

CATHOLICISM VS. FREEMASONRY—IRRECONCILABLE FOREVER

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What is the truth regarding the present official attitude of the Catholic Church toward Freemasonry? To begin this inquiry into that which is now in effect, we should go back to what was stated in the Church's canon law before there was any doubt about where the Church stood on Masonry. The former code (which, incidentally, was promulgated on Pentecost, May 27, 1917, just two weeks after Our Lady's first apparition at Fatima) contained a canon which definitely capped all the previous papal condemnations of it. Canon 2335 reads as follows:

Persons joining associations of the Masonic sect or any others of the same kind which plot against the Church and legitimate civil authorities contract <ipso facto> excommunication simply reserved to the Apostolic See.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, however, when the revision of the Code of Canon Law was underway, the prevailing spirit of "ecumenical dialogue" prompted questions among various bishops as to whether or not Canon 2335 was still in force. Responding to these questions, a letter from Cardinal Francis Seper, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to the presidents of all the episcopal conferences, dated July 18, 1974, stated that: (1) the Holy See has repeatedly sought information from the bishops about contemporary Masonic activities directed against the Church; (2) there will be no new law on this matter, pending the revision of the Code now underway; (3) all penal canons must be interpreted strictly and (4) the express prohibition against Masonic membership by clerics, religious and members of secular institutes is hereby reiterated.¹

This rather awkwardly structured letter (which, for whatever reason, was not published in the <Acta Apostolicae Sedis,> the official journal of record for the Holy See) came to be interpreted in many quarters as allowing membership by laymen in any particular Masonic (or similar) lodge which, in the judgment of the local bishop, was not actively plotting against the Church or legitimate civil authorities.

This state of affairs, in which undoubtedly a fair number of Catholics in good faith became Masons, lasted for some years. Then, on February 17, 1981, Cardinal Seper issued a formal declaration: (1) his original letter did not in any way change the force of the existing Canon 2335; (2) the stated canonical penalties are in no way abrogated and (3) he was but recalling the general principles of interpretation to be applied by the local bishop for resolving cases of individual persons, which is not to say that any episcopal conference now has the competence to publicly pass judgment of a general character on the nature of Masonic associations, in such a way as to derogate from the previously stated norms.²

Because this second statement seemed to be as awkwardly put together as the first, the confusion persisted. Finally, in 1983 came the new Code with its Canon 1374:

A person who joins an association which plots against the Church is to be punished with a just penalty; one who promotes or takes office in such an association is to be punished with an interdict.

Cardinal Ratzinger's Declaration

Following the promulgation of the new Code, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the new Prefect of the

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued a new declaration: (1) the new Canon 1374 has the same essential import as the old Canon 2335, and the fact that the "Masonic sect" is no longer explicitly named is irrelevant; (2) the Church's negative judgment on Masonry remains unchanged, because the Masonic principles are irreconcilable with the Church's teaching ("earum principia semper iconciliabilia habita sunt cum Ecclesiae doctrina"); (3) Catholics who join the Masons are in the state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion and (4) no local ecclesiastical authority has competence to derogate from these judgments of the Sacred Congregation. 3

With these official statements of the Universal Church now on record,⁴ it should be clear that the lamentable confusion of so many Catholics regarding Freemasonry must be seen as only a temporary aberration—to be written off as one most costly consequence of a mindless "spirit of Vatican II." But we may hope that, as in other issues that have plagued the Church in the last score of years, there is a providence in this, a veritable blessing in disguise. For now, more clearly than ever before, we should see just why the Catholic Church has been—and will always be—so opposed to Masonry.

It may at first seem plausible that the main (if not only) reason for its being condemned by the Catholic Church is that Masonry is conspiratorial. Its plotting against the Church (and, in the old Code, its also plotting against the State) is the one descriptive statement mentioned in both versions of the Code of Canon Law. Moreover, as the first curial document we cited (that of 1974) seems clearly to imply, the one requisite condition for permitting Catholics to join a Masonic lodge is that the lodge in question was not actively plotting against Church and State. Yet, for all its initial plausibility, this opinion seems to be inadequate. The proof of this is evident not only from the two subsequent curial documents (of 1981 and 1983), but more decisively still from the entire previous history of Roman documents, both curial and papal, treating of Masonry.

