

Pure, Ancient Masonry and the Catholic Church

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IN HIS SPRING 2019 COLUMN IN *FREEMASONRY TODAY* THE GRAND SECRETARY, Dr David Staples, wrote:

... we must become known for who we really are, what we stand for and what we do in our communities in order to counter such abject prejudice and nonsense. There are those members who feel that we should go about our business quietly with as little publicity or fuss as possible. Whilst respecting those of that opinion, they are wrong. Freemasonry must be associated in people's minds with who we are, what we value and what we do...

In a similar vein, a former Grand Master of the *Grand Orient de France*, Alain Bauer, and his historian colleague Roger Dachez stated in a recent book: 'Freemasons hardly recognize themselves in the portraits drawn up by their observers or enemies (which range from the simply mocking to the resolutely hostile)...'¹ At the European Grand Masters' Conference in Monaco in March 2019, the Grand Master of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy, Fabio Venzi, addressed the delegates on the subject of anti-Masonic conspiracies

¹ Roger Dachez & Alain Bauer *Freemasonry: A French View* (New Hampshire: Westphalia Press, 2015) 1.

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and the appropriate response. He focused in particular on the long history of the Catholic Church's objections to Freemasonry.

It is in the spirit of these recent statements and of the problems encountered recently by three young Catholic Freemasons in Sheffield on the Universities Scheme that I have written this paper on contemporary English Freemasonry and the Catholic Church.

For far too long English Catholics have suffered criticism of their membership of the Craft from priests who know little about the subject and appear prejudiced against it. I know personally many English Catholic Freemasons and not one of them has ever found anything in any of the rituals of pure, ancient Freemasonry that is contrary to the faith and doctrine of the Catholic Church. Indeed, pretty well everything one reads and hears on the subject veers towards ignorance and prejudice rather than reason and objectivity. As this paper seeks to show, it is surprising that people publish their thoughts on Freemasonry without any serious study or knowledge of the subject. This may be because Freemasons have ignored much of what they read. The Grand Secretary is right: if we begin to challenge what is written, perhaps people will, in future, think twice before publishing ill-informed nonsense.

This paper discusses only English Freemasonry as governed by UGLE and Supreme Grand Chapter, nothing else. Not all Masonic rituals even within regular Freemasonry are compatible with Catholic faith and doctrine. Each case should be viewed on its own merits. To seek a simplistic 'Yes' or 'No' to Freemasonry in general from the Catholic Church is neither reasonable, responsible, nor indeed possible. That much is clear.

Regular English Freemasonry is a system of morality aimed at helping each of its members to have a better chance of passing through 'the eye of a needle' and of being among the 'few [who] are chosen' from the 'many [who] are called.'² In the first degree, the regular English Freemason is taught to consider his duties to God, to his neighbour and to himself; in the second degree he is instructed to consider the importance of education but also the limits of human knowledge and the importance of relying on his instincts and his heart; in the third degree he is encouraged to consider his own eventual death and how to face it; and in the Royal Arch he learns about God who knows his every thought, word and deed.

The Volume of Sacred Law, the Holy Bible – known in regular Freemasonry as the first of the Three Great Lights 'to rule and direct your faith' – is always open when a regular Masonic lodge is open. Other sacred texts which may also be open in a lodge are additional to, not replacements for the Bible.

Freemasonry is not a rigid system, still less is it a self-proclaimed religion. It is a moral framework within which each individual Mason, whatever his faith, is encouraged to find

² Matthew 22:14.

himself. As it says in the third degree ‘... [to] guide your reflections to that most important of all human studies, the knowledge of yourself.’³

Traditionally, a Masonic evening consisted of three parts of which the ceremony was the first. This was followed by a Festive Board and a Catechism. The last has now generally disappeared although it is still practised in some lodges in the North of England in a shortened form. Some masons think of the Festive Board as simply a dinner with friends but it is much more than that. It is and has always been an essential part of a Masonic meeting. It is the place where the moral development encouraged in the ritual is put into practice and where a mason gets to know his fellow masons better. Interestingly, in recent years, most Christian churches now have ‘Festive Boards’ – usually tea or coffee and biscuits after their services – so that their members can socialize and get to know each other better.

