

My dad's health has been declining over the past few months. He's 83 and has been winning the battle with cancer over the past ten years, but this year has been especially difficult. He's very weak right now and we're running out of options for his treatment. I'm grateful to my dad for a lot of things, and especially for giving me such a positive image of fatherhood. Not every family gets that. This is especially important among Christians because we call God "Father", and if your image of your own father is weak, it can discolor your thinking about God.

Jesus called God "Father", and he taught his disciples to do the same. In today's gospel Jesus says, "Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven." The leaders of religion, family and education are called rabbi, father and master. But God ultimately has all those roles.

This passage particularly vexes Catholics because we call our priests Father. Sometimes other Christians will point to this verse and say, "This proves that Catholics aren't Christians. They don't obey the word of God."

Well, not really. All Christians call their own father their father. We assume Jesus was exaggerating here. We didn't start calling priests "Father" until fairly late in Church history, to express the spiritual relationship between priest and people. Still, it looks like Catholics were asleep at the wheel. To some Christians our title of respect for priests seems disrespectful to Jesus. At this point there's not much we can do.

It's more a problem in the United States. In some other countries Catholics use one title for religious order priests – like our former pastor Fr. Al Herber – and another title for diocesan priests like me. In Europe, for example, they only call religious order priests by the title Father. They call diocesan priests "Lord", but I don't think that would catch on in the United States.

Some people work hard to get a title, like a teacher. Some receive a title relatively easily, like dads, who stand by while moms give birth. Some people are voted into office, like state representatives. Some people just claim a title on their own, like a sniper who calls himself God.

Having a title is not as important as living up to it. And living up to it means imitating the one who holds all titles, the one whom no title adequately names, the one we call God. We earn our titles only when we imitate God.