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"THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND FREEMASONRY"

AN OUTLINE OF THE VIEWS HELD BY THE ROMAN  
CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR  
CONTEMPORARY SETTINGS

SATURDAY 1ST, DECEMBER 1979 AT 11AM SHARP  
YORK MASONIC TEMPLE  
1100 MILLWOOD AVE.  
TORONTO

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH  
AND FREEMASONRY

The title Mr. Robertson has suggested for this presentation suggests, to say the least, a large and complex subject. To deal with it well, one would need a much better knowledge of Masonry than I have; I begin with an admission of ignorance about things Masonic, and limit myself to trying to clarify a few points that may puzzle you about Roman Catholic ideas and attitudes. I say "a few points", because any real survey of the ecclesiastical documents which have dealt with the matter would require more time than we have at our disposal today.

Given the harsh words that both Roman Catholics and Masons have written and spoken against one another in the past 250 years, it may seem remarkable that you have invited me here at all. I am honoured by the invitation, and hope our meeting leads to an increase of mutual esteem and understanding. But if understanding is to be genuine, it must be based on an honest facing of those things, both past and present, that have come between us. It would be pleasant to dwell on the many instances of friendship between Catholics and Masons, and of collaboration between Masonic and Roman Catholic organizations in various good works. But if I have not misunderstood your request, you want me to answer more painful questions, e.g., "Why did the 18th and 19th Century Popes condemn Masonry?" and, "What is the present status of those condemnations?"

To begin, let's review quickly the history of the condemnations. The first instance I know of was in April 1750, when Pope Clement XII issued the Apostolic Letter In eminenti; this document was written in response to a particular situation in the city of Florence but was addressed to the entire Catholic population and so was, at least in principle, general in scope. In May 1751 Benedict XIV, in response to another local situation in Naples, issued the Constitution Providam, which renewed and reasserted the earlier prohibition. The next papal text I know of was not until 1821: here, Pius VII's main point was that the same condemnations applied to the Carbonari, who were becoming strong (and strongly anti-papal) factor in the political life of Italy; Leo XII repeated this condemnation in 1825. During the long and stormy reign of Pius IX, there were increasingly frequent and strong assertions of disapproval, as the political movements which ultimately led to seizure of the Papal States received strong support from Italian Masons. Finally, in 1884, Pius's successor Leo XIII in the Encyclical Humanum genus reasserted the ban; this was the last papal document that concerns us here. The 150-year conflict, which had grown more bitter on both sides, was concisely summed up a generation later in 1917, when the discipline of the Catholic Church was gathered together in the Code of Canon Law: canon 2335 of that document reads,

"Those who join the Masonic sect, or other associations of the same sort that plot against the Church or against the legitimate civil powers, thereby incur an excommunication simply reserved to the Apostolic See."

There are many things about this canon that you might wonder about, but I shall spare you the legal fine points about ecclesiastical censures and their "reservation". Two points that do concern us here are the clear implication that Masons as such engage in evil plotting, and the use of the word "sect".

So far as "plotting" is concerned, many of us in the Roman Church have always known the implication to be unwarranted. No matter how justifiable the term may have been as an interpretation of some activities of Italian lodges in the 19th Century, it was patently absurd to speak of British Lodges plotting against the crown, or American Lodges against the President. Moreover, those of us who had the privilege of a close association with honourable and upright Masons knew that they were not plotting against the Church either. As we shall see in a few moments, this "Anglo-American" perception has recently penetrated Rome itself, and has somewhat mitigated the practical application of the canon in question.

The other point is the use of the word "sect". This clearly implies a perception of Masonry as a religious body, one which rivals and in some sense excludes Catholic Christianity. My own knowledge of Masonry is too skimpy to allow a confident opinion as to whether the word "sect" is justified; I have not read the Masonic publications that might shed light on the question, and I doubt that Catholic sources, however upright in intention, are based upon altogether reliable information. (Much of the "information" seems to come from ex-Masons: no matter how sincere they may be, I wonder if their interpretations are more trustworthy than, for example, those of ex-Catholics about my religious beliefs and practices!)

At any rate, to go back to the first of the two questions I proposed for our discussion, "Why the condemnations?", I think most of the objections to Masonry boil down to the strictly religious one of "sect", and to the religious implications which the Popes saw -- or thought they saw -- in matters of social and political policy.

The latter differences are clearly subject to changes of perspective. Few Roman Catholics today, for example -- and perhaps the Pope himself least of all -- desire a restoration of the Papal States; yet it would have been difficult indeed for a loyal Catholic in 1865 to side with those who so fiercely struggled to wrest them from a Pope who sincerely believed that they enhanced the supra-national and spiritual authority of his office. (In fact it was only when that struggle became fierce that prohibitions of Masonry were effectively promulgated and enforced by Catholic Bishops of other countries where Masons and Catholics previously lived in relative harmony. Well after Clement XII and Benedict XIV, Catholic Bishops in both Ireland and the U.S. managed to ignore the prohibitions as somehow not applying to the situation in their countries.)



Indeed, Rome itself has recently acknowledged that the ban need not apply in the same way in all countries. In July 1974, one of Paul VI's principal lieutenants, Cardinal Seper, wrote an official letter to Cardinal Krol of Philadelphia, indicating that U.S. Masonry need not necessarily incur the censure of canon 2335; while insisting that the canon itself is still in force, the letter explained that if the Lodges do not in fact correspond to its description, then it does not apply to them!