The origins of pure, ancient Masonry date back to the Middle Ages and to the builders of the great Norman cathedrals. ‘Freemason’ is an abbreviation of ‘Free-stone Mason’: the men who designed the buildings and carved the statues and the elaborate ornamentation. They were, of course, all devout Catholics. The earliest English Masonic document dates from the end of the fourteenth century by which time the order was already fully established. After the Reformation, the language of Freemasonry in England became more Protestant in character and the rituals still contain quotations from the *King James Bible* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. Until the second decade of the nineteenth century, English Freemasonry was, in general, explicitly Christian (Nordic Freemasonry still is). The importance of St John’s Gospel to Freemasons in the eighteenth century cannot be underestimated. Indeed the first seal of the Premier Grand Lodge had the motto *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος*, [En Arche en ho Logos] (‘In the beginning was the Word’) engraved on it.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, following an appeal from the first Chief Rabbi, Solomon Hirschell, to the first Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England – the Duke of Sussex – English Masonic rituals were revised to make them more acceptable to Jews and consequently to men of other non-Christian faiths. (Rabbi Hirschell had previously prevailed on the Army to allow Jewish soldiers, recruited for the Napoleonic Wars, to take their oaths of allegiance on the parade ground and on the Book of Leviticus rather than, as previously, on the Bible and in the local Parish Church.)⁴ Some still refer to these changes, erroneously, as the ‘de-Christianization’ of Freemasonry, but this is far from the case. All that occurred was the removal of certain expressly Christian phrases from the ritual, phrases such as ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’ at the end of a prayer, replacing it with ‘So mote it be’ – the Middle English and Masonic version of

³ Quotations from Masonic ritual come from that used in the North of England which is closer to 18th-century practice rather than Emulation or Oxford, two 19th-century rituals which are more common in the South of England.

⁴ Simons, Hyman A. *Forty Years a Chief Rabbi – The Life and Times of Solomon Hirschell* (London: Robson, 1980).

the Hebrew 'Amen.' Nor is Jesus Christ ever mentioned by name in the rituals but he is still referred to by other means which Christian Freemasons will understand.

This is where the final phrase of the famous definition of Freemasonry as 'A peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory *and illustrated by symbols*' comes into play. Towards the end of the third degree, the Worshipful Master instructs the candidate in the following words: 'Lift up your eyes to that bright morning star whose rising brings peace and salvation to all the faithful and obedient of the human race.'⁵ Any Christian brother hearing this phrase will recognize the reference to a quotation in the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation of St John: 'I, Jesus, . . . am the root and offspring of David, – the bright morning star.'⁶ So, if he is a Christian, the candidate will understand the sentence to refer to Christ's resurrection and how he is to place his faith in Him as the Messiah in order to achieve salvation. A Jewish brother, on the other hand, will not see that particular connection because the quotation will be foreign to him since he will never have read the New Testament. Nevertheless, he looks towards a future *Mashiach* who will bring peace and salvation to him.

Similarly in the Royal Arch, a Christian will recognize the three Principals – Joshua, Haggai and Zerubbabel – as representing Jesus Christ in his three Offices – Priest, Prophet and King – whereas to a Jewish brother they are simply three characters in the Hebrew Bible.

So Masonic rituals work on different levels depending on the faith group to which each brother belongs. Just as in any Christian church very few members of the congregation will know the origins of the prayers used in the service, I am sure very few Royal Arch Masons realize that their chapters are opened with a prayer taken from the medieval Catholic Sarum Rite said by a priest before Mass. The absence of 'through Jesus Christ Our Lord' at the end to accommodate non-Christians does not make it any less of a prayer to the Holy Spirit nor any less of a Latin medieval Catholic prayer.

In 2007 Monseigneur Dominique Rey, Bishop of Fréjus-Toulon, published a book in French under the title *Peut-on être Chrétien et Franc-Maçon?* ('Can one be a Christian and a Freemason?'). His conclusion was that the two were incompatible. Like Cardinal Ratzinger before him, Mgr Rey had assumed that Freemasonry was the same all over the globe, that it was universal in the same sense that the Catholic Church is universal. This was an error. To quote Alain Bauer and Roger Dachez again: 'Perhaps one should speak not of Freemasonry but of Freemasonries in the plural.'⁷ This is fundamental to an understanding of Freemasonry worldwide.

⁵ See fn 3.

⁶ Revelation 22:16.

⁷ Dachez & Bauer *Ibid.* rear cover.

