

THE OLD PAST MASTER

THE VATICAN'S ATTITUDE TO FREEMASONRY

Two questions you hear often are: “Why are Masons anti-Catholic;” and “Why is the Catholic Church anti-Mason?”

As practicing Masons we know that the first question has no validity, as we demand that the candidate be “a good man and true,” and that he express a belief and trust in a Supreme Being. The answer to the second question is not so easy.

The 16 Century [*circa* 1535] ushered in the Reformation and the rise of Protestant religions [protesting against the Catholic Church and forming their own] — with a detrimental effect on operative Masonry, as the cathedral building came to a halt for lack of new construction -- and commencing the weakening of the Catholic Church. This segued into the Age of Enlightenment in the 17 and 18 Centuries, with new ideas and philosophies beginning to explode and flourish resulting in a further weakening of the *Holy See's* spiritual and temporal control over the minds and actions of the public.

Speculative Freemasonry “went public” on St. John the Baptist’s Day, June 24, 1717, with the formation of what has melded into the present English Grand Lodge. We find records of non-operatives being admitted to Lodges as early as 1598 in Scotland, and there are schools of thought that would suggest that our organized roots as free thinkers stem from the suppression of the Knights Templar and the relocation of some of them into Scotland.

Up until 1717 the members of the Masonic Lodges had kept their views on free thinking and philosophy under wraps and out of the view of the Catholic Church. In fact, until 1723, all members were [ostensibly] publicly required to “Love wel God and holy churche,”¹ and use no error or heresy.”² The Gothic Constitutions which are the repository of the old charges and points were basically Trinitarian Christian and in conformity with the Catholic creed.³ The Church and Freemasonry had not yet come into conflict.

In 1723 Anderson’s Constitutions were adopted by the Premier Grand Lodge. The charges adopted inculcated the highest regard for the Supreme Being, but left the particular opinions of individuals and their methods of sectarian worship to themselves and their consciences — opening the Craft to “all good men and true,” regardless of their religion. While Anderson’s Constitutions were never proscribed by the Catholic church, they began to set the scene for future conflict.

After 1717, Masonry, having attracted to itself many members of royalty and men of high position, including many who were Catholics, began to grow by leaps and bounds. It spread to Continental Europe and the Americas. At a time when the Church’s influence was weakening, Freemasonry was rapidly becoming an international institution, with the ability to offer a philosophical, moral and theological alternative to the Church. On March 20, 1737, in France, Andrew Michael Ramsay gave his famous “Oration,”⁴ tracing the origins of Masonry back to the mystery schools and sects of the ancient world [much like Albert Pike in the following century], and also to the Knights Templar [although he did not name them, as that would have been a political *faux pas* toward the Church].

Ramsay sought to give Masonry a Royal character, as he hoped to initiate Louis XV as a Jacobite Freemason, thereby uniting French Masons with those of Scotland, with the hopes of an invasion

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of England to put a Stuart on the throne.⁵ Whatever his intent, it backfired. The Church had had enough. Freemasonry had already fallen under police investigation in Holland [1735] and Sweden [1736]. Cardinal Fleury, the French King's chief advisor, ordered the French police to commence investigation of the Masons. On August 1, 1737 the police declared Freemasonry innocent of "indecent" but potentially dangerous by reason of the indifference of the Order towards religions. Following arrests and seizure of documents, the number of Masons was astounding, and their positions being officers, officials or intimates of the court, were such as to give them significant influence over the King and public affairs.

Pope Clement XII had not waited for the investigation to be completed. The famous [or infamous, depending on your viewpoint] Papal Bull *In eminenti* issued on April 24, 1738, forbidding any Catholic to become [or remain] Freemasons, under threat of excommunication. Two years later, in the Papal States, membership was punishable by death. The Bull refers to the rapid expansion of the Masonic Order, the fact that it had secrets which were presumably kept from the confessional, that they resisted civil and canonical sanctions [the people as the source of power], and other "just and reasonable" causes for the Church's stance against the Order. Personally, I feel that religious "indifference" — the allowing of men of various religions to join the Order — coupled with Masonry's rapid growth and the huge number of influential men who were members, including an increasing number of influential Catholics, terrified the Church. To the Holy See, you were either for or against it, with or without it, nothing in between. It saw Masonry as a real threat to its power over the hearts and minds of men. It was a large group which became a visible focal point for the Church's frustration at its increasing powerlessness. The position of the Church became more firmly entrenched as time went on, This was the public speech. A shortened version of his extended one on December 26, 4 1736, culminating with the Papal Bulls of Leo XIII.

