

What is God's name?

Dear **Father Kerper:** Recently some people told me that the Catholic Church is against using God's real name, which in the Bible is Jehovah. In fact, they said that Pope Benedict recently banned Catholics from ever using this name. If this is God's true name, why prohibit it?

Thanks for your question, which comes up fairly often. Actually, you raise three distinct but interconnected issues: first, the name Jehovah; second, the use of the name "Yahweh" in worship; and third, the possibility of a divine name.

Let's begin with the name Jehovah. If you search through any relatively recent translation of the Bible, you won't find it. Why? Because almost all scholars agree that it is a mistranslation of four Hebrew letters — it was rendered into our standard alphabet as YHWH or JHWH.

Origin of the Term Jehovah

Here's what happened. As reverence for God's name deepened among the people of Israel, they stopped uttering YHWH. This happened around 300 B.C.

To remind readers not to say the revealed name, scribes began to insert the vowel points of "Adonai" (Hebrew for Lord) above the consonants YHWH. When people read the biblical text aloud they always substituted "Adonai/Lord" for "YHWH/God." Beginning in late medieval times, scholars who translated

the Hebrew text into Latin and other European languages created the name "Jehovah" by mistakenly merging the four consonants — YHWH — with the vowel points of *Adonai*. Over the centuries, the pronunciation evolved into Jehovah.

There is still another huge problem with YHWH: No one really knows what it means. Most translators render YHWH as "I am who am." Others prefer "I am who will be." And some even translate it simply as "Being." Also, some scholars even suggest that the ultimate fuzziness of the YHWH means that God did *not* want to reveal the Name at all. In other words, God was saying to Moses, "My name is none of your business."

Please remember that Jehovah's Witnesses have long disputed this standard account of the origin of "Jehovah," claiming that it is the only true name of God. However, the scholarship on this point is quite persuasive that it is not the case.

Why "Yahweh" is No Longer Heard

Now, let's look at Pope Benedict's "ban" on using God's "real name." In August 2008, the Holy See issued a directive regarding the use of "Yahweh" in sacred music and public prayer. Two reasons were given:

First, Christians have *never* used this name to address God in public worship. Indeed, "Yahweh" first appeared in Catholic hymns in the early 1970s.

This happened largely through the influence of *The Jerusalem Bible*, whose English translation appeared in 1966.

Many Catholic academics favored this innovative translation and some trend-setting hymn writers, like Gregory Norbet, Dan Schutte, and the St. Louis Jesuits, began using "Yahweh" instead of Lord and God. "Yahweh," they believed, captured the "flavor" of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the psalms.

From the start, however, some liturgy experts objected to using "Yahweh" in public worship. Some considered it untraditional while others appealed to practical considerations, namely that many people have no idea that "Yahweh"

WHAT DO IHS AND PX MEAN?

Dear Father Kerper: In some churches I have seen vestments, banners, and other objects with the letters IHS and PX written on them. Someone told me that IHS means "I have suffered" and that PX means peace. I don't get it. Do they mean something else?

The explanations you received, though nice attempts at deciphering the meaning of the letters, are incorrect. Both sets of letters are monograms, the IHS for Jesus

IHS

and the X superimposed on the P for Christ. These letters all come from the Greek alphabet.

IHS is a shortened form of the Greek name for Jesus as written out in a form of the Greek alphabet used from the fourth to eighth centuries. Though IHS came from the Greek it gradually assumed

meanings based on Latin. The first — and most common — is *Jesus Hominum*

Salvator, which means Jesus Savior of Humanity. Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380-1444) promoted this understanding during his great campaign to recover respect for the name of Jesus. Among the Jesuits, IHS was an abbreviation for *Iesum Habemus Socium*, which means: "We have Jesus as companion."

The X placed over the P represents the first two Greek letters — Chi and Rho — of the word Christ. As such, it's a "shorthand" version for Christ, which is not really a name but a title for Jesus.



Send your questions to: "Dear Father Kerper," *Parable Magazine*, P.O. Box 310, Manchester, NH 03105 or e-mail dearfrkerper@parablemag.com.

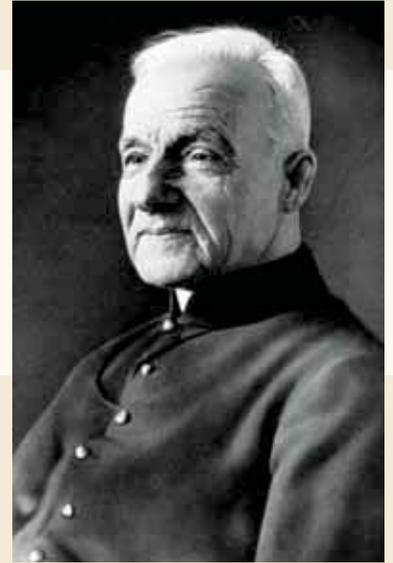
Saint André Bessette

BORN: August 9, 1845

DIED: January 6, 1937

FEAST DAY: January 6

PATRON OF Saint André Bessette Parish in Laconia



Saint André Bessette was canonized on October 17, 2010. Born in Quebec in 1845, Alfred Bessette was so sickly that the midwife baptized him immediately.