A failure to understand this axiom is the source of many of the problems. At its root lies a statement that is ambiguous and repeated by every candidate in Masonic rituals: 'Freemasonry is spread over the whole habitable part of the globe.'

In one sense Freemasonry is universal, but in a more profound sense it is not. Masons use the term 'regularity' to distinguish those Grand Lodges that conform to the 'ancient landmarks' of the order which require their members to be men of belief, from those Grand Lodges which do not. There are certainly Freemasons and Masonic lodges spread around the world, but many are not regular Freemasons or regular Grand Lodges. In France alone there are many Grand Lodges but only one is 'regular'. Similarly in Italy, only one Grand Lodge is deemed 'regular'. English Freemasons are thus prohibited from visiting a majority of the Masonic lodges in France and Italy. Indeed, throughout the globe, as Bauer and Dachez correctly stated, there is not one Freemasonry, but many Freemasonries (plural).

Having examined Grand Orient Freemasonry which is by definition atheist in its true sense as being 'without God', or secular, Mgr Rey unsurprisingly found it incompatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Where he made a profound mistake was in conflating Grand Orient Freemasonry with all of Freemasonry.

No-one, least of all regular English Catholic Freemasons, expects the Catholic Church to give a blanket 'Yes' to Freemasonry in general. Some Grand Lodges are atheistic, others humanist, and even some regular Grand Lodges contain elements in their rituals that are incompatible with Catholic faith and doctrine. However, some are Christian and theist and should be regarded as compatible.

The United Grand Lodge of England is one such Grand Lodge and I would argue its rituals are wholly consistent with being a Christian and a Catholic. This is certainly the experience of many English Catholic Freemasons who find in it a great source of comfort and moral support: an encouragement to live better Christian lives.

So what are the facts? The words 'Freemasonry' and 'Freemason' do not occur anywhere in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the definitive account of Catholic faith and doctrine produced in the 1990s by Cardinal Ratzinger and his colleagues in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Nor do the words 'Freemasonry' or 'Freemason' occur in any of the current canons, or laws of the Catholic Church. The only canon among those promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983 that can be taken to refer to Freemasonry is Canon 1374 which states:

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.'

Few, if any, would suggest that the United Grand Lodge of England is ‘an association which plots against the Church’, any church. However, at the same time this canon was promulgated, Cardinal Ratzinger, the recently-appointed Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, issued a ‘clarification’ of the canon entitled a *Declaration on Masonic Associations* in which he stated that Masonic principles were still considered irreconcilable with orthodox Catholic doctrine, and that Catholics were still prohibited from joining Masonic bodies.

So the situation is at best ambiguous with the canon saying one thing and Ratzinger’s *Declaration* another. And in spite of the ‘clarification’ the canon itself has never been changed even during Ratzinger’s pontificate as Benedict XVI. It is thus important to note that for a Catholic to be a Freemason is not contrary to Canon Law. This situation was not new in 1983.

In 1917 Pope Benedict XV issued a new Code of Canon Law. His Code contained Canon 2335 which stated that ‘Those who lend their names to a masonic sect or other association of the same kind which plots against the Church incur the penalty of excommunication resting simply in the Apostolic see.’ For many decades this was taken to mean all Masons and Masonic lodges. Matters changed, however, after the Second Vatican Council which addressed the relations between the Catholic Church and the modern world. The Council was opened by Pope John XXIII in 1962 and it was closed by Pope Paul VI in 1965. People realised that Canon 2335 referred only to Masonic sects ‘which plot against the Church’, a phrase that was new in 1917.⁸ As the Jesuit priest, University Professor and Masonic historian, Fr Ferrer Benimeli pointed out in 1968 in his book *La Masonería Después del Concilio* (‘Freemasonry after the Council’): ‘regular Freemasonry, “based on belief in God, could not stand condemned under the Papal Bulls” whose charges should be directed only against the irregular Grand Lodges which preach and practise atheism and anti-clericism.’⁹ In other words, that Canon 2335 referred only to irregular Grand Lodges and not to those regular Grand Lodges such as UGLE which conform to the ancient landmarks of the order. It should be noted Benimeli’s book was published under the *nihil obstat* of Cardinal Marcelo Gonzalez Martin, then Archbishop of Barcelona and later Primate of Spain.