Following *In eminenti*, Masonry continued to flourish. Chevalier Ramsay's Oration had triggered off the propagation of large numbers of Chivalric degrees. The Scottish Rite came into being. The York Rite claimed to have always been there. The Scottish Rite began to expand into the Latin countries of Central and South America, carrying the torch of freedom "liberty, equality, fraternity", and the rights of man — throwing down the gauntlet against the Roman Catholic despotic attempts to control the minds of man for its own personal gain. Shortly before Leo XIII was elected Pope in 1878, the Vatican had been stripped of its control of the Papal States and relegated in terms of temporal power to the Vatican only.

Leo XIII had previously been a liberal, and a social and political reformer, had tried to reach an accommodation with science and the Church [with the Church supreme], and basically to reconcile with the Age of Enlightenment [i.e. where did the world go wrong]. He was a reformer by nature committed to one of the most conservative organizations in the world. As noted by one author, "he was an essential liberal bound with unbreakable ties to a conservative institution."⁶ In his frustration and despair at the loss of power by the Holy See, Leo struck out once more at the Masons. In 1884 he issued *Humanum genus*, railing against the Craft for its advocacy of the separation of church and state, freedom of conscience and religion, equality of all people under the law, the sovereignty of the people over rulers and institutions, and of course "religious indifference," [which we know as tolerance]. The very concepts that we are most proud of are those the Church condemned — thereby widening the rift in the lute, as it were.

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In 1917, Benedict XV promulgated Article 2335 of the canon law: “Persons who have themselves enrolled in the Masonic sect, or in other institutions of the same kind which plot against the Church or legitimate civil powers, have committed a crime of disobedience, and incur ex-communication reserved simply to the Holy See.” This appears to have opened the door to a Catholic becoming a Mason, but not much seems to have been done with it.

It was not until the 1960s that the Church’s position against Masonry began to relax. In 1964 and 1965 two Papal Bulls were issued by Paul VI, recommending tolerance for, and exchange of ideas with, non-Catholic beliefs and philosophies, basically as a means of bringing non-Catholic believers into the Church. In 1965 the Vatican Council published its declaration that the “human person has a right to religious freedom.”⁷ In 1971, two English Freemasons were specifically permitted by the Holy See to join the Church without renouncing their Masonic affiliations. In 1974, the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reinterpreted Article 2335, stating that it only pertained to Lodges known to be hostile to the Church — i.e. if the Lodge does not advocate overthrow of the Church, a Catholic can become a member. Article 1734, a new code section of Canon Law was published in 1983, effective at the end of 1983, further formalizing that interpretation, and replacing Article 2335, which quite simply forbade association only with those organizations known to be hostile to the Church. During 1983, and shortly before Article 1734 became effective, the Sacred Congregation, under a new Prefect, clarified the earlier pronouncement, saying that they didn’t mean it and that nothing has changed since 1738.

However, the proper rule of construction of a law is that a new statute supercedes it, and an “interpretation” has no ability to change a statute with a clear meaning contrary to it. The 1983 pronouncement was directed to Article 2335. While Article 1734 became effective **after** the “clarification,” of Article 2335 -- as a new and distinct Statute, which is not susceptible to such a perverse interpretation. Nothing further has issued from the Vatican, to my knowledge, on this point, and it clearly appears that a Catholic is now free to join a Masonic Order that does not advocate atheism or the overthrow of the Catholic Church. This is the very rationale which is bringing Catholics of good conscience into the Order.

It is only the strained interpretation by various Bishops and priests who, for whatever reason, still tell their members that the two organizations are incompatible that keeps good men of the Catholic faith out of the Craft. As such, it behooves us to make known to the public our goals and philosophy, and to enter into dialogs with clericals at high levels — through the auspices of our Grand Lodges and well known Masonic scholars — to open the door to men as brothers who might otherwise remain at a perpetual distance.

I hope this is of some interest and use.

FRATERNALLY AND FONDLY,
JOHN D. NELSON, P.M.

1. *Regius Manuscript 1390 a.d.*¹
2. *Grand Lodge MS December 25, 1583*
3. *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia, 1961 ed.*

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4. *This was the public speech. A shortened version of his extended one on December 26, 1736*
5. *See Baigent & Leigh, The Temple & The Lodge, pp 186-190*
6. *William G. Madison, The Miter and the Trowel, Vol. XLIX, The Philalethes, 10/96.*
7. *“Dignitatis humanae” issued 12/7/65.*