

No 'Yahweh' in songs, prayers at Catholic Masses, Vatican rules

WASHINGTON - In the not-too-distant future, songs such as "You Are Near," "I Will Bless Yahweh" and "Rise, O Yahweh" will no longer be part of the Catholic worship experience in the United States.

At the very least, the songs will be edited to remove the word "Yahweh" - a name of God that the Vatican has ruled must not "be used or pronounced" in songs and prayers during Catholic Masses.

Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, announced the new Vatican "directives on the use of 'the name of God' in the sacred liturgy" in an Aug. 8 letter to his fellow bishops.

He said the directives would not "force any changes to official liturgical texts" or to the bishops' current missal translation project but would likely have "some impact on the use of particular pieces of liturgical music in our country as well as in the composition of variable texts such as the general intercessions for the celebration of the Mass and the other sacraments."

John Limb, publisher of OCP in Portland, Ore., said the most popular hymn in the OCP repertoire that would be affected was Dan Schutte's "You Are Near," which begins, "Yahweh, I know you are near."

He estimated that only "a handful" of other OCP hymns use the word "Yahweh," although a search of the OCP Web site turned up about a dozen examples of songs that included the word.

OCP is a nonprofit publisher of liturgical music and worship resources.

Mr. Limb said the company would be contacting composers to "ask them to try to come up with alternate language" for their hymns. But he said hymnals for 2009 had already been printed, so the affected hymns would not include the new wording for at least another year.

Even when the new hymnals are out, “it may take time for people to get used to singing something different,” he added in an Aug. 11 telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

At Chicago-based GIA Publications, another major Catholic publisher of hymnals, no major revisions will be necessary, because of the company’s longtime editorial policy against use of the word “Yahweh.”

Kelly Dobbs-Mickus, senior editor at GIA Publications, told CNS Aug. 11 that the policy, which dates to 1986, was based not on Vatican directives but on sensitivity to concerns among observant Jews about pronouncing the name of God. As an example, she cited Heinrich Schutz’s “Thanks Be to Yahweh,” which appears in a GIA hymnal under the title “Thanks Be to God.”

Bishop Serratelli said the Vatican decision also would provide “an opportunity to offer catechesis for the faithful as an encouragement to show reverence for the name of God in daily life, emphasizing the power of language as an act of devotion and worship.”

His letter to bishops came with a two-page letter from the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, dated June 29 and addressed to episcopal conferences around the world.

“By directive of the Holy Father, in accord with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, this congregation ... deems it convenient to communicate to the bishops’ conferences ... as regards the translation and the pronunciation, in a liturgical setting, of the divine name signified in the sacred Tetragrammaton,” said the letter signed by Cardinal Francis Arinze and Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith, congregation prefect and secretary, respectively.