At the same time, in 1968, the Scandinavian Episcopal Conference agreed that ‘the bishops of the said Nordic countries [Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway and Iceland] could permit individual members of the masonic Order who wished to embrace Catholi-

⁸ It was Pope Pius X, the totem of present-day traditionalists, who set in train in 1904 the creation of the set of universal laws for the Church which were promulgated by his successor Benedict XV in 1917 as the first Code of Canon Law.

⁹ Ferrer Benimeli, *La Masonería Después del Concilio* (Editorial Ahr: Barcelona, 1968). This is a very detailed account of the situation and includes nearly 200 pages of documents. Benimeli updated it in 1977.

cism to be received into the Church without having to renounce their active membership of Freemasonry.¹⁰ This caused confusion and was refuted by the Holy See in a press statement dated 19 March 1968. Subsequently, the Secretary of the Scandinavian Episcopal Conference wrote an article in *The Tablet* making it clear there was nothing anti-Christian or atheistic in Scandinavian Freemasonry.¹¹

In 1971 one of the Vatican's senior canon lawyers, Fr P Beyer, S.J., Dean of the Faculty of Canon Law at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, concurred with Benimeli's view of the situation.¹²

Fr Benimeli's understanding of Freemasonry, backed by Fr Beyer's legal opinion in 1971, made the situation clearer and as a consequence there was eventually a change of policy at the Vatican. Several archbishops were consulted and the Holy See appeared to accept the distinction between regular Masonry and irregular Masonry. The first was orthodox, traditional, Christian and apolitical; the second was largely heterodox, atheistic and political.

In July 1974 the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith effectively permitted Catholics to become regular Freemasons by stating: 'Canon 2335 only contemplates those Catholics who give their name to associations that actually plot against the Church.'¹³

With a view to clarifying the situation in England, the then pro-Grand Master, Earl Cadogan, wrote to Cardinal Heenan, Metropolitan Archbishop of Westminster, whose private secretary replied on 15 November 1974 as follows:

A Catholic should regard himself as first and foremost a member of the Catholic Church, finding his inspiration for Christian living in the Church and his fellowship within that community. But if he sincerely believes that membership of Freemasonry does not conflict with this deeper loyalty he should approach his Bishop through his Parish Priest to discuss the implications of such membership. . . . Priests, religious and members of Secular Institutions are still forbidden by the universal law of the Church to accept membership of the masonic order or similar associations.

In February 1975 this information was circulated by the Grand Secretary to all lodges under UGLE.¹⁴ It opened the doors wide for English Catholics to join the Craft. Many did and many remain to this day.

However, the situation was thrown into question once again by a Conference of German bishops who, in April 1980, questioned the by-then accepted view. They did not appreciate the difference between regular and irregular Masonic Grand Lodges and

¹⁰ W. Read, 'The Church of Rome and Freemasonry (1738 . . . 1917 . . . 1983 . . .)' *AQC* 104 (1991) 61.

¹¹ *The Tablet* 30th May, 1968.

¹² 'Los Catolicos y la Masoneria', *Vida Nueva*, No.966, January 1975, 35.

¹³ Letter dated 19 July, 1974 from Cardinal Franjo Šeper, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to Cardinal John Krol, Archbishop of Philadelphia in response to a question posed by Krol to the CDF.

¹⁴ Read *Ibid.* 63

that there is not one Freemasonry but many Freemasonries (plural). They also chose not to address the issue of ‘associations that plot against the church’, preferring to concentrate on matters of theology— for which the German Freemasons were ill-prepared. The German bishops came to the conclusion that what they had examined was inconsistent with Catholic faith and doctrine. One of those bishops and the President of the Conference was Joseph Ratzinger, then Archbishop of Munich and Freising.

Things changed for the worse so far as regular Freemasonry was concerned in 1981 when the same Joseph Ratzinger was appointed by Pope John Paul II as the new Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the body responsible for Catholic doctrine. His appointment was widely seen as an attempt to turn back the clock and halt the changes brought about by Vatican II.

Cardinal Ratzinger’s anti-Masonic outlook flowed from his understanding of German Freemasonry as examined by himself and the German bishops in 1980. It appears that he failed to have considered the nature of Masonic ‘regularity’ and Fr Benimeli’s detailed analysis in 1968. Most crucial was his failure to appreciate that there is not one, universal Freemasonry, but many Freemasonries.

Ratzinger’s *Declaration on Masonic Associations* dated 17 February 1983 states that ‘The negative judgment of the Church in regard to Masonic associations remains unchanged, since their principles have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church and, consequently, the Church’s membership is still prohibited.’¹⁵ For a distinguished theologian such as Ratzinger this can be considered as a poorly-worded statement.