Beginning in 1738 with Clement XII's encyclical <In Eminentis> (just twenty-one years after the establishment of the Grand Lodge of England, the event usually recognized as the commencement of the modern Masonic movement) and running through ten successive pontificates, the Church's case against Freemasonry finds its culminating statement in 1884 in Leo XIII's encyclical <Humanum Genus.> Masonic deceitfulness regarding its real objectives in society—and its consequent policy of secrecy regarding the authorities of Church and State, and including even the rank-and-file of its own membership—has always been noted by the popes, and most tellingly by Leo XIII.⁵ And in the century since then and in our own country this conspiratorial policy has been amply documented.⁶

However useful this knowledge of Masonic strategy is for our understanding of the authentic nature of the movement, it is quite secondary. It is wholly subordinate to that which <defines> the movement itself: the content in function of which conspiracy is but "method," the <end> determining and justifying the <means.> That content—that end—is what we must now examine, if we are to find the fundamental and explicit reason for the Church's condemnation of Freemasonry .

This fundamental reason can be briefly stated. The following summary passage from Leo XIII's <Humanum Genus> suffices.

. . . that which is their ultimate purpose forces itself into view—namely, the utter overthrow of that whole religious and political order of the world which the Christian teaching has produced, and the substitution of a new state of things in accordance with their ideas, of which the foundations and laws shall be drawn from mere "Naturalism."...

Now, the fundamental doctrine of the Naturalists, which they sufficiently make known by their very

name, is that human nature and human reason ought in all things to be mistress and guide. Laying this down, they care little for duties to God, or pervert them by erroneous and vague opinions. For they deny that anything has been taught by God; they allow no dogma of religion or truth which cannot be understood by the human intelligence, nor any teacher who ought to be believed by reason of his authority. And since it is the special and exclusive duty of the Catholic Church fully to set forth in words truths divinely received, to teach, besides other divine helps to salvation, the authority of its office, and to defend the same with perfect purity, it is against the Church that the rage and attack of the enemies are principally directed.⁷

Catholicism and Freemasonry are therefore essentially opposed. If either were to terminate its opposition to the other, it would by that very fact become something essentially different from what it previously was; it would in effect cease to exist as itself. For Catholicism is essentially a revealed religion; it is essentially <supernatural,> both in its destiny and in its resources. Beyond all natural fulfillment, it tends toward an eternity of ineffable union with God in Himself; and beyond all natural resources, it begins that union here and now in the sacramental life of the Church.

Masonry, on the other hand, is essentially a religion of "reason." With an insistence and a consistency matching Catholicism's self-definition, Masonry promises perfection in the natural order as its only destiny—as indeed the highest destiny there is. And it provides for this perfectibility with its resources: the accumulated sum of purely human values, subsumed under the logo of "reason."

Literally a logo, the Masonic compass and square are the symbol of a Rationalism that claims to be identified with all that is "natural." The consequent syncretism, blending all the strands of human experience—from the cabalistic mysteries of an immemorial Orient to the technological manipulations of a post-modern West—is the basis for Masonry's claim to be not just a religion but <the> religion: the "natural" Religion of Man. That is why its claim to date from the beginning of history—its calendar numbers the "Years of Light" (from the first day of Creation) or the "Years of the World"—is no mere jest on its part. And that is why its opposition to the Catholic Church antedates the Catholic Church's opposition to it. For it cannot abide the Church's claim to be the One True Church, and the consequent refusal by the Church to be relegated to the status of a "sect" which Masonry would have it be.

Since the Church's claim to be the One True Church is ultimately founded and validated on the reality of the One True God, the opposing Masonic claim must ultimately derive from a perception of God that diametrically opposes the Church's faith. And so it does. Although Pope Leo does not explicitly speak of this essential opposition between Catholicism and Masonry in terms of the First Commandment of God—"I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me"—surely the most radical and simplest way of situating this opposition is to say just this. The Masonic "God" is an <idol.> What the Masons really worship is <Man>—or the Spirit who has deceived man from the beginning: the masked Spirit of Evil. This is the one primal reason why the Catholic Church has condemned, and will always condemn, Freemasonry. It is clearly sufficient to stand by itself as the <only> reason—and in a most fundamental sense, as Leo XIII seems to imply, that is the only reason in fact.

