

Put controversial Scripture in the right context

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Bishop Anthony B. Taylor delivered this homily Nov. 12.

In today's Gospel we have a passage that enemies of the Church use out of context to discredit Catholicism and confuse simple believers.

They twist Jesus' words so that they appear to say something quite different from what he had in mind. The text goes like this: Jesus says, "Do not be called Rabbi. You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one father in heaven. Do not be called Master; you have but one master, the Christ." Call no one father and yet we call priests "Father." Call no one teacher and yet we call our catechists "Teachers."

Taken out of context, these titles do seem to contradict what Jesus says in today's Gospel. But put them in their proper context and the problem goes away.

n Linguistic context: Every language has peculiarities. For example English has only the remnants of a subjunctive mood but a highly developed sequence of tenses. By contrast, Spanish has a highly developed subjunctive mood but a less developed sequence of tenses.

Well, Jesus spoke Aramaic, a very concrete language that has an acute shortage of abstract vocabulary, a deficiency that Aramaic speakers remedy in part through the use of hyperbole, overblown language, what we might call exaggeration except that when we exaggerate the intent is often to deceive, while with hyperbole the intent is to emphasize — even in English.

For instance, if I say "no one likes brussels sprouts" you know not to take me literally; they wouldn't be in the store if absolutely no one ate them. But you know what I mean: "Most people don't like brussels sprouts and neither do I."

Well, native speakers of Aramaic used hyperbole a lot more than we do and they knew not to take hyperbole literally, but rather to pay attention to what Jesus means, which in today's Gospel is his teaching about true greatness: "The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." That's the point being emphasized.

n Audience context: To understand any statement of Jesus, you have to keep his audience in mind. When he said, "Call no one on earth your father," who did his audience think he was referring to? There were no Catholic priests around prior to the Last Supper.

The only people his original audience called father were their own natural fathers, their mother's husband. "Call no one on earth your father." This is an example of Aramaic hyperbole. All those literalists violate the out-of-context literal meaning of Jesus' words whenever they call their own dads "father."

Jesus' point is not that we need to come up with a new label for the man who married Mom, but rather that we recognize that we all — including our natural parents — are all brothers and

sisters and thus equal, all sons and daughters of the same Father in heaven who is much more fundamentally our father than anyone on earth we might call father, hence: "Call no one on earth your father." And in any event he wasn't talking to his original audience about Catholic priests since Catholic priests did not yet exist.

What he is emphasizing is that true greatness comes not from occupying an important role in society, be it as head of a family or as a teacher in a school or as a religious leader — in this passage as Rabbi and by extension my role as priest and bishop, having an important title is not what makes someone truly great.

What makes us truly great is our service of others in the exercise of these roles, and the more selfless the service, the greater we become.

Jesus teaches — through his words and through his example — that true greatness comes not from titles and roles, but rather only from selfless service and that's no hyperbole.