It is evident that the position had not remained ‘unchanged’. At the time it was written, Catholics had been and were allowed to join regular Masonic lodges both in practice and under the then current and previous Code of Canon Law. Nor had Masonic principles ‘always been . . . irreconcilable with the teachings of the Church’: that was first raised in 1738 and principally for political reasons, as is explained below. In short, Cardinal Ratzinger’s *Declaration* was designed to change the *status quo* and to revert to the situation pre-1917. At the same time, Ratzinger blocked the Metropolitan archbishops from making a decision on their own, restricting it to the Holy See, in other words, to himself as Cardinal Prefect.

Shortly after the *Declaration* was published, Fr Benimeli issued a scathing criticism of it in the Spanish journal *El Pais*. He concluded that it was a retrograde step, factually incorrect, and a return to the nineteenth-century doctrines of Leo XIII. Benimeli also noted that local ecclesiastical authorities were generally in favour of Catholics becoming involved in Freemasonry and that Ratzinger’s *Declaration* was political in intent.¹⁶

¹⁵ Sacra Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei, ‘Declaratio de associationibus massonicis, 26 novembris, 1983’ in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 76, 1984, 300.

¹⁶ Ferrer Benimeli, ‘El Vaticano y los masones’ *El Pais* 19 March, 1985.

Aware that his *Declaration* had been met with considerable opposition from those who saw it as a retrograde step and against the spirit of Vatican II, Ratzinger sought and obtained Pope John Paul II's aid in support of his statement. But notwithstanding Pope John Paul II's support for the *Declaration*, Canon 1374 has remained unaltered – even during Ratzinger's own pontificate as Pope Benedict XVI.

It is worth noting exactly what was decreed by the Sacred Congregation in 1974, pre-Ratzinger, regarding Canon 2335 (1917):

When considering particular cases, it must be borne in mind that criminal law is subject to a strict interpretation. Therefore, the opinion of those authors who maintain that the aforementioned Canon 2335 only contemplates those Catholics who give their name to associations that actually plot against the Church can be taught and applied with complete certainty.¹⁷

This statement applies equally to Canon 1374 (1983). Thus, strictly according to the Canons of the Catholic Church from 1917 to the present day, there is nothing to prevent a Catholic layman from becoming an English Freemason.

The original ban on Catholics becoming Freemasons was the famous Papal Bull of 1738 *In Eminenti Apostolatus*. Although promulgated by Pope Clement XII who was eighty-six years old and seriously ill at the time, it had been drafted in 1737 by a conference of bishops meeting in Rome. Most influential in the drafting of the bull was Cardinal André-Hercule de Fleury, chief minister to Louis XV in France. An able and influential politician, he had read Ramsay's *Discours* sent to him by the author late in 1736 or early in 1737, and he realised that the continental European elites were turning 'Masonic' with men of influence and several members of the European royal houses joining the Craft.

This process began with Francis I, Duke of Lorraine, being initiated in Holland by Jean Théophile Desaguliers in 1731. Francis became Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1737, Archduke of Austria in 1740 and Holy Roman Emperor in 1745. In England Frederick, Prince of Wales, became a Freemason in 1737 – he was also initiated by Desaguliers. (As things turned out he pre-deceased his father George II in 1751 aged forty-four and so did not become king.) In 1738 Frederick, the Crown Prince of Prussia, was initiated. Two years later he became king; he is known today as Frederick the Great. Within France initiates included the courtier, politician and philosopher President Montesquieu, and Louis XV's secretary of state, Louis Phélypeaux, Comte de St Florentin. And even if Louis XV of France was not initiated into Freemasonry, he was considered to be amenable to the order.¹⁸

¹⁷ Letter dated 19 July, 1974 from Cardinal Franjo Šeper, see above.

¹⁸ Gustave Bord *La Franc-Maçonnerie en France des Origines à 1815 Tome Premier* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1908) 236.

Fleury viewed the rapid spread of Freemasonry across Europe as a political rival to the influence of the Church. On 18 March 1737 Fleury banned all Masonic meetings in Paris.¹⁹ This was the context of the papal ban on Freemasonry in 1738. Dressed up as heresy in order not to upset either the Jacobites or the Hanoverians, *In Eminenti* was wholly political in intent. Subsequent popes continued the ban on Catholics being Freemasons under penalty of ex-communication until 1917, although the change in attitude signalled in the wording of Canon 2335 (1917) was not noticed for half a century, until after Vatican II.

