

What Should I Call the Clergy—*Father?* *Reverend?* *What?*

This is a very common question. The fact, however, is that there is no definitive Anglican answer to this question. It demonstrates that people want to show respect for the clergy, but it is ultimately based on a faulty theology. Clergy are not “set apart” from the world in the way members of monastic orders are. Rather, we are ordained for service among the baptized faithful. It is our baptism that makes us Christians, and baptism is the sacrament that makes us one with God and each other.

Our current prayer book emphasizes our essential unity and equality in the eyes of God in some very subtle ways. In the historical books, for instance, the liturgy for ordination required that candidates be presented to the Bishop thus: “Reverend Father in God, I present unto you these persons....” The current liturgy instead has us address the Bishop by his (or her) first name: “_____, Bishop in the Church of God, we present” Our first names, after all, are also our *Christian* names.

So it really behooves us as Christian people to refer to each other by our Christian names. Just as God makes no distinction between us, and loves us all without measure, we should show the world we are Christians by our love. For me, then, the proper way to address me is “Barrie.” That nickname is derivative of my Christian name, Barrington (which is, in itself, a bit much for every day, eh?).

If you really need to use a title, I suggest you consult the individual clergy person. Some prefer “Father,” others abhor it. You can call me “Father” or “Doctor,” if you like. Some female clergy are called “Mother,” while others prefer “Pastor.” (Don’t ask me about “Father Betty” in Northern Michigan!) Personally, I do not care for “Pastor” or “Reverend.” Most Anglicans eschew *Reverend*, as in “Reverend Smith.” Although calling a pastor “Reverend Jones” is the practice in many churches, the Episcopal Church looks upon *Reverend* as an adjective, like *Honorable*. It precedes the full name of a deacon or priest, as in “the Reverend John Jones,” just as *Honorable* precedes the name of a judge. Episcopalians do not address a cleric as “Reverend Jones.” In the old days, he would have been Mr. Jones, or Fr. Jones, or Dr. Jones, if appropriate. In Episcopal usage, the word *Reverend* is always preceded by the article “The.”

This is not to say that there are not rules governing more formal forms of address, such as when you list a name on a masthead or address formal correspondence. Here are some examples:

	<i>Formal Title</i>	<i>Salutation of a Letter</i>
<i>Deacon or Priest</i>	The Reverend Sue Smiley	Dear Ms. Smiley, Dear Mother Smiley, Dear Sue
<i>Bishop</i>	The Right Reverend Sallie Mae	Dear Bishop Mae, or Dear Bishop Sallie
<i>Presiding Bishop</i>	The Most Reverend Katharine Aragon	Dear Bishop Aragon, or Dear Bishop Katharine
<i>Canon</i>	Canon John Jacobs (<i>if lay</i>)	Dear Canon Jacobs
	The Reverend Canon Jerry Jillson (<i>if ordained</i>)	Dear Canon Jillson
<i>Dean</i>	The Very Reverend Freddie Mac	Dear Dean Mac

Reverend can be abbreviated as “Rev.” or “Rev’d,” and *Right* can become “Rt.” Sometimes, *Canon* is written as “Cn.” And some of these titles accumulate, and get intermingled with others, such as “Doctor.” I once knew someone who was the Very Reverend Canon Doctor.... Now, *he* was very interesting.

Other titles, like *Rector* and *Vicar*, are specific to a particular position—rather than a specific person. These do not precede the name. That is, it is correct to write to “the Rev. Bing Crosby, Rector,” but not to “Rector Rosemary Clooney.” You can correctly ask, “O Rector, may I speak with you?” or “I’d be happy to introduce you to the Rector,” but you would not say, “Rector Mansfield, may I have a word?” or “Let me introduce you to Rector Vera-Ellen.”

If ever I get named something called “archdeacon,” I would get to be “the Venerable.” That’s something to aspire to, I suppose!