

forbidden to join the Masons, and until 1983, under pain of excommunication. (The Orthodox and several Protestant churches also ban membership in the Masons.) Confusion occurred in 1974, when a letter by Cardinal Franjo Seper, then prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was interpreted to mean that Catholics could join Masonic lodges that were not anti-Catholic; the same congregation declared this interpretation as erroneous in 1981.

On Nov. 26, 1983, with the approval of Pope John Paul II, the Sacred Congregation reiterated the ban on Catholics joining the Masons: "The Church's negative position on Masonic association ... remains unaltered, since their principles have always been regarded as irreconcilable with the Church's doctrine. Hence, joining them remains prohibited by the Church. Catholics enrolled in Masonic associations are involved in serious sin and may not approach Holy Communion." However, neither this declaration nor the 1983 Code of Canon Law imposed the penalty of excommunication on Catholics belonging to the Masons.

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Pamphlet 057

## **Catholics and the Freemason 'Religion'**

Fr. William Saunders, PhD

### **What are the Masons?**

The origins of the Masons, or what is officially called Freemasonry, are hard to pinpoint. With the decline of cathedral building in the aftermath of the Protestant movement, the guilds of masons began accepting non-masons as members to bolster their dwindling membership. Eventually, the non-masons outnumbered the masons, and the guilds became places for the discussion of ethics and morality while retaining the secret signs, symbols and gestures of the original guild. Four such guilds merged in 1717 in London, England, to form the Grand Lodge of Freemasons. (A "freemason" was highly skilled mason who enjoyed the privileges of membership in a trade guild.) The Masons then spread throughout the world.

Old "handbooks" of Freemasonry define the organization as "a peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols," "a science which is engaged in the search after the divine truth," and "the activity of closely united men who, employing symbolic forms borrowed principally from the mason's trade and others and thereby to bring about a universal league of mankind which they aspire to exhibit even now on a small scale."

James Anderson (d. 1739), a Scottish Presbyterian minister, wrote the Book of Constitutions in which he contrived the "traditional," albeit spurious, history of Freemasonry. Masons hold that God, "the Great Architect," founded Freemasonry, and that it has as patrons Adam and the Patriarchs. Even Jesus is listed as "the Grand Master" of the Christian Church. They credit themselves with the building of Noah's ark, the Tower of Babel, the pyramids and Solomon's Temple. In all, Freemasonry borrows liberally from the history and traditions of cultic groups such as Druids, Mithars, Egyptian priesthood, Rosicrucians and others to weave its own history.

### **Are Catholics allowed to belong to this organization?**

The Catholic Church has difficulties with Freemasonry because it is indeed a kind of religion unto itself. The practice of Freemasonry includes temples, altars, a moral code, worship services, vestments, feast days, a hierarchy of leadership, initiation and burial rites, and promises of eternal reward and punishment. While in America most Masons are Christian and will display a Bible on their "altar," in the same lodges or elsewhere, Jews, Moslems, Hindus or other non-Christian religions can be admitted and may use their own sacred scriptures. (In France, in 1877, the "Grand Orient" Lodge eliminated the need to believe in God or the immortality of the soul, thereby admitting atheists into their

fold; this atheistic type of Freemasonry spread particularly in Latin countries.)

Moreover, the rituals involve the corruption of Christianity. The cross is merely a symbol of nature and eternal life, devoid of Christ's sacrifice for sin. INRI (For Christians, "Jesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum," i.e. Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews) means for Masons "Igne Natura Renovatur Integra" ("the fire of nature rejuvenates all) referring to the sacred fire's (truth and love) regeneration of mankind, just as the sun regenerates nature in the Spring.

The rituals are also inimical to Catholicism. During the initiation rite, the candidate expresses a desire to seek "light," and he is assured he will receive the light of spiritual instruction that he could not receive in another Church, and that he will gain eternal rest in the "celestial lodge" if he lives and dies according to Masonic principles. Note also that since Masonry involves non-Christians, the use of the name of Jesus is forbidden within the lodge.

A strong Anti-Catholicism also permeates Freemasonry. The two traditional enemies of Freemasonry are the royalty and the papacy. Masons even believe that Christ, dying on Calvary, was the "greatest among the apostles of humanity, braving Roman despotism and the fanaticism and bigotry of the priesthood." When one reaches the 30th degree in the Masonic hierarchy, called the Kadosh, the person crushes with his foot the papal tiara and the royal crown, and swears to free mankind "from the bondage of

despotism and the thralldom of spiritual tyranny."

A second difficulty with Freemasonry for Catholics involves taking of oaths. An oath is a religious act which asks God to witness the truth of the statement or the fulfillment of a promise. Only the Church and the state, for serious reasons, can require an oath. A candidate makes an oath to Freemasonry and its secrets under pain of death or self-mutilation by kneeling blindfolded in front of the altar, placing both hands on the volume of sacred law (perhaps the Bible), the square and the compass, and repeating after the "worshipful master." Keep in mind that the candidate does not yet even know all the "secrets" to which he is taking an oath.

The history of Freemasonry has proven its anti-Catholic nature. In the United States, one of the leaders of Freemasonry, General Albert Pike (d. 1891) referred to the papacy as "a deadly, treacherous enemy," and wrote, "The papacy has been for a thousand years the torturer and curse of humanity, the most shameless imposture, in its pretense to spiritual power of all ages." In France, in 1877, and in Portugal in 1910, Freemasons took control of the government for a time and enacted laws to restrict the activities of the Church, particularly in education. In Latin America, the Freemasons have expressed anti-Church and anti-clerical sentiment.

Since the decree "In Eminenti" of Pope Clement XII in 1738, Catholics have been