

## A CATHOLIC AND A MASON?

For several years now, for various reasons, there has been confusion among Catholics regarding Catholic laymen becoming members of a Masonic organization.

An impression exists in the minds of Catholics that the Catholic Church has softened its stand against membership in Freemasonry and that membership in a Masonic organization is an option for Catholic laymen.

Some Catholics think of the Masons as a fraternal benefit society similar to the Knights of Columbus. A recent study on Masonry and Catholicism done by the Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops dispels the confusion. It was published April 19, 1985.

The committee, chaired by Bernard Cardinal Law of Boston, concluded that the principles and rituals of Masonry embody a naturalistic religion that makes Freemasonry irreconcilable, not only with Catholicism, but with all of Christianity. Active participation in any Masonic organization is incompatible with Christian faith and practice. Catholics who knowingly embrace the principles of Masonry are committing serious sin.

Even though any particular Masonic organization may not be actively anti-Catholic, a Catholic may not knowingly join such a group for several reasons. Among them are:

**Masonry's regard for God.** The Masonic God is a neutral "Great Architect of the Universe," not the personal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, nor the Father of Jesus. In Masonry, man's "relationship with God is relegated to a position that is even pre-deistic."

**Masonry's regard for Jesus Christ.** Masonry does not recognize Jesus' special spiritual claims. It honors Jesus as it honors Socrates, Buddha or Mohammed.

**Masonry's regard for truth.** "The possibility of an objective knowledge of truth is denied by Masons.... The relativity of every truth represents the basis of Freemasonry." There can be, therefore, for the Masons, no divine Revelation nor any dogmatic formulation of truth.

**Masonry's regard for religion.** Masonry looks upon all religions as competitive attempts to explain the truth about God, who is, in the final analysis, unattainable. Human nature and reason alone should be the sole guides of men's actions. As such, for a professing Christian, Masonry represents a retreat from the Gospel of Christ.

However, as mentioned above, Freemasonry itself is a naturalistic religion that sees itself as **the** universal religion. It denies anything has been taught by God but claims it has the superior path to spiritual advancement and the superior morality.

**Masonry's regard for Christianity.** Christianity is simply another of the dozens of sects whose "particular opinions" have divided mankind over the ages. Masonry explicitly maintains that Christianity is a derivative of the primitive astral religion of the Babylonians and the Sumerians. There is no room in Masonry for a God Who reveals Himself.

**Masonry's concept of salvation.** Masonic ritual words and symbols give the impression that an objective transformation of man is carried out under the symbolic rites. This impression "has all the character of a form of competition with his sacramental transformation.... Perfection is...so separated from grace that there is no space left for man's justification according to the Christian conception."

**Masonry's use of oaths.** In an oath required of a Master Mason, the candidate solemnly swears to keep Masonic secrets and do or not do various things on penalty of being killed, having his body severed in two, and then having his bowels removed, burned to ashes and scattered to the winds.

The Church teaches that a solemn oath sworn on a Bible may be taken only for very serious reasons. It is considered a serious matter. Either the above-mentioned oath means what it says, in which case the man is entering a pact consenting to his own murder should he break it, or it does not mean what it says, in which case the man "is swearing high-sounding schoolboy nonsense on the Bible, which verges on blasphemy."

### **Contradictions**

As can be seen, the basic principles of Masonry contradict Catholic teaching. There is no room in Masonry for the inspiration of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority and teaching role of the Church, and the sacraments as a means of grace. Freemasonry rejects the possibility of objective, absolute truth, and, therefore, Catholic dogma. The Church's historical opposition to Masonry has not been based primarily on whether the Masonic lodges are hostile or neutral toward the Church, but on the principles for which these lodges stand.

Masonry presents other contradictions to a Catholic. Freemasonry boasts that it fosters brotherhood. But how can a Catholic Christian at one and the same time share in the full communion of Christian brotherhood and look upon any non-Mason Christian brother as an "outsider"?

While technically not plotting against the Catholic Church, some Masonic groups are anti-Catholic. The hostility to parochial schools of the Southern jurisdiction of the Scottish rite, which enrolls 600,000 Masons in 33 southern and western states, is a matter of public record.

In the mind of the general public, the impression that the Church has softened its opposition to masonry creates a pastoral problem. Catholics and non-Catholics may wonder why now, in an era of ecumenism, the Catholic Church is reasserting its condemnation of an organization often known for its charities and good works (e.g. the Shriners hospital for crippled children)?

Two things must be kept in mind: First, the Catholic Church has never lessened its opposition to Freemasonry. Several years ago, the Church modified its application of the penalty of excommunication to a Catholic joining a Masonic organization. Previously, a Catholic was excommunicated for joining **any** Masonic organization. Subsequently, a Catholic would be excommunicated for joining a Masonic organization **that plots against the church**. In both instances, it is seriously wrong to join a Masonic organization.

The difference between the two lies in when the penalty of excommunication is applied to a serious sin. The Church does not attach a penalty to everything that is immoral.

This modification was verified in a 1974 letter to John Cardinal Krol from Franjo Cardinal Seper, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This letter, however, was misinterpreted by some bishops to mean that it was now permissible to join a particular Masonic association if it did not plot against the Church.

However, the point of the Vatican letter, according to the Cardinal Law study, was only to indicate **when the penalty of the excommunication would apply** to Catholics joining Masonic associations. This modification became one of the sources of confusion among Catholics regarding joining Masonic organizations.

Secondly, what must also be kept in mind is that, like abortion, opposition to Freemasonry is often seen as solely a Roman Catholic position. But this is not an accurate perception. Orthodox churches condemn Freemasonry as a "false and anti-Christian system."

Actually, most Christians belong to worldwide church bodies that forbid or discourage Masonic affiliation. No church that has seriously investigated the religious teachings and implications of Freemasonry has ever yet failed to condemn it. Moreover, within the United States, most political observers "would probably label Masonic lodges as both politically reactionary and racist." Freemasonry excludes blacks and women from membership.

The Cardinal Law study states that its findings should not be used to foster antagonism. It notes that, like authentic ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and non-Catholics and even non-Christian groups, "dialogue between Christians and Masons can lessen hostility between these groups."

The purpose of the study is not to launch any kind of new vendetta against Masonry, but to affirm that