Ironically, it was the changes and developments to pure, ancient Masonry made in France during the second half of the eighteenth century that lie at the root of most twentieth- and twenty-first century Christian objections to Freemasonry. But English pure, ancient Masonry still observes the ‘ancient landmarks’ and is entirely consistent with being a Christian and a Catholic.

In the end, each individual is responsible for his or her own immortal soul. English Freemasonry is by definition a system of moral improvement; lodges and their members provide fraternal help and support, but each Freemason’s moral journey is his own and as the rituals teach us, one day each of us will individually have to answer for our lives and actions.

Clearly, officers of the Catholic Church must uphold what they believe to be the current teaching of the Catholic Church, *mater et magister*, but they must also be aware that attitudes change and that in the end it is Canon Law that must prevail, and currently, Catholic Canon Law does not outlaw or condemn English Freemasonry or Catholics from being members of regular lodges. Nor does the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* say a word about or against it. The principal road block is Ratzinger’s *Declaration* of 1983 which, as outlined above, is based on a misunderstanding of the diverse nature of Freemasonry and of ‘regularity’.

Regular English Freemasonry defines itself as ‘A peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols’; however, commentators often forget the last phrase of the definition ‘and illustrated by symbols’ and in consequence may err in their analysis. Examples of this are seen in a pamphlet written by Fr Ashley Beck and published by the Catholic Truth Society entitled *Freemasonry and the Christian Faith*. Fr Beck does not give regard to the symbols within the rituals and, surprisingly, relies on secondary sources rather than studying the rituals themselves – all of which are readily available. He also certainly fails to appreciate what lies at the heart of the Craft and states that Christ is ‘entirely absent from the basic three degrees.’²⁰

¹⁹ L. Dussieux & E. Soulié (eds.), *Mémoires du Duc de Luyens sur la Cour de Louis XV (1735-1758)* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1886) 210.

²⁰ Ashley Beck *Freemasonry and the Catholic Faith* (CTS, London, 2/2017) 33.

For a Christian Freemason nothing could be further from the truth. Beck misses the quotation from the Book of Revelation noted above and that the three Principals in the Royal Arch are symbols of Jesus Christ in his three offices of Priest, Prophet and King, and hence states wrongly that ‘Christ the Light of the World is nowhere to be seen.’²¹

Fr Beck also fails to understand that words alter their meaning over time and that words such as ‘nature’ and ‘science’ as quoted in Masonic rituals are used in their eighteenth-century sense, not in their modern sense. He thus refers to Freemasonry, wrongly, as a ‘Naturalistic’ religion.²²

‘Nature’ in Masonic ritual refers to human nature, to a man’s feelings and instincts, to his heart; ‘science’ means ‘knowledge’ in a general sense, the intellect. In short, when a Mason is instructed to study ‘the hidden mysteries of nature and science’ he is being asked to consider the limitations of human knowledge especially as far as life after death is concerned and how he must trust to his own instincts and to his faith in such matters.

Having stated wrongly that ‘the rituals are all based on a mythical reconstruction of the life and death of the Mason Hiram Abiff . . .’²³ Fr Beck misses that the Hiram legend in the third degree illustrates another New Testament quotation from the Book of Revelation: ‘Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life.’²⁴ Beck also comments that the concept of ‘grace’ is lacking in the ritual, but he has apparently failed to examine a first degree Tracing Board or a Royal Arch jewel – or perhaps he has not understood them. There are other examples, but the point has been made.

This is a recurring problem with anti-Masonic authors who rarely examine the rituals, the primary sources, preferring outdated secondary sources that justify their prejudices.

The same cannot be said of Revd Walton Hannah, nor of Monseigneur Dominique Rey whose books are considered and thoughtful, and deserve to be taken seriously.

Hannah pointed out a number of problems he saw in Masonic rituals and published his findings in two books, *Darkness Visible* (1952) and *Christian by Degrees* (1954). His comments were addressed by UGLE in the 1980s, most especially by removing the bogus ‘word in three languages’ which seemingly entered Masonic rituals in France around 1775 and has long since been replaced in England by the centuries-old Mason Word surrounding which there is no problem.

