

Julianna Rezza

How the word *father* in the Bible continues to create a hierarchy in which women cannot hold authority equivalent to a man.

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Abstract

In this paper, I will be discussing how the use of the word *father* in the Bible has created and continues to create a church hierarchy in which women cannot hold authority equivalent to a man, thereby displaying that the propagation of *Father God* impacts how women function in today's society. First, I explore the use of the word *father* in both the earlier and late portions of the Bible and the lines drawn to certain male traits. Often in the Old Testament and portions of the text that "advise," we understand the disciplining authority of God, how God is the father that punishes and holds power over his children in the same way the church explains the father of a house can. In the New Testament, specifically the life of Jesus, we see an exclusivity on the knowledge of Father God. He is one that selects certain individuals to be the carriers and holders of sacred truths and dominion. Within these portions of the text comes frequent reference to the apostles, moments in which Jesus draws authority from his Father and through this knowledge and love, bestows it onto the twelve apostles. Moments like these in the Bible serve as primary reasoning for the sole ordination of men: because there were no female apostles and because the power comes from the father and women cannot biologically be fathers, they are barred from integral human experiences in the church such as performing transubstantiation as a stand-in for Jesus, performing reconciliation as a stand-in for God, and being able to make decisions with Papal infallibility. Thus, due to the use of the word *father* and the fact that linking God to the word *father* places a specific biology to our grand authority, we continue to create a society and a religious culture that women cannot represent the entity that we hold in our highest regard and consideration.

“In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit.”

From the time I was young, these words preceded every meal, each school day, my bedtime, church prayer, wakes, and every other place I was taught to pray, solidifying a specific view of God: a Father above all else.

This language is littered throughout the Bible, but what is important is that the word *father* becomes synonymous with God. As Jesus preaches, God becomes an ever-loving father, an authority that is filled with generosity and goodness.

In the act of assigning God with word *father* in the Bible, we give God a gender. This associates the most powerful authority, the overseeing everything and everyone, only male qualities, and male biology.

I was always a girl who believed the entire world was at her fingertips, and being told that our God, the almighty being that created all and held all power, was a male, made me feel little. I was suddenly a lot less important, and it made me reevaluate not just my worth, but the worth of all the women before me. All these thoughts posed a resounding question: What if God was taught as a woman? What if at the beginning of the writing of the Bible and time, it was that *She* was almighty and all powerful?

This question dominos into the impact of propagating a male God, in particular, how the word *father* in the Bible has created a hierarchy in which women are barred from holding authority equivalent to God and therefore any man in the Church, subsequently continuing to affect the roles of women today. These ideals are present in many organized religions, but for the sake of focus, this paper will only discuss the Roman Catholic Church.

The way in which we tell a story hugely impacts the opinions that resonate with the readers. Language and more importantly, words associated with certain ideas, continually impact the brains of those reading the material, even on a subconscious level.

The God of the old and New Testament are often viewed differently, the Old Testament containing the image of a harsher God in the stories of the plagues, Job, and the near killing of Isaac while the New Testament expresses the authority of God as finding its foundation in forgiveness and mercy.

Despite these differences, the use of the word *father* spans both areas of the Bible to either create an image of God, assert power in a household, form fear and respect, or in later passages when Jesus was preaching, use the word *father* to establish a selective relationship, and express the power in being merciful. Different images created in the readings with this usage create dynamic differences and permissible actions for those men on earth.

In the book of Hebrews, it is stated, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Hebrews 12:7) A couple of important things happen with the quote; first and foremost, the statement encourages suffering because it likens it disciplining children. It explains that fathers must discipline their families and because of this, any sort of suffering should be construed as a gift from God, a way in which He is watching over us.

This statement encourages a punishment that is analogous with suffering or hardship, saying that fathers in the home keep their children in line the way that God the Father lets us endure suffering to keep us in line. This poisons what God does; the purpose of suffering is not to humble us, discipline us into being complacent; in fact, suffering is not something God *causes* rather than something he allows due to free will. By making this action of suffering purposeful, we give the household father an incredibly large but wrongful power. He now holds the authority to scold because it is said that God does, and they are both fathers. Thus, by linking God to the word *father*, we create a comparison that links the power of God to the authority of the earthly father and in ways that are inappropriate, normalize the idea of the man having the right to keep people in line.