The strictly religious question of whether Masonry is a "sect" is, as I indicated earlier, one to which I can offer only a very tentative and hypothetical answer. What I can and will do is indicate to you what the Popes thought they saw, and what was the nature of their objections to it; only you yourselves, with your own knowledge of the reality of Masonry as you experience it, can know whether it corresponds to the description of what the Catholic Church objects to. I think there are at least three distinguishable elements in the strictly religious grounds for misgivings, as well as a fourth that straddles the border between doctrinal and policy questions; let me take these one by one, even though they tend to overlap and get mingled together in most discussions.

First of all, there is the question of whether Masonry is a religion. Masons themselves appear to be less than unanimous on the point; this may be due in part to different understandings of the term "religion", but I suspect it also comes from the fact that Masonry means different things to different Masons. I know that many Masons are devout, active members of various Christian communions (and at least among Anglicans, of the clergy), and I cannot imagine an Anglican priest or bishop remaining a Mason if he saw it as a "religion" in the sense that the Popes seem to have thought it was. Yet I know too that some Masons regard Masonry as all the religion they need, and the ceremonies of its Lodge as true and adequate worship of their Creator; this alone, not just to 19th-century Catholics, but to some contemporary Christians of other denominations, makes it difficult to reconcile Masonry with the demands of Christianity as they understand those demands. To the extent that Christian belief includes the notion of "Church" as an essential element (and it does so for the great majority of believing Christians), there is at least the possibility that the Lodge will be perceived as an unacceptable rival, usurping one or more of the functions that the Church (be it Roman, Lutheran, Anglican or whatever) feels bound to claim as its own exclusive domain.

A second source of misgiving is the non-sectarian quality of the Masonic ritual, even assuming that the Lodge is not a rival Church. Few Roman Catholics (or Anglicans or Lutherans) today would object to membership in an organization which includes others whose religious beliefs are different from their own (e.g. the Toronto Symphony or the Liberal Party, to take a couple of random examples). It is not simply the absence of a religious test that causes the disquiet, but an impression that "real" Masons think themselves somehow above all these sectarian differences, that if one is illuminated with the higher truths of the Craft, he will see how petty are the squabbles that divide adherents of the various religions (be they Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or whatever). Such an attitude, if and to the extent that it exists in Masonry, would make it very hard for a man to be a good Mason and a good Catholic at the same time: if one accepts the doctrines of traditional Christianity at all, he almost has to regard them as very important. The level of disapproval that has been stuck on this facet of Masonry in Catholic documents is "religious indifferentism"; you may think it unfair, and perhaps it is, but at least this is what it means.

Finally, rightly or wrongly, there has lurked in some minds the suspicion that Masonic ritual contains elements positively opposed to Christianity. For some, this centres on fragments that seem drawn from oriental mystery-religions, particularly those of Egypt. For others, the main sticking-point appears to be the oaths: I gather from the literature that these are strongly-worded, invoking fearful torture and mutilation on yourselves should you break them. Some have felt that these are either immoral (if meant seriously and literally) or irreverent (if not meant seriously). Since I know neither the wording of your oaths nor the sense you attach to them, I can have no opinion of this, but simply report to you that it is one of the areas of some hard things that Catholic authors including Popes have written about you.

Those are, I think, the chief strictly religious or doctrinal areas that have raised barriers between us. As I said a moment ago, there is another area that lies somewhere between doctrine and policy; this is the matter of sharing or co-operation with non-Catholics in activities that are matters of religious concern. (The question, of course, arises only if we assume that Masons as such must be non-Catholics.) Until recently, Catholics (especially in Latin countries) tended to oppose active sharing with others not only in worship, but even in educational, social, political and charitable activities; the sharp and clear reversal of this policy, at least at the highest level, is a clear directive of the Second Vatican Council, and seems to be filtering down into practice, though at an uneven pace. This change has of course challenged both Masons and Catholics to work more closely together for humanitarian causes, areas in which we both have a lot to our credit.

This, I think, represents about as much as I know how to say about the "why" of the Roman condemnations of Freemasonry, though I'll be glad to try to answer further questions you may have. Let me finish with a few words about the present force and status of those bans.

Here, I think two quite distinct matters must be addressed. The first of these is that of friendship, trust and co-operation between separate organizations. Here, it seems to me that at least on the Anglo-American scene, there is no problem except for the very real one of a bitter heritage of old resentments and suspicions that will not die overnight. My own experience of more than 50 years attests to the possibility that these can be overcome; my presence here today is a sign of your desire and mine that they should be.

The second question concerns membership: can a man be both a good Mason and a good Catholic? Here, the answer is less clear. The document of July 1974 to which I referred earlier shows at least that Rome is not prepared to rule out the possibility; local Bishops may once more, as they did in the 18th century, treat the prohibitions as not applying to their regions. So far, I see no evidence of a widespread desire of Masons to become Catholics, nor of Catholics to become Masons; unless such a desire exists, the question remains largely academic. It does appear, though, that were a flood of such applications to develop in Toronto, your own screening process would have to cope with it; you can no longer rely on our canon 2335 to protect you from us!

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