

Increasing reverence

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 05, 1999](#) issue

The Rev. Seminarian Chad Foster wrote a letter to *U.S. News & World Report* (April 5) and reverently signed it as just described. The usage was new to me. Have you ever seen a seminarian "reverendized"? The designation set me to doing some research.

It occurred to me that Foster's first name might be "Seminarian," and his middle name "Chad." But *The Baby Name Countdown*, by Janet Schwegal, which lists 50,000, has no "Seminarian." It has "Selwyn," "Semaj," "Semerill," "Semi," "Semil" and "Semisi." But no "Seminarian."

So it was a title. Then Foster put that "The" in front of "Rev.," as one should, according to Fowler in *Modern English Usage*, Follett in *Modern American Usage*, and William and Mary Morris in *Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*--which ought to cover everything, since Foster is from St. Louis, where they speak English and are American--and April 5 is contemporary. So far so good.

What kind of seminarian is he? There are lots of seminaries in St. Louis: Concordia, Covenant, Eden, Kenrick-Glennon and Aquinas. Aquinas is a Jesuit institution, and one would expect to see an "S.J." after "Foster," in that case. But I don't know just when Jesuit seminarians post themselves or get posted as "S.J."

The *Christian Century* of old, when words like "Catholic" or "Jesuit" still aroused suspicion, would have said, in any case, that Foster could not have been a Jesuit because his letter criticizes the idea that "the end justifies the means," and our editorial ancestors thought and taught that Jesuits believed that "the end justifies the means."

Maybe Covenant seminarians are called "Reverend" early in the game? As for Concordia, I am an alumnus, and at least pre-1952 we seminarians were not "Reverend" and we surely were not "Very Reverend," one of the next allowable titles up the ranks in the style and usage manuals. The manuals also have room for "Right Reverend"; some of us Concordians were "Right," but still not "Reverend."

Let's assume that Foster is Roman Catholic. Do Catholics call seminarians "reverend"? I've never heard them thus designated at any Catholic seminary I've visited. Could it be that an editor at *U.S. News & World Report* put the word "Reverend Seminarian" in front of the name? If so, this might be the first such usage and could make it into the supplement to the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*.

My authority on things Catholic is the Reverend Father Richard McBrien, S.T.D.--we call him "Dick" when he does not have his collar on. In his *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, the Reverend Richard says that *Reverend* applies to bishops as "Most Reverend" and monsignors as "Reverend Monsignor," or "Right" for domestic prelates or "Very" for papal chamberlains. Abbesses, prioresses and superiors of religious communities are "Reverend Mother." But again, no "Seminarians."

Emily Post's *Etiquette* has "the Reverend" for priests and "Brother" and "Sister" for members of religious orders. *Miss Manners* offers the example "The Reverend Doctor Mary Jane Doe, D.C.," but that is irrelevant because we are talking Catholic here.

Still, Catholics, Concordians and Covenant students of the world unite: you can all be "The Reverend" if this usage sticks. Having spent many years in and around theological schools, I can say that to have such a title would replace many irreverent names we called ourselves and each other.