

# Freemasonry

**Fr. William P. Saunders, PhD**

**Question:** There seems to be some confusion about whether Catholics are allowed to be Masons. I know some Catholics who are Masons. They say that the Church has changed its ban on Masons, and Catholics may join. I don't think so. What is the Straight Answer?

**Answer:** Before addressing the question at hand, let's first consider the organization itself. 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, mason guilds 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 a highly skilled mason who enjoyed the privileges of membership in a trade guild.) Masons gradually 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 sym-

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 Italy, the movement in the mid-1800s to unify the country was infiltrated by Freemasons who were intent on abolishing the papacy and restricting the rights of the Catholic Church. In Latin America, Freemasons have expressed anti-Church and anti-clerical sentiment. Without doubt, one reason why Western Europe suffers from its present secularism is because of the role of freemasonry since the 19th century.

Since the decree "In Eminenti" of Pope Clement XII in 1738, Catholics have been forbidden to join the Masons, and until 1983, under pain of excommunication. Scanning official documents, the Church has condemned freemasonry and other secret societies at least 53 times since 1738, and has specifically repeated the condemnation of freemasonry 21 times. (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, an interpretation widely advanced by the media; however, 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 (whose prefect was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) reiterated

the ban on Catholics joining the Masons: "The Church's negative position on Masonic association ... remain 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." Neither this declaration nor the 1983 Code of Canon Law imposed the penalty of excommunication on Catholics belonging to the Masons. However, the Holy See has upheld that belonging to freemasonry and participating in its rituals is a mortal sin which prevents one from receiving Holy Communion.

Some Masonic lodges may provide great service to the community. Nevertheless, when a Catholic understands this group's history, religious pretense, anti-Catholic bias and violence against the Catholic Church, one must question, "Why would a serious, practicing Catholic even consider joining?" So the straight answer is, "No, Catholics may not join the Masons."

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Pamphlet 051

bolical forms borrowed principally from the mason's trade and from architecture, work for the welfare of mankind, striving morally to ennoble themselves 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 had 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 the Druids, Mithars, Egyptian priesthood, Rosicrucians and others to weave its own history.

The Catholic Church has difficulty 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, Muslims, 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, Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum, i.e., Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) means for Masons, Igne Natura Renovatur Integra, i.e., by fire nature is renewed entirely, referring to the sacred fire's (i.e., 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 that he will receive the light of spiritual instruction that he could not receive in another Church. Moreover, 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. For Catholics, (and hopefully all sincere Christians), Christ alone is the light Who entered this world to dispel sin and darkness.

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 a Mason 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." Now pause for a moment: Would a sincere Catholic commit such an action? In a word, "no".

A second difficulty with freemasonry for Catholics involves the 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 reason 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 even the Bible), the square, and 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. This oath is wrongful because of to whom and to what the candidate is swearing.

The history of freemasonry has proven its anti-Catholic nature. In the United States, one of the leaders of freemasonry, Gen. 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."