

Call me "John" not "Father"

When I was doing formation work at our national seminary, I often used to say to the students that when ordained, they would be privileged to be called "father" by the people. But I also used to say that they had to earn the privilege of being called "father" because of the way they were living their lives – serving the people of God in such a way that they were bringing life and hope.

Recently I read an article by French priest, Jean-Pierre Roche, titled: *Stop Calling Me "Father"!*

Like him, I now wonder why we priests continue to be called "father".

Last August Pope Francis wrote to us all to take action against "clericalism" which he sees as the source of abuse perpetrated by priests and bishops.

Jean-Pierre Roche says that we may be able to make some small changes to overcome clericalism by priests not expecting to be called "father" – to be called by their baptismal name. He gave three reasons why it is a good place to start.

The first is found in Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is speaking to the disciples – to us disciples today: "You are not to be called 'Master' – you have but one Master, and you are all brothers and sisters. And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have but one Father who is in heaven" (Mt 23:8-9). The meaning of the words is clear. Jean-Pierre Roche says that to be called "father" is to usurp the place of God. It becomes even more serious if a priest begins to play "god" – which happens with clericalism.

Second, when people call the priest "father" it creates a children and parent relationship – priest the parent and people the children. It is not possible to have equal relationships among adults who are "brothers and sisters" if one of them is called "father". We all share the dignity of the daughters and sons of God. If we want the Church to be a real community in which we care for and look after one another we need to practise equality in relationships.



As we were reminded by Vatican Council II: "Even though some, by the will of Christ, are made doctors and pastors for the good of others, in terms of the dignity and activities of all the faithful in the edification of the Body of Christ, there is true equality among all" (*Lumen Gentium* 32).

Third, Roche says that the practice of calling priests "father" can be unhealthy because it becomes an expression of dependence which is based on a false and unreal idea of obedience.

Being called "father" may seem important to some priests – but it is more important that we live, act and relate in a way that makes it clear that we are all daughters and sons of God.

For each priest to make the choice to ask the people he serves to stop calling him "father" (and for me "Your Eminence" or "Cardinal") might seem a small thing to do but it will not be an easy custom to overcome – requiring practise by priest and people equally. We will all need to get over the initial awkwardness of entering into a new relationship of equality.

But this little beginning may be a spark of the reform in the Church which Pope Francis is asking for. It's a new practice that highlights the fundamental truth that through baptism we are all sisters and brothers of Christ – using our baptismal names highlights this – and God is our focus and centre. ❶

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For Jean-Pierre Roche's article see: <https://international.la-croix.com/news/stop-calling-me-father/9779>



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