In Psalms, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13). Here, we see a clear association between the word *father* and fear. The first half of the sentence paints a picture of a father acting with compassion, but the second half distorts this compassion because it explains that a father feels this love because of how the Lord loves those that *fear him*. In this way it is assumed that a household father too, has compassion for those he has an authority over because of this fear instilled.

This portrays a very warped image of not only fatherhood but Godliness to the reader. When we make compassion a condition of fear for male authority, it is simple and easy to let that become a condition of love and a point of righteousness. From this statement, men draw the

authority of a God that must be respected and feared and only if those conditions are fulfilled, compassion and caring.

In the last piece of advice discussed, the Bible speaks more to the father of a family and the attention he deserves, saying “Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding” (Proverbs 4:1). While this statement does not explicitly link God to the word *father*, we do see a clear encouragement of authority in a more subtle way. Here, the book urges us to listen to our father as from listening we gain a clear understanding and knowledge. It gives the father in the family this level of power by saying his opinions and instructions hold the most value, ones from which we all must learn from. There is no condition here, no “if” statements, just the very plain statement to listen because a father is knowing.

This poses issues because without work or experience, the father has just gained the authority and attention of other people. He does not need to do anything except exist as a father, as God exists as a father. While God is not mentioned here, there is a feeling of his authority being linked due to this unconditional obedience and its presence in the Bible.

An unfortunate picture forms of what a father looks when reading these pieces of advice since God, our grand authority, is a Father. We get the manly authority likened with discipline, fear, and a wealth of wisdom that is unspecified. We understand that these statements, when linking God to the word *father*, allow for our earthy fathers to, in their absorption of Gods power, be the authority that comes from heaven, even in its negative traits.

As we move to Jesus’s life, we see a shift from fear and domination to more of a selectiveness when it comes to knowledge, leadership, and authority. In Matthew, Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). As a part of the Holy Trinity, Jesus is God, and therefore the language here associated with Father is threefold: one of exclusive intimacy between a father and a son, the concept of moving information from a father to a son, and this idea of a choice in who is looked after by God.

Breaking down the first section, “all things...” there is an important assertion of authority here that is essential to the concept of God. It is expected in any text to establish the image of

omnipotence and power in a god figure, regardless of religion. Here, however, we are once again tying this omnipotence and authority to the word *father* by saying “all things have been handed over to me by my father.” It becomes clear to the reader that this image of a father should indeed be correlated with the image of a supreme God.

In the next phrase of the sentence, Jesus establishes this exclusive intimacy, explaining to his disciples that only God the Father understands him. Jesus, as the prime figure for Roman Catholicism for both his godliness and humanity, is the cornerstone. He is the example we look to and on what the church hierarchy bases a lot of its doctrine. If Jesus himself claims only he knows Father, we then understand this distinct power dynamic between father and son, a mutuality and reciprocity exclusive to that relationship.

In the final piece of this quote, there an addendum to the middle portion: that only people chosen by the son can fully understand the Father. Thus, this statement rounds out its expression with this idea that the Son of God selects who understands God the Father by invoking his name; this also becomes essential as Jesus invokes the name of the Father when selecting his apostles to then become preachers and evangelists.

This occurs in Matthew, as Jesus states “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

As Jesus speaks to his apostles, he explains to them the task, going out and serving the good word, but ensures that that whatever they express is God the Father working through them. There is therefore, a connection made between God and the apostles, one of sharing word, sharing action and behavior. In his bestowal of authority and responsibility to these men, he links the authority of God to the individuals, and he does it by saying that their words are the same as the Father’s.

This persistent use, despite the fact it does bring about many good and forgiving ideals, especially in the New Testament, is gender exclusive language in a very dangerous way; if we

only tie the authority of God to a Father, a human concept and biological label, then we are destined to live in a society outside and inside the church where authority of God is then linked to the human idea of a father. The idea goes both ways.

Thus, as we examine how the use of the word *father* in the Bible, how attaching a male authority to God continues to impact women today, we explore the priesthood. It is an argument often had, but this paper does not set out to convince the readers that women should be priests, but rather the use of the word *father* impacts what we expect and allow for female figures in the church. One of the primary reasons women cannot be priests is because of the use of the word *father* and because all the apostles are male, which we know from the papal letter in which St. Pope John Paul speaks for the Church, saying, “She holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church” (Pope John Paul).

