

derived from the word *abba*, the Aramaic Hebrew word father, but in the very familiar sense of 'daddy'. Later, in the Middle Ages, the term 'father' was used to address the mendicant friars – like the Franciscans and Dominicans – since by their preaching, teaching and charitable works they cared for the spiritual and physical needs of all of God's children. Although Franciscans now are all styled Brother regardless of priesthood. In more modern times, the heads of male religious communities or even those who participate in ecumenical councils are given the title 'father'. In the English speaking world, addressing all priests as 'Father' has become customary.

On a more personal note, the title for the individual priest is very humbling. As a priest, "Father" reminds him that he is entrusted with a grave responsibility by our Lord – His faithful people. Just as a father must nourish, instruct, challenge, correct, forgive, listen to and sustain his children, so must a priest do so for his spiritual children. The priest must especially meet the spiritual needs of those entrusted to his care, providing them with the nourishment of our Lord through the sacraments. He must preach the Gospel with fervour and conviction in accord with the mind of the Church, challenging all to continue on that path of conversion which leads to holiness. He must correct those who have erred, but with mercy and compassion. In the same spirit as the father with his prodigal son, the priest must reconcile sinners who have gone astray but seek a way back to God. As a father listens to his child, so must a priest listen to his spiritual children, providing counsel and consolation. A priest must also be mindful of the "physical" needs of

his flock – food, housing, clothing and education.

All of us must pray for our priests, especially those that serve in our own parishes and missions in this diocese, that by God's grace they may strive to fulfil the responsibility of being truly a 'Father' to God's people.

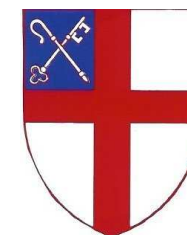
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**Why Call
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In St. Matthew's Gospel Jesus said, "Do not call anyone father, except your Father in Heaven." So why do we call priests, Father?

This question refers to Jesus' teaching found in the Gospel of St. Matthew, when He said, "Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven" (Mt 23:9). Taken literally, we would have to wonder why we do use this title "Father" when Jesus seems to forbid it. First, we must remember the context of the passage. Jesus is addressing the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees – the learned religious leaders of Judaism. Our Lord castigates them for not providing a good example; for creating onerous spiritual burdens for others with their various rules and regulations; for being haughty in exercising their office; and for promoting themselves by looking for places of honour, seeking marks of respect and wearing ostentatious symbols. Basically, the scribes and the Pharisees had forgotten that they were called to serve the Lord and those entrusted to their care with humility and a generous spirit.

Given that context, Jesus says not to call anyone on earth by the title 'Rabbi', 'Father' or 'Teacher', in the sense of arrogating to oneself an authority which rests with God and of forgetting the responsibility of the title. No one must ever take the place of, or usurp the privileges and respect that belongs to the heavenly Father. As Jesus said, only the heavenly Father is the true Father, and only the Messiah is the true teacher and rabbi. In a similar vein, Jesus said, "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt 10:37). Because of the



authority of the heavenly Father and the respect due to Him, Jesus freely referred to His heavenly Father as "Father", and taught us to pray the "Our Father" (Mt 6:9-13).

Moreover, our Lord Himself used the title "father" for several characters in His parables: In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar, the rich man cries out from the depths of Hell, "Father Abraham, have pity on me", and the usage of the title "father" occurs three times (Lk 16:19-31). One has to wonder, if Jesus prohibited the use of the title "father", why does He instruct the people with a parable in which the characters use the title? To do so seems to be contradictory and actually misleading to the audience. The same is true in the parable of the Prodigal Son: The young prodigal son, upon his return, says, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you" (Lk 15:11-32). Given the way He used the title "father" in so many teachings, including when repeating the fourth commandment, our Lord did not intend to prohibit calling a father by the title "father"; rather, He prohibited *misusing* the title.

We do commonly use these titles: We call

those who instruct us and others 'teacher'; our male parent 'father'; and Jewish religious leaders 'rabbi'. Especially in a religious sense, those who serve the Lord and represent His authority, as a teacher, parent and especially a priest, must be mindful of exercising it diligently, humbly and courageously. To use this authority for self-aggrandizement is pure hypocrisy. Jesus said at the end of this passage, "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, but whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

Since the earliest times of the Church, we have used the title 'Father' for religious leaders. Bishops, who are the shepherds of the local Church community and the authentic teachers of the faith, were given the title 'Father'. Consequently, St. Peter may well have been addressed as 'Father Peter', in that sense of spiritual father. The likelihood of this address is supported by St. Paul who identifies himself as a spiritual father. In writing to the Corinthians, he said, "I am writing to you in this way not to shame you but to admonish you as my beloved children. Granted you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you have only one father. It was I who begot you in Christ Jesus through my preaching of the gospel. I beg you, then, be imitators of me. This is why I have sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful son in the Lord." (1 Cor 4:14-17).

Until about the year 400, a bishop was called 'father' ("papa"); this title then devolved solely to addressing the Bishop of Rome, the successor of St. Peter, and in English was rendered 'Pope'. In an early form of his rule, St. Benedict designated the title to spiritual confessors, since they were the guardians of souls. Moreover, the word abbot, denoting the leader in faith of the monastic community, is