Mgr Rey, like Cardinal Ratzinger before him, made the error of assuming that all Freemasonry was the same. His comments in his 2007 book are perfectly justified, but apply only to French Grand Orient Freemasonry. At the time, Mgr Rey knew nothing

²¹ Ibid 33.

²² Ibid 24.

²³ Ibid 9.

²⁴ Revelation 2:10.

of Masonic diversity or regularity and assumed his analysis applied to Freemasonry writ large. He now knows otherwise.

Down the ages there has been – and still is – an obsession by non-Masons with ‘Masonic secrecy’. Masonic lodges are private lodges and they meet in private. But privacy should not be confused with secrecy. The only secrets in Freemasonry are the signs, tokens, and words associated with each of the degrees – nothing else. The rituals themselves can be found online and many are published and available in bookshops and libraries. Masonic privacy is, however, important. The lodge provides a quiet space away from the troubles and stresses of the outside world in which men of like mind can reflect on their lives, consider how they can improve themselves, their communities and the world at large. In words credited to Rabbi Israel Salanter:

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world . . . Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself . . . But I’ve come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country, and we could all indeed have changed the world.

The lodge room is a refuge. It is not a temple but nevertheless it is a sacred space for those seeking to be made whole: it is ‘holy ground’ as it says in the rituals. The Hebrew word for that is *tikkun* (תיקון). We come to lodge to be reminded of the person whom we seek to be, to be inspired towards that higher rung on the ladder, and to get the boost to bring it within reach.

Everyone knows that English Freemasons are devoted to charity. They do not stand in the street with a begging bowl; they raise the money from within. But Masonic charity is not inward-looking; it is outward-looking. Each year UGLE distributes millions of pounds to non-Masonic causes. While the air ambulances may occasionally pick up a stranded or sick Freemason, the majority of their patients are non-Masons.

The Anthony Nolan Trust does sterling work in the field of bone marrow transplants but it is only rarely a Freemason will receive the benefit from the Masonic donations made to that charity.

The large grants given to support post-graduate research at the Royal College of Surgeons benefits the whole of mankind, not just Freemasons. I name but a few examples.

But charity is not just about money: it is fundamentally about giving of oneself to others. Freemasons are encouraged to be good citizens, to be ‘citizens of the world’, and to support their local communities in any way they can. Hospices throughout England and Wales have received millions of pounds over the years in Masonic donations; again, only a small percentage of the beneficiaries are Freemasons. In the words of the Masonic

chain of union: ‘Masonry does not stop at helping our brethren only, but reaches out the hand of friendship . . . to do good to all mankind.’

If the Catholic Church requires long-term evidence of the morality, and indeed the godliness, of English Freemasonry and Freemasons, then I would suggest it takes as its text Matthew 7:16–20, a paragraph which ends with the familiar phrase ‘Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.’

The Catholic Church is genuinely universal: ‘One, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.’ The words of the Mass are the same throughout the world no matter where one resides. Indeed, it is only relatively recently that the words have been spoken in the vernacular language: before Vatican II they were in Latin, no matter where one lived.

Freemasonry, in contrast, is not universal, and not all Freemasonry is compatible with Catholic faith and doctrine. Each case has to be judged on its own merits and a universal judgment is not feasible. For a universal church such as the Catholic Church, this means the decision should surely be left to each metropolitan archbishop as far as his own province is concerned, basing his decision on the Masonry worked in that country and whether it conforms to the teachings of the Catholic Church, to the *Catechism*, and to Canon Law.

It is certainly my hope and I am sure that of all English Freemasons that the Catholic Church will review its current confused policy on Freemasonry, and devolve the decision on whether to agree to its members being Freemasons to the metropolitan archbishops of each Catholic province who could make an informed decision on the regularity of their national Grand Lodges, and as far as England is concerned, once again permit, even perhaps encourage, English Catholics to join Masonic lodges under the regular UGLE.

In the twenty-first century few organizations can issue edicts which are obeyed without question. This applies in many areas, not just Freemasonry. For the Catholic Church to retain its integrity it must demonstrate that it acts justly and does not condemn on the basis of misunderstanding and error.

I believe greater dialogue and improved understanding might well lead to the conclusion reached by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and by Cardinal Heenan in the 1970s: that English Craft and Royal Arch Masonry as worked by UGLE and Supreme Grand Chapter is wholly compatible with Catholic faith and doctrine as defined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.





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