Examining priests, not only what they are allowed to do, but what authority they represent, starts with the idea that we call the priest “father,” an interesting practice since in Matthew 23:9 Jesus states we should never call anyone on earth titles like father, teacher, or rabbi.

Many bishops and priests alike set out to explain such a paradox, each one expressing that Jesus means to warn against giving titles of honor to hypocrites, a valid and beautiful statement when talking about religion. But as each priest, bishop, or cardinal continues, they explain why we do use the word *father* when referring to priests, one bishop saying. “The priest, as father, teaches us the faith, forgives us when we fail and blesses us like a father and like God, our Father” (Bishop Rodriguez 2019). Each explanation, including this one, likens a priest’s duties and faith to the authority of God. Linked through the word *father*, our church leaders represent the authority of Christ and God. Because of the word *father*, women continue to be excluded from this alignment; a woman in the church will never hold the authority of God or Christ because she cannot be called “father” and that is how we link church authority to God. The bishop finished his piece with, “If you use it for a priest, do so from the faith: God is our

Father, but this man represents him in my life and gives me supernatural life, feeds me with the Eucharist and helps me experience God's care" (Bishop Rodriguez 2019).

We call priests "father" because Jesus calls God our "Father" too. As the authority of faith, priests have the honor to complete all the tasks that Jesus did: teach, forgive sins, and turn the bread into the body. An exclusivity seen in the Bible now forms in our current bestowal of the word *father*, because we disallow individuals who cannot be called this name in proper alignment with their biology, from these roles of representational power. Now we examine and explore the use of the word *father* in tandem with specific tasks and authority given to the men in the Church, and how the use of the word *father* created exclusivity to tasks picked for ordained ministers.

In examining the Last Supper Bible passage, we get the most important tradition of the Catholic Church: transubstantiation. More than that, however, we receive the conditions of transubstantiation: who is allowed to do it and why. Taken from the account of the last supper according to Luke is, "My Father made me a ruler, and now I make you rulers." (Luke 22:29).

We immediately see the use of the word *father* as a substitute for the word *God*, linking power quite quickly and concisely to the word. Additionally, there is a chain of power that occurs in this statement: the father creates a ruler of the son, Jesus because he is the only one that has authority to do so. In making Jesus a ruler, mimicking the Father's power, Jesus then bestows this fatherly power onto the apostles. The word *father* therefore begins a chain of command for the forming church.

The only people seated at the table were the twelve apostles, the twelve official male followers of Jesus which are cited by name in Matthew Chapter 10. Thus, as Jesus turns the bread and wine into the Body and Blood, he expresses sharing that authority only with the people at that table: the male apostles. Because the apostles were all men, it is viewed that Jesus's jurisdiction over this conversion cannot be transferred to women. Even the highest-ranking sisters, mother superiors, and nuns can never perform transubstantiation because women were not, quite literally, seated at the table. It is an act performed by Christ alone and those that can represent Christ, the apostles, or those that become *fathers*.

In 1994, a letter from the pope was issued, banning women from the priesthood. One Cardinal wrote that, “the ban on women priests is “irrevocable, a doctrine . . . that has an infallible character’ and reasons it with the fact that Jesus was indeed a radical and did not conform to the ways of the world. Therefore, if Jesus wanted male priests, he would have chosen them. Cardinal Ratzinger asserts that Jesus only chose male apostles, but attempts to nullify by saying, “you must consider that the priestly ministry is a service and not a position of power or privilege above others” (Ratzinger in *LA Times*). While all positions in the church are considered ones of service, the priest is the only individual that can perform this task-transubstantiation-which is the heart of the Roman Catholic faith. In a twitter quote taken from Pope Francis he states, “The Eucharist is essential for us: it is Christ who wishes to enter our lives and fill us with his grace” (Pope Francis 2014), so if as Cardinal Ratzinger says that it is merely a service, why then is a center of the catholic faith, an essential part of feeling as one in the church, restricted to the priest and only ordained ministers.

