

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time – A  
Fr. Chad S. Green  
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church  
Sammamish, Washington  
5 November 2023

Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10  
Psalm 131  
1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13  
(Matthew 23:9b, 10b) Matthew 23:1-12

*You Have but One Father in Heaven*

There are three titles that Jesus forbids His disciples to use in today's Gospel: 'Rabbi' or teacher, father, and 'Master'.<sup>1</sup> And He gives us three reasons why this is so:

- "You have but one teacher..."
- "...you have but one Father in heaven."
- and "...you have but one master, the Christ."

So, for us as Catholics, one big question that you might have is *Why do we call priests "Father"?* Some of you might have friends from other Christian communities who question you about this. You might have wondered about it yourself.

This question arises when we take a literal interpretation of Jesus' words in today's Gospel. And, to be fair and consistent with taking Jesus literally in this instance, then one would also have to ask why any Christian uses the word "father" to refer to a man who has a child. And, why any Christian uses the word "teacher" to refer to someone who has students. So, right away, we're seeing that there is a difficulty with holding to the literal interpretation in this instance.

A way to resolve this difficulty is to recognize that there are other lenses of interpretation that we have available to us in understanding the meaning of Sacred Scripture. For example, sometimes Jesus uses a literary technique called *hyperbole*—or exaggeration—to make a point. Such as earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, in the *Sermon on the Mount*, when Jesus says:

"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It

is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna.”<sup>2</sup>

On this occasion, Jesus is not asking all of us to mutilate our bodies. Rather, He’s using *hyperbole* to wake us up to the reality of how harmful sin is to our spiritual health and the threat it is to the gift of eternal life He offers us with Him in Heaven. So often, we are prone to focus on our bodily health and our life in this world above everything else—and at the expense of our spiritual health and with our eternal destiny in mind. Therefore, the *hyperbole* on this occasion is meant to adjust that imbalance, and tip the scales more towards being able to see reality from God’s perspective.

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How else can we know that this might be *hyperbole* that Jesus is using in this instance? We can look at the cultural setting to help us understand the meaning of Jesus’ words. Jesus was speaking at a time when there were a number of false teachers, leading people astray (which could be said of any time). One of the ways they led people astray was by demanding total allegiance and that their followers call them “Father”.<sup>3</sup>

There’s an imbalance and disorder in this type of cultish behavior. The imbalance and disorder is that people were being drawn to follow men rather than God. Another way to say it, men were putting themselves in place of God, and demanding that people follow them. (What deadly sin is it that causes us to put ourselves in place of God? *Pride*.)

Jesus is using *hyperbole* to draw attention to this practice that His listeners were well aware of. To fight against pride, and to put things back in order. Reminding us that we only have one Father in Heaven. God is always our starting point. He’s the source of all life and all fatherhood. If we lose sight of that or begin to forget God, or worship a personality or charismatic person, then we are in danger of falling into error, following false teachings, and

falling into that deadly sin of pride, which leads to death—rather than the life that only God the Father can give us.

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Finally, we can follow the principle of unity in Sacred Scripture, by looking for other places in the New Testament in which the term “father” is used. And we find that St. Paul calls himself the “father” of the Corinthians, in his First Letter to that community:

“...for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

And, also, in his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul refers to them as:

“My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you.”<sup>5</sup>

St. Paul is calling himself a “father”, but he does so in a specific way. In a way that is rooted in Christ Jesus. In a way that shows God the Father to the people. That’s the only way one can truly be and rightly be called a father.

We notice this spirit in today’s Second Reading, as well. In St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, he doesn’t call himself a “father” (rather, he makes an analogy to a mother), but all that he’s describing is an example of being a father and/or mother rooted in God. Nurturing, caring, and—most importantly—giving the people not his own words, but the Word of God.<sup>6</sup>

There are other references in the New Testament to the word “father” being used, as well as the writings of the disciples and theologians of the first few centuries. So, the practice of those closest to Jesus’ words gives us a clue for how we are to interpret His words today. If they did not follow that literally, then it gives us evidence that Jesus was using *hyperbole* in this instance. One commentator stated it this way: “Jesus does not dictate a vocabulary; he demands the right spirit!”<sup>7</sup>

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So, why do we call priests “father”? And, why do we call men who have a child “father”? Or, maybe it’s better to ask *how* we do this. We do so only in a properly ordered way. We do so in order to recognize that these men represent God the Father in our world. That there is some way in which they are participating in the life that only God the Father can give to us.

Fathers (and mothers, for that matter), participate in bringing new life into the world. But, they are not the source of that life. God is the source of all life. When fathers and mothers bring new life into the world, they do well to thank God that Father for allowing them to participate in that miracle. And they do well to rely upon God to help them in living out their holy vocation. Of teaching their children the ways of God. Of modeling God’s love and mercy to them. And of helping them to know God the Father. As humans, we all fall short of this massive responsibility.

But, that’s why it’s so important to always have God as the starting point. If we make ourselves the starting point—for one thing, that’s way too much pressure and burden for a human to carry. Additionally, if we’re the starting point and the focus, then we have no other place to point our children. And, inevitably, it will all come crashing down when we are unable to fill the shoes of God the Father, which no human can fill.

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It’s the same for priests in the Catholic Church. We participate in bringing new life into the world. In the ways that we bring souls to eternal life. Helping people become sons and daughters of God the Father through Baptism. Teaching them about God’s ways and His mercy through preaching and celebrating the Sacraments. In particular, restoring them to life through forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament of Confession.

If a priest begins to replace God. Begins to teach false teachings.<sup>8</sup> Begins to seek the attention or set himself up as a replacement for God the Father, that's where we run into problems. That's when it all comes crashing down. Our role is to help people know the love and mercy of God the Father, and to know their truest identity is a beloved child of God.

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So, why call men who have children “father” and priests “father”? It's not so much a title of honor, as a reminder—and encouragement—for them. A reminder to them of their holy calling. It's a reminder to them that God the Father is with them and that they are called to represent Him as best they can. They will make mistakes. That's why we must continue to pray for all fathers: dads and priests, alike.

I thank you for your prayers for me! I'm grateful for them and I depend on them in my ministry as father in this community. Please know of my prayers for all you fathers out there—and my prayers for all of you and your families and loved ones—that you and everyone will come to know our one Father in Heaven!

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:8-10

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:29-30

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Dwight Longenecker from “Jesus Said ‘Call No Man Father’...Well Catholics?” (6 Dec 2022) (<https://dwightlongenecker.com/jesus-said-call-no-man-father-well-catholics/>):

“Jesus’ words about ‘calling no man Father’ was a cultural reference to warn his disciples against false teachers. In their culture there were leaders of sects (as there are today) that gathered together a community of followers who were expected to give him total allegiance and call him ‘Father’.

So Jesus is warning against false, cult-like sects who would lead people astray. Most of all he was directing their ultimate allegiance to their Heavenly Father. In other words, ‘Don’t follow any man who sets himself up as your ultimate religious authority. That allegiance belongs to your Heavenly Father.’”

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:15

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 4:19

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13

<sup>7</sup> Rev. John C. Kersten, SVD, “A—31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time” in *New Saint Joseph Sunday Missal Complete Edition* (2011), p. 639.

<sup>8</sup> See Malachi 2:1, 8: “And now, priests, this...is for you:...you have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to stumble by your instruction...”