

Call No Man Father

The Nature of the Priesthood

Letter to a prisoner.

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To: ...

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Dear in Christ ...

I will see you This is a reminder. I rcvd your letter, and will respond a little bit. I plan to do more in a postal letter, but it will probably not reach you before I see you!

Please ask questions. Please, also, understand that I may teach, or correct, but this never means I am angry or upset. How can you know, unless you are told? The scripture speaks of this. Much of this is new to you. So, with that introduction, I want to say a little bit about the Orthodox priesthood.

The priesthood is a human and divine institution. It is a constant collaboration between man and God. A priest, according to St Kosmas of Aitolia, is midway between a man and an angel. He is a sinful man, but he can do things not even an angel can do! He can call down the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will obey him! God will cause the bread and wine, offered on the altar, to become the body and blood of Christ, for the “true bread from heaven” that feeds the faithful. Only a priest can do this. For this reason, in the true tradition of the church, we honor the priesthood by honoring priests. St Kosmas has this to say about the priesthood:



“So, I beg you, holy priests, and I counsel you to concern yourselves with the laymen, how they and you are going to be saved. Similarly, you laymen should honor your priests. And if you chance to come upon a priest and a king, you should give preference to the priest. If you chance upon a priest and an angel, prefer the priest, because the priest is higher than even the angels.’

(<http://www.stmaryofegypt.org/files/library/Father-Kosmas-Apostle-of-the-Poor.pdf>)



We honor the priesthood by asking the blessing of a priest when we meet him, and addressing him as “Father”, or at least by his title of priest. I am a priest by ordination, but become a “father” by my actions with God’s grace helping me. The common custom is to call priests “Father”, but this is, in its essence, a term of endearment and respect, and must be earned. For this reason, I do not expect to be called “father”, but I cringe when a person does not acknowledge my priesthood. The priesthood is a high thing, above the capacity of human beings, but, as the ordination prayer says, God “fills the infirm vessel”.

Even an unworthy priest, such as myself, acts as a father, in the way the Holy Apostle describes. He baptizes, and by his right hand, feeds the faithful with the holy mysteries.

Our Lord famously said: “And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.” (Matthew 23:9), but the Holy Apostle also said: “I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you. (15) For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 4:14-15)

We must reconcile these two scriptures. Those who profess belief in Christ, but do not acknowledge a priesthood frequently refuse to call a priest “Father”. Of course, they call their natural father “father”. Fatherhood is participation in creation. God is the first creator, but He expects us also to “create”. This we do when bringing a child into the world, or helping him to become a new creature in his second birth, baptism, and we continue to be fathers by caring for those that are our responsibility – our natural and spiritual children, and all mankind (since a priest, and all Christians, should care for anyone God send to them).

Here are some notes I wrote for a talk about the distortion of the Protestant understanding of “call no man father”.

(https://www.orthodox.net/catechism/orthopraxis_and-call-no-man-your-father-upon-the-earth-for-one-is-your-father-which-is-in-heaven_matthew23-9.pdf the talk is here: https://www.orthodox.net/catechism/orthopraxis_and-call-no-man-your-father-upon-the-earth-for-one-is-your-father-which-is-in-heaven_matthew23-9.mp3)

We must examine our Lord’s admonition IN CONTEXT!

“Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, (2) Saying, the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: (3) All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (4) For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. (5) But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, (6) And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, (7) And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. (8) But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. (9) And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. (10) Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. (11) But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. (12) And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” (Mat 23:1-12)

EXEGESIS of this verse.

1. Not possible to understand this verse without:

- The context (surrounding verses)
- The rest of Scripture
- The mind of the church and its traditions.

Context: Surrounding verses.

- Pharisees are hypocrites, proud, scheming, and unworthy of the title "Rabbi" because of their attitudes.

- Do not seek after acclaim.
- Know where (from whom) your ministry comes from.

LARGER CONTEXT:

A teacher must remember these three things.

- He IS a teacher, he IS a FATHER,
 - but he IS NOT the Teacher or the Father who IS.
 - He is unworthy.
 - His teaching and fatherhood comes from God
1. James 1:16-17 Do not err, my beloved brethren. (17) Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.
 2. Luke 17:10 So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.
 3. Eph 3:14-15 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (15) Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

Why are we teachers, fathers, creators?

- Because we are made in the image and after the likeness of God.
- We are called to act like God.
 - be priests
 - fathers, children
 - heal, preach, etc. (Good Samaritan - innkeeper told to take care of him)
- Psalm 81:6 **I said: Ye are gods, and all of you the sons of the Most High.** (and never forget from Whom we receive our "God-hood")
- **EPHESIANS 3:14-15!**

I think this is enough for now.

We are brothers in the human race, and in God's time, if you come into the church, brothers in the body of Christ, so it is not incorrect to think of me as a brother. In Orthodox piety, no layman would address a priest his "brother". He would acknowledge that the priest has been given grace by God to take care of His people and call him "father", or at least "priest".

We also kiss the right hand of the priest after taking his blessing for this reason. The priest is a sinner. He does not deserve or expect submission in an earthly sense (like kissing of the right of a mafia "Godfather", or of the Pope of Rome). The pious Christian recognizes that by the right hand of the priest, God comes upon the gifts and makes them into the body and blood of Christ, and regenerates a man in the water, and brings blessing upon His people. We show respect for this grace when we kiss the right hand of the priest.

It is also our custom to address a priest by his saint's name. We honor the saint in this way. It is an unfortunate Western custom to refer to priests by their last name only. We were names with the name of a heavenly protector, and we should honor our protector at all times. So, I should be called "Priest Seraphim" or "Father Seraphim" and not "Father Holland". In prisons, when I deal with the administration, I refer to myself as "Father Holland", because that is what they understand and are familiar with, but we who love the church should live according to a different standard.

May God bless you and help you in all things!

This letter is at:

http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/prison-ministry-letters_2017-06-02+call-no-man-father+nature-ofthe-priesthood.doc

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