We draw this reasoning from Jesus, the apostles, and this word *father*, and in particular this moment of the Bible: Jesus sitting before the twelve male apostles and teaching them how to perform, change the bread and wine into the Eucharist. Because of this instance, this fatherly God coming into humanly fruition as a male son, women are still disallowed from performing this core task in the church. Yes, Cardinals and bishops may continue to argue that being a priest is being a servant, but they do so from positions where they are allowed to mimic, to represent the authority of God, to make decisions within the honor of God. Transubstantiation is a huge part of the Catholic faith, but the sacrament of reconciliation and the act of confession is just essential in showing how the word *father* has created a dynamic in which women need the men, the *fathers* of the church to be good Christians.

The first time I confessed my sins to a priest in the act of reconciliation, I was in fourth grade. I had all my prayers prepared and my sins stacked up like a little laundry list. I remember being nervous I would forget something, and then I would not be completely forgiven. I went in, said the Act of Contrition (a sorrowful prayer asking for forgiveness) to the priest, confessed all the sins a semi-sentient 10-year-old could muster, and was assigned, as my penance, one *Our Father* and one *Hail Mary*. I remember, as I was raised and taught so much, feeling *better*,

feeling forgiven. This priest had the ability to forgive me in the name of God and in the eyes of Church, I was once again pure.

A huge part of the Catholic Church is reconciliation, the act of confessing sins and being forgiven. Because God is the only one that can forgive, only a representative of God can perform reconciliation, and this is the priest. The priest is a father and on behalf of God the Father, he can forgive our sins. Being that confession is one of the sacraments and rituals that is less prominent, it is forgotten how authoritative this very act is. When we apologize to people, there is a beautiful release in being forgiven. It is freeing.

When we talk about all our sins, our everyday thoughts, we look to God to tell us we are okay, that we are continuing to try and that is enough. But in the Catholic church, only a man has this ability. Sister, nuns-they cannot forgive me my sins in the name of God. They do not have this authority, because they are not *fathers*.

We look back to the book of Matthew and see where this rule comes from, the Bible saying, “Again Jesus said...As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20 21-23). Just as we broke down these previous quotes, we can indeed comprehend the sequence of this one.

Jesus very clearly states that his authority comes from *the Father*. It is in this authority of forgiveness that Jesus can forgive; whomever Jesus, acting with the Father’s breath, expresses can be given this authority, can be. Jesus is aware he will not only not be around for long, but that there must be continuity to this faith, so he draws the authority of forgiveness from God and bestows it upon these surrogate fathers, the apostles.

Again, modern cardinals, bishops, use the same argument for ordination and the privileges that come with it back to these moments, ones where Jesus addresses the twelve and no one else. And this is an immensely powerful action: forgiveness. Like transubstantiation, it is a cornerstone of the catholic faith. The majority of Jesus’s story focuses on his ability to forgive and welcome people back into the community he creates. Cornerstone aside, people *need* forgiveness. They need to know that mistakes are seen and that they can move past them.

This honor and right resides in *the father*, and while critics may argue that no one has the same power of God and priests merely stand in, they are still *standing in* because they can be fathers, because they can represent fathers, and because biologically, they align with what a father is. We let them exclusively hold the right to bring this catharsis and relief.

This continues, too, to be an argument brought up and dismissed by those making the theological decisions in the Vatican, most specifically the pope and the cardinals. As we move from honors reserved for priests to those creating the rules, we approach the concept of the leader of the church, what he stands for and as, and what sort of images come with it.

The Pope has many names, the *pope* being the least official of them. The following are the eight official titles of the pope:

“Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the State of Vatican City, Servant of the Servants of God.”

We are all aware that the Pope is the head of the church, each one of these names expresses that quite clearly, so for the sake of focusing in on ideas that restrict our authority figure, I will be discussing the titles, “Vicar of Jesus Christ and Successor of the Prince of Apostles”

Vicar means “representative” or “deputy,” so when we look at a title of *Vicar of Christ*, there is not a huge amount of elaboration needed, as the title really reads *Representative of Christ*. When we look at the authority, then, of the pope, we see one that is likened to Jesus Christ himself. Even though the pope is considered the first servant of God, the acting leader of humility as Jesus is meant to be, he is still making decisions of exclusivity. He is still drawing power from God and using such authority to make earthly decisions. Having leaders is not a bad thing at all, but when we have a leader representing God and Christ, *gender* should not be playing a in making that decision. It does, however, because of the use of the word *father* and this male image of apostles in the Bible. This leads right into the next title: Successor of the Prince of Apostles.

