



CONGREGATIO DE CULTU DIVINO  
ET DISCIPLINA SACRAMENTORUM

Prot. N. 213/08/L

LETTER TO THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCES  
ON "THE NAME OF GOD"

Your Eminence / Your Excellency:

By directive of the Holy Father, in accord with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, this Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments deems it convenient to communicate to the Bishops' Conferences the following as regards the translation and the pronunciation, in a liturgical setting, of the Divine Name signified in the sacred *tetragrammaton*, along with a number of directives.

I. – Exposé

1. The words of Sacred Scripture contained in the Old and New Testament express truth which transcends the limits imposed by time and place. They are the Word of God expressed in human words and, by means of these words of life, the Holy Spirit introduces the faithful to knowledge of the truth whole and entire and thus the Word of Christ comes to dwell in the faithful in all its richness (cf. *Jn* 14:26; 16:12-15). In order that the Word of God, written in the sacred texts, may be conserved and transmitted in an integral and faithful manner, every modern translation of the books of the Bible aims at being a faithful and accurate transposition of the original texts. Such a literary effort requires that the original text be translated with the maximum integrity and accuracy, without omissions or additions with regard to the contents, and without introducing explanatory glosses or paraphrases which do not belong to the sacred text itself.

As regards the sacred name of God himself, translators must use the greatest faithfulness and respect. In particular, as the Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* (n. 41) states:

in accordance with immemorial tradition, which indeed is already evident in the above-mentioned "Septuagint" version, the name of almighty God expressed by the Hebrew *tetragrammaton* and rendered in Latin by the word *Dominus*, is to be rendered into any given vernacular by a word equivalent in meaning. [Iuxta traditionem ab immemorabili receptam, immo in (...) versione "LXX virorum" iam perspicuam, nomen Dei omnipotentis, sacro tetragrammate hebraice expressum, latine vocabulo "Dominus" in quavis lingua populari vocabulo quodam eiusdem significationis reddatur.]

Notwithstanding such a clear norm, in recent years the practice has crept in of pronouncing the God of Israel's proper name, known as the holy or divine *tetragrammaton*, written with four consonants of the Hebrew alphabet in the form יהוה, YHWH. The practice of vocalizing it is met with both in the reading of biblical texts taken from the Lectionary as well as in prayers and hymns, and it occurs in diverse written and spoken forms, such as, for example, "Yahweh," "Yahwè," "Jahweh," "Jahwè," "Jave," "Yehovah," etc. It is therefore our intention, with the present Letter, to set out some essential facts which lie behind the above-mentioned norm and to establish some directives to be observed in this matter.

2. The venerable biblical tradition of Sacred Scripture, known as the Old Testament, displays a series of divine appellations, among which is the sacred name of God revealed in the *tetragrammaton* YHWH (יהוה). As an expression of the infinite greatness and majesty of God, it was held to be unpronounceable and hence was replaced during the reading of Sacred Scripture by means of the use of an alternate name: "Adonai," which means "Lord."

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Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the so-called *Septuagint*, dating back to the last centuries prior to the Christian era, had regularly rendered the Hebrew *tetragrammaton* with the Greek word *Kyrios*, which means “Lord.” Since the text of the *Septuagint* constituted the Bible of the first generation of Greek-speaking Christians, in which language all the books of the New Testament were also written, these Christians, too, from the beginning never pronounced the divine *tetragrammaton*. Something similar happened likewise for Latin-speaking Christians, whose literature began to emerge from the second century, as first the *Vetus Latina* and, later, the *Vulgate* of St. Jerome attest: in these translations, too, the *tetragrammaton* was regularly replaced with the Latin word “*Dominus*,” corresponding both to the Hebrew *Adonai* and to the Greek *Kyrios*. The same holds for the recent *Neo-Vulgate* which the Church employs in the Liturgy.

This fact has had important implications for New Testament Christology itself. When in fact St. Paul, with regard to the Crucifixion, writes that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name” (*Phil* 2:9), he does not mean any other name than “Lord,” for he continues by saying, “and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (*Phil* 2:11; cf. *Is* 42:8: “I am the Lord; that is my name”). The attribution of this title to the Risen Christ corresponds exactly to the proclamation of his divinity. The title in fact becomes interchangeable between the God of Israel and the Messiah of the Christian faith, even though it is not in fact one of the titles used for the Messiah of Israel. In the strictly theological sense, this title is found, for example, already in the first canonical Gospel (cf. *Mt* 1:20: “The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.”) and one sees it as a rule in Old Testament citations in the New Testament (cf. *Acts* 2:20: “The sun shall be turned into darkness...before the day of the Lord comes (*Joel* 3:4); *1 Peter* 1:25: “The word of the Lord abides for ever” (*Is* 40:8)). However in the properly Christological sense, apart from the text cited of *Philippians* 2:9-11, one can remember *Romans* 10:9 (“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”), *1 Corinthians* 2:8 (“they would not have crucified the Lord of glory”), *1 Corinthians* 12:3 (“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”) and the frequent formula concerning the Christian who lives “in the Lord” (*Rm* 16:2; *1 Cor* 7:22; *1 Thess* 3:8; etc.).

3) Avoiding pronouncing the *tetragrammaton* of the name of God on the part of the Church has therefore its own grounds. Apart from a motive of a purely philological order, there is also that of remaining faithful to the Church’s tradition, from the beginning, that the sacred *tetragrammaton* was never pronounced in the Christian context nor translated into any of the languages into which the Bible was translated.

## II – Directives

In the light of what has been expounded, the following directives are to be observed:

1) In liturgical celebrations, in songs and prayers the name of God in the form of the *tetragrammaton* YHWH is neither to be used or pronounced.

2) For the translation of the Biblical text in modern languages, destined for the liturgical usage of the Church, what is already prescribed by n. 41 of the Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* is to be followed; that is, the divine *tetragrammaton* is to be rendered by the equivalent of *Adonai/Kyrios*: “Lord”, “Signore”, “Seigneur”, “Herr”, “Señor”, etc.

3) In translating, in the liturgical context, texts in which are present, one after the other, either the Hebrew term *Adonai* or the *tetragrammaton* YHWH, *Adonai* is to be translated “Lord” and the form “God” is to be used for the *tetragrammaton* YHWH, similar to what happens in the Greek translation of the Septuagint and in the Latin translation of the Vulgate.

From the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 29 June 2008.

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