitimate, necessary, and natural roles established by God for man and human society.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus highlights the *spiritual significance* of these roles entrusted to certain individuals, and therefore their sacred obligations. They are special roles, in that they share directly in the authority of God, and His solicitude for His people. Thus, even though men may be established in these roles, they always pertain to God, and belong to Him alone.

What Jesus prohibits in this teaching is the *abuse* of these offices, which occurs any time the father or teacher or master directs the one in his charge to himself instead of to God; any time he misuses his authority over others for selfish ends.

¹ Our neutered society prefers the term “parent.”

² i.e. “Rabbi”

³ In the economic system at the time of Jesus, the relationship of a servant to a master was much more dependent and personal than the fluid worker relationship that exists today.

The most important of these roles is fatherhood (including motherhood). This role is a sacred responsibility, because by means of it the child comes to experience the authority of love of God. The fourth commandment (to honor and obey your father and mother) makes this clear. Parental authority and love is not simply the authority and love of the two parents for their children, it is the very authority and love of God Himself. In other words, parents minister the love of God, they are conduits or channels for God to manifest Himself.

There are profound and practical implications for parents to consider. First, their children do not “belong” to them; they “belong” to God, but are “entrusted” to them. The task of raising and disciplining children is a task undertaken in God’s name, and for God; not simply in the parents’ own name, or for their own ends. The discipline which parents administer must be worthy of God’s holiness: that is, it must be strict with regard to those behaviors that are sinful, even “absolute” and uncompromising with regard to the moral law. But discipline can never be arbitrary, disproportionate to the offense, or related to the frustration and inconvenience of the parents. Parents may never “take out their problems”, their impatience, on their children. Because God would never do such a thing, and parents must act in His name. *This* is what Jesus means when he says we have one true Father, and He is in heaven.

Additionally, even in situations where a father may be absent, fatherhood is still necessary in the life of the child. Jesus’ own situation illustrates this role of fatherhood by the vocation of St. Joseph. Even though he was not the biological father of Jesus, and perhaps because of this circumstance, St. Joseph best illustrates the true role of fatherhood according to Jesus’ teaching: an earthly sacrament of God’s heavenly Fatherhood.

Likewise, when the role of “master” is understood according to the teaching of Jesus (all exercise of human leadership has reference to God’s Lordship over us all), it has a transforming effect on society. Jesus reminds his followers, “*you are all brethren*” (Mt 23:8). It is the same expression used by St. Paul in his letter to Philemon, when intervening on behalf of an escaped slave whom he is returning to his human “master.” He tells Philemon he is returning Onesimus to him “*no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother*” (Phm 1:16). He reiterates the new Christian relationship between masters and servants in several of his letters (Eph 6:5-9, Col 4:1). Under Christianity institutionalized slavery, as well as all forms of abuse toward workers, falls away. No Christian may use another man for his own aggrandizement: Christian economics always emphasizes the good of all parties as the goal.

Likewise, Christianity understands the role of Teacher as a sacred vocation, a responsibility to guide disciples into the way of truth. Modern educational systems fall far short of the Biblical vision, which envisions the teacher as the one who instructs disciples in the *Wisdom* of God. The role of the Christian teacher is not merely to impart knowledge, but to form character. It is a sacred task, which requires careful avoidance of personal opinions, and skirting or justifying areas where the teacher himself may be weak or sinful.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is beginning his great confrontation and exhortation of the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and failure. The roles he describes – father, teacher, master – are shared by laity, but they pertain above all to the clergy, since as Jesus emphasizes, these roles have a particular relationship with God's own authoritative role. They are *sacred* responsibilities, *religious* obligations. It is bad enough when the laity fail in these roles, but it is intolerable for the religious fathers/teachers/masters to fail in these roles, failing to recognize the holy and sacred character of their office, failing to “practice what they preach.” It will not go well on judgment day for clergy who are bad fathers by their example, who corrupt God's truth in their teaching, and whose administrations impose burdens and obstacles for the faithful who must actually do the work of the Church.

Nevertheless, even here Jesus' teaching makes a crucial distinction that enables the laity to contextualize those situations where clergy do indeed fail: “*they occupy the Seat of Moses, therefore do and observe whatsoever they command; but do not follow their example*” (Mt 23:2-3). The human fathers-teachers-masters do indeed bear God's authority and must be obeyed when they exercise their roles – however perfect or imperfect they might be... Thus, for instance, children must obey and honor their parents, even when they are aware that parents make mistakes or are sometimes wrong. But because God alone is the true Father-Teacher-Master, our lives and faith are never dependent on the particular ministry of any individual father-teacher-master.

Christ does not permit us to use the failures of clergy as an excuse for our own failures or abnegation of responsibility. Clergy who have abused victims will burn in hell for their scandals and failures to honor God. Victims who use that as an excuse to turn against God's Church, attacking and undermining her, will join them. God's Fatherhood transcends any human fatherhood, lay or clerical. This important truth is both a condemnation of the fathers who fail to carry out their roles in God's name, and a consolation to those who experience the failures.

Therefore, Jesus is not saying no man on earth is our “father,” but that no earthly fatherhood is true unless it reveals the Fatherhood of God.