As put in the book of Matthew, “Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that

you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16: 17-18). The pope is considered the first successor, chosen to lead the Church, of Peter the Apostle. Additionally, we refer to Peter as the *prince* of the apostles, the leader, the head, the representative of authority. Thus, this title *Successor of the Prince of Apostles*, refers right back to this biblical moment of Jesus looking at Peter and deciding that he was going to be the leader of the church, and he does it not only in the *name* of the father but states that the Father is speaking through him. Thus, the pope’s authority is representative of the Father’s word, anchored through the appointment of Peter. This link from the Father to the apostle and from the apostle to the pope is clear in this name, continuing to draw attention and make evidence of the use of the word *father* to pass down and invoke power.

In addition to the name, popes also have the capability to invoke papal infallibility. This is the law that a pope’s statements or words are infallible, that he cannot be wrong because he is the instrument of Christ and representative of God himself. The following is a paragraph taken from Catholic Faith and Reason organization:

"I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete—to be with you always; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, since it neither sees him nor recognizes him because he remains with you and will be within you . . . the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send will remind you of all that I have told you" (John 14: 16-17, 26). "When the Spirit of truth comes He will guide you to all truth . . ." (*John 16:14*). Peter shares the gift of infallibility (a negative gift in the sense it keeps him from teaching error on matters of faith and morals) with the other apostles and their successors, the bishops.

From the Gospel of John, we draw this belief that God gifts a holy counselor to us for leadership, but under the condition that this paraclete is only given only to the successors of Peter. The exclusivity between the *father* and the apostles, those that can continue the leadership

is seen once again but in the naming of the apostle leader of the church. Because the pope represents God and God is a *father*, the pope must be a man.

Now moving further, we discuss this concept of infallibility, as God the Father is infallible, and the authority of God is passed down to pope. *Pope* in Italian means *papa*, which means this phrase “papal infallibility” means the “correctness of the father”. Thus, as we look at the power of the pope as a figure, he draws his dominion from this phrase, the impossibility of being incorrect as the *father* of the Church.

When we apply this idea now to how the word *father* continues to impact women today, it becomes clear. Each action that an ordained minister in the Catholic church can perform traces back to a biblical moment between the apostles and Jesus where Jesus draws authority from God his Father, letting His authority and dominion work through him. As it is the belief that *father* is the word of those leading the church just as God is the Father, the apostles are the sole successors of Jesus and therefore serve as the example for those leading the catholic church.

So yes, women are continually impacted by the propagation of a male god but specifically in the propagation of a male God the *father* as it is in this word that the biology of God is assigned. It is in this word that we, as human beings, can draw comparisons and understand to the best of our ability what this authority is supposed to look like. It is in the word *father*, the continued use of the word *father* that creates an environment for women where they cannot possibly be equals. We can say until we are blue in the face that priests are the primary servers, the first servants of Gods. We can say that the position is humbling and it is; it should be. But at the end of the day there is an exclusivity to the position, and God is not meant to be exclusive. As a being, He is not meant to be able to work through only certain people. And in this use of the word *father*, we biologically ban women from representing his authority, which as

stated, is a humbling honor. We bar them for being allowed to forgive sins, perform transubstantiation, and make decisions in the church as leaders and theologians.

These are concrete ways that the Church's use of the word *father*, tying the word *father* to the authority of God, making God a male, continues to impact how women function. The initial purpose of this research was to show how the propagation of a male God impacted the way women function in society, the way this ideal bled into laws and the justice system and the way we view marriage and politics, but that level of research far surpasses a semester of time. So, this example, taking a magnifying glass to the Bible and seeing how this word-use led to the linkage of authority and subsequently the understanding that only men and fathers can represent the male God we chose, this is one way women are continually impacted. The purpose of the research and paper is not to say the Catholic Church is bad, that the ideals or doctrines are a bad thing. Rather, it is to say that as a society we adopted the male image. We made a decision to create *God the Father*, and this decision yielded a dynamic in the Church where because of that word, because of the inherently male qualities and language used for our God, we disallow women from being in places they can make decisions. There are good and feminist texts in the Bible, just like there are good priests and figures of authority, but continuing to exclusively use the word *father* in every prayer and refer to it textually, using the manhood of the apostles and their ability to be *fathers* as a reason, is wrong to any woman looking to be taken seriously. God is genderless; She or He possessed all the good qualities we can imagine a being having. It is good to remember that.

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