

No 'father' must come before God

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 23:1-12; (R1) Malachi 1:14-2:8-10; (R2) Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13.

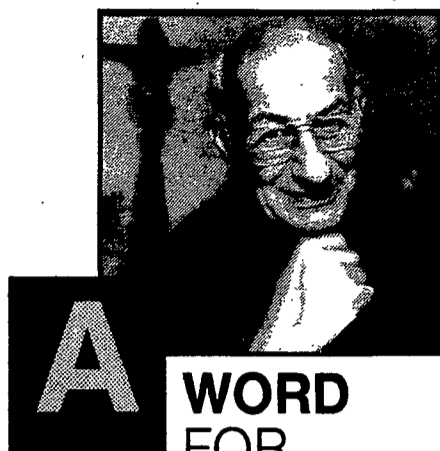
I have been accosted many times by fundamentalist Christians who upbraid me for permitting people to call me "Father." They would say, "This is against the teaching of the Bible. Don't you know that Jesus said, 'Call no one on earth your father'" (R3).

Generally, I would answer, "Don't you know that text out of context is pretext?"

Jesus' words about not calling anyone "Father" were part of His attack on the Scribes and Pharisees. During Jesus' time, this sect — once the champions of true religion — had become abhorrent hypocrites whose words were bold, but whose deeds were few.

It is significant that the only one who ever called Jesus "Rabbi" was Judas. And the only people who ever addressed Him as "teacher" were His enemies (Matthew 8:19; 9:11, 12:38, 22:16).

Jesus never corrected them on this usage, for He was opposed, not to



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titles, but to the attitude of those who sought them. I am sure you have heard someone retort like this when another tried to lord himself over others, "Who does he think he is, God Almighty?"

Well, that was precisely the way the Scribes and Pharisees acted. They thought they were God Almighty. They set themselves above the prophets and God's written words. Not infrequently, their regulations actually nullified God's laws (Mark

7:13, John 7:19-23). It was against this lopsided inversion of values that Jesus inveighed.

Our Lord's words were simply a strong way of saying, in the Hebrew style, that no earthly father must come before God, the one supreme Father of all, in one's allegiance. Thus Jesus said, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." He wasn't forbidding a boy to call a parent "father," only his preferring his father to God.

If we can call the earthly parents to whom we owe our earthly life, education and constant care "mother and father," so we may call the earthly men to whom we owe our spiritual care "father."

In a purely spiritual sense, a priest does all for a person in the life of grace what ordinary parents do for the natural life of the children God gives them. The priest gives spiritual life at baptism and nourishes it with the bread of life. In addition to educating those brought forth to life in Christ, he teaches, warns, corrects and advises his spiritual children.

Not having his own family through marriage, the priest belongs to every family giving divine life, nourishment and guidance. So

Catholics call him "father" not to the exclusion of their father in heaven, but as a manifestation on earth of the supreme fatherhood of God in the spiritual order — just as an earthly father is a similar manifestation of that same fatherhood in the natural order.

Thus St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (1 Cor.inthians 4:15).

The practice of using the title "father" is not new. It goes back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, and has been in use ever since, though the name is traditionally applied more commonly to monks than to secular priests. Most Protestants abandoned its use gradually after the Reformation.

Religious authenticity is what Jesus demands of all of us. The habit doesn't make the monk. Not our titles, not what we wear nor what we say is all important — only what we do.

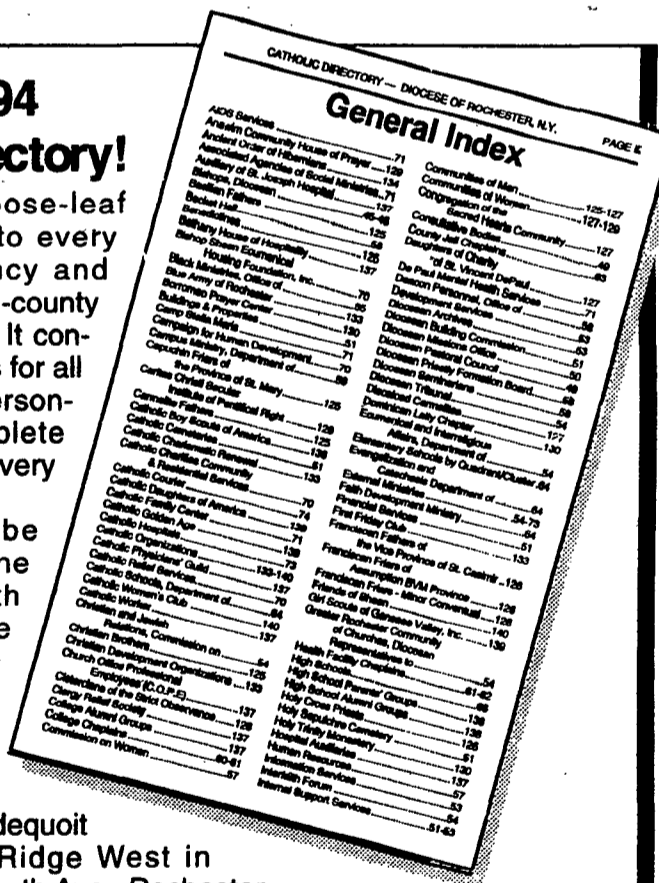
As the song observes: "They will know that we are Christians by our love, by our love."

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