Gravely Evil Misuse Of Oaths

We can, however, give a second reason for the Church's opposition to Masonry. Not strictly independent of the first reason, based as that reason is on the First Commandment, we can yet distinguish a second reason—based on the Second Commandment. Some ten years earlier than <Humanum Genus,> there appeared (even in English translation) a brief (barely more than pamphlet-sized) but penetrating work, <A Study of Freemasonry,> by the great bishop of Orleans, Felix

Dupanloup.⁸ All the more impressive because of his "liberal" credentials, Dupanloup duly notes the facts, and the gravity, of the Masonic conspiracy. But what he stresses, besides the same primary point subsequently stressed by Leo XIII, viz., the Masonic violation of the First Commandment, is its violation of the Second Commandment by its gravely evil misuse of oaths. The famous (or, rather, infamous) oaths that run through the entire ritual of Masonic initiation are more than mere promises based on personal honor. They formally invoke the Deity, and have for their object a man's total commitment to a cause under the direst sanctions. The Catholic Church sees in such oaths an inescapable grave evil. Either the oaths mean what they say or they do not. If they mean what they say, then God is being called to invert by his witness loyalties (viz., to Church and to State) already sanctioned by Him. If the oaths are merely fictitious, then God is being called to witness to a joke.

It is not the secrecy of what goes on "behind the lodge door" that elicits and justifies the Church's condemnation of Masonry. It is rather the formal violation of the Second Commandment which these proceedings inescapably entail. The vaunted Masonic secrets, moreover, are scarcely that secret any longer. There is in fact a frequent Masonic plea to the effect that there are no secrets in Masonry—that all is open to a truly open mind. On this point we may take the Mason at his word: he is speaking more truly than he knows!

The case for the Catholic Church's condemnation of Freemasonry is open and clear. By its very nature as formulated in its philosophical statements and as lived in its historical experience, Masonry violates the First and Second Commandments of God. It worships not the One True God of revelation—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—but a false god, symbolically transcendent but really immanent: the "god" called "Reason." And it invokes without adequate cause the Name of the One True God. After such a case as this, to cite the secrecies of initiation and the further secrecies of machination called "conspiracy" is not only anti-climactic, it is beside the point.

To conclude: we Catholics should now see the Masons more clearly for what they essentially are. They are the heirs (unwitting or otherwise is irrelevant) of a religion which purports to be the one religion of the one "God"—and therefore the enemy, intrinsically and implacably so, of Catholicism. Freemasonry in its modern mode <is> "modernity" in the deepest (i.e., the philosophical and religious) sense of that term. It is, in a word, "Counterfeit Catholicism." For its "God" is the "Counterfeit God": the one who would be as God, the one who is the prince of this world, the one who is the Father of Lies.

Endnotes

1. "Complures Episcopi," <Notiziario CEI> (1974) 191. (From <Enchiridion Vaticanum,> No. 563, pp. 350-51.
2. "S. Congregation pro Doctrina Fidei," <Acta Apostolicae Sedis> 73 (1981) 240-41. (From <EV,> No. 1137, pp. 1036-39)
3. "Quaesitum est," AAS 76 (1984) 300. (From <EV,> No. 553, pp. 482-87)
4. A summary of this documentation was made available in this country by the American Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Research and Practice, in a report entitled "Masonry and Naturalistic Religion," published in <Origins,> 15 (June 27,1985), pp. 83-84.

5. <Acta Sanctae Sedis> 16 (1883 sic) 420.

6. For an excellent recent survey, with emphasis on the American scene, see Paul Fisher's <Behind the Lodge Door: Church, State and Freemasonry in America> (Bowie, MD: Shield, 1988).

7. <Acta Sanctae Sedis> 16 (1883 sic) 421. The English version used here is from a Paulist pamphlet first published in 1944 and reprinted by TAN (Rockford, IL: 1987), pp. 6-7.

8. The English edition which I used was published in Philadelphia in 1856.