When he was 10, Alfred's father died in an accident and his mother succumbed to tuberculosis a few years later, leaving Alfred an orphan. Relatives took him in and encouraged him in various trades, but his poor health made him unable to sustain employment. Almost illiterate, Alfred had little education but demonstrated a strong spirituality, spending hours in prayer. As a teenager, he came to New Hampshire to work in the mills for a time.

This natural holiness was recognized by Alfred's pastor who suggested that he might have a vocation. With his pastor's prescient recommendation in hand ("I am sending you a saint") Alfred entered the Congregation of the Holy Cross in Montreal. The Order was reluctant to take him because of his poor health, but in 1872, Alfred entered the novitiate, receiving the religious name of Brother André. He made his final vows at the age of 28.

For 40 years, Brother André served the congregation as doorman and porter. He recommended devotion to Saint Joseph for all afflicted peoples whom he met and prayed to Saint Joseph on their behalf. He insisted that it was Saint Joseph's intercessions, not his own powers, which brought about the miracles of healing which were attributed to him. Word spread about the people cured through Brother André and he was sought out by the thousands.

From his post in the doorway of the Order, Brother André looked upon Mount Royal, envisioning a small chapel there in honor of his patron saint. Fifty years later, shortly after his death in 1937, the dome of St. Joseph's Oratory was finally in place. It is the largest shrine devoted to Saint Joseph in North America, and the second largest basilica dome in the world — only St. Peter's in Rome is bigger.

Saint André Bessette is a contemporary example of how God works through the most humble and weak. His natural humility, steadfast faith, devotion to Saint Joseph, and tireless intercession on the part of the poor and sick make him a wonderful example for all of us.

and God are the same.

Second, the actual oral pronunciation of "Yahweh" is considered potentially offensive to Jewish people. Recognizing the long-standing prohibition among Jewish people against uttering the Divine Name, some argued that Christians should respect the Jewish people and not do what they would consider objectionable, indeed even sacrilegious.

God's True Name

Now to the next big question: So, what is God's true name?

God, being infinite and beyond all human ideas, obviously surpasses any single name. The Bible expresses this essential truth by offering a rich variety of names and terms for God.

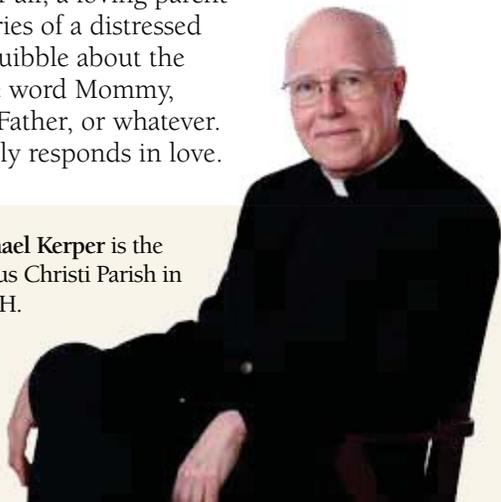
Let's start with "God," perhaps the most common name we use. Strictly speaking, this is not a name at all but a generic term like "man" or "dog" or "ruler." It usually translates the Hebrew word "*Elohim*," which is not really a personal name.

Hebrew Scriptures use other impersonal terms for God, such as Lord, Holy One, Strong One of Jacob, the Almighty, and so on. When the Jewish people translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, they always replaced YHWH with the Greek work *kyrios*, which means Lord. This Greek version circulated widely in the early Church. Hence, almost all early Christians would have addressed God as "Lord," never Yahweh.

What about Jesus? Being a pious Jewish man, as he certainly was, Jesus would never have addressed God as Yahweh, at least in public. Instead, he almost always used the term "*Abba*," which is the familiar form of Father, equivalent to "Daddy" or "Papa." Note, too, that "*Abba*" is a title, not a Divine name.

The only other term used by Jesus was "*Eloi*," which means God in the generic sense. He uttered this only *once* — before dying on the cross. Similarly, Saint Paul and other New Testament writers use Father and God, never Yahweh or Jehovah.

When people become overly concerned about retrieving the "true" name of God, they overlook the loving nature of God. Because God truly loves us, it is safe to assume that God hears all sincere prayer regardless of what name a person may use. Indeed, genuine prayer may invoke no name at all. After all, a loving parent who hears the cries of a distressed child does not quibble about the child's use of the word Mommy, Mother, Daddy, Father, or whatever. The parent simply responds in love.



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