

much more the priests, who speak and minister to us in the name of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

### 3. The Pope: the Holy Father?

For us Catholics, **the Pope is a father in a very special way**. Indeed, we call him “Holy Father!” Why do we Catholics consider the pope to be a father in a very special way? The answer is: because the Bible inspires us to do so!

In Isaiah, we read about Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah being appointed as steward of the royal household. It is said of him, that, *“he shall be as a **father** to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. And I will lay the key of the house of David upon his shoulder; and he shall open and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.”* (Isaiah 22:21-22) This verse is a prophecy of the papacy. The papacy is fully revealed as the fulfillment of Isaiah 22: 21-22 in Matthew 16: 18-19, where Our Lord tells Peter, *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* Just as Eliakim is given the key of the house of David, so Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of the son of David. Just as Eliakim has the power to open and shut, so

Peter and his successors are given the power to bind and loose. Take note that Eliakim succeeds to the position of “steward of the royal household” after Shebna, because the position of royal steward lasts as long as there is a royal household to govern. In the same way, St. Peter’s position as the “rock” of the Church does not end with him, but is passed on to his successors – the Popes, the Bishops of Rome! As royal steward, Eliakim is called “father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.” If a royal steward of the house of David can be called “father”, then how much more the popes, who are the stewards of the house of the Son of David? To distinguish the pope from other priests and to point out that the pope’s fatherhood is very special, we Catholics rightly call the Pope “Holy Father”!

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## Calling Priests “Father”

### Defensores Fidei Foundation Catholic Apologetics Tract #1

#### 1. Can we call anybody father?

According to the “Born Again” and Fundamentalist Protestants, calling priests “father” is unbiblical. To support their view, they quote this saying of Our Lord Jesus Christ: *“**And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven**”* (Matthew 23:9)

But what did Christ actually mean when he said this? Did he intend this verse to be taken literally? **The answer is NO**. We know this because, in the same speech where he says, “call no man your father”, he also says the following: *“...you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your **fathers**”* (Matthew 23:32) Here, Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself uses the term “father” to refer to the ancestors of the Pharisees, the very same people who killed the prophets! Another example where Our Lord uses “father” to refer to a human being is in the Gospel of Luke, where He says: *‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own **father** and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple’* (Luke 14:26) Finally, Jesus Himself referred to the ancestors of the Jewish people as

fathers.

“Your **fathers** did eat manna in the wilderness and are dead.” (John 6:49) Obviously the Lord Jesus did not intend to forbid people from calling anyone father, because He himself called some people “father”! (See also Mt 15: 3-6 and Mk 7:10-12)

**So, what did He mean when He said, “call no man your father?” He was, in fact, simply warning the Pharisees and Scribes against attributing too much honor and authority to themselves and to their masters. In setting themselves up as the authorities of Jewish society, the Pharisees and Scribes forgot that God alone was the source of all teaching and wisdom, the true source of all Fatherhood.**

We should remember that **Our Lord often spoke in “hyperbole” or exaggeration, in order to make his point.** The Gospels are full of examples where Our Lord uses hyperbole. An example is the verse from the Gospel of Luke that we already cited above, Luke 14:26. Could He really have meant that we should literally hate our family members in order to be His disciples? The obvious answer is **NO**. After all, Our Lord told us to love one another. (John 13:34-35) What Our Lord means in Luke 14:26 is that His disciples should give more importance to following His will than to their families. In this verse, to “hate” in fact means, “to

love less.”

There are many other verses in the New Testament in which the term “father” is used to refer to a human being:

- In Acts 7, St. Stephen, in his speech to the Sanhedrin, which he spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7: 55) he calls the members of the Sanhedrin “**brothers and fathers**” (Acts 7:2). He repeatedly speaks of the Old Testament patriarchs as “fathers” (Acts 7: 8, 12, 14-15, 29, and others). The early Christians spoke of David as “our **father**.” (Acts 4:25)
- St. Paul and the other apostles often addressed their audiences as fathers. (Acts 22:1, Ephesians 6:4, I John 2:13-14)
- St. Paul and the inspired writers often refer to their ancestors in the faith as fathers. (Cf. Acts 13:17, Romans 4:1-18, where Abraham is called “father” seven times; 2 Timothy 1:3, Hebrews 1:1 and 12:9 [referring to fathers in the flesh], and 2 Peter 3:4)
- In his Letters, St. Paul repeatedly refers to himself as a father! (1 Corinthians 4: 15, Philemon 1:10, and Philippians 2:22)

It is obvious from the New Testament that God does not forbid us from calling some people “father”. It also obvious from the

verses just quoted, that “father” could have spiritual and brotherly meanings in addition to its biological meaning.

## **2. Why call priests father?**

Our Born-Again friends might respond, “but why call priests father?” The Catholic answer is very simple: because to be a priest is to be a father! A priest, by giving us the sacraments and by teaching us the Word of God in a special way, gives us access to eternal life. Our earthly fathers bring us to the life of this world, but priests bring us to the life that is to come. In the Old Testament, fatherhood and priesthood are seen as inseparable. Thus, in Judges we read how the Ephraimite Micah invited a Levite from Bethlehem to be his “*father and priest*” (Judges 17:10. See also Judges 18:19). This does not end with the New Law of Christ. The identification of fatherhood with priesthood is deepened and enriched in the age of the New Testament. Like St. Paul, priests deserve to be called “father” because of their unique role in guiding us to Christ through the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 4:15 and I Thessalonians 2:9-12). Laymen may be able to instruct us in many things, but only priests can nourish us with the Sacraments, especially the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. This is another reason why we call priests father: by nourishing us with the Sacraments, priests become the **providers of our sustenance** in a special manner. If the members of the Sanhedrin, despite their corruption and errors, deserved to be called fathers (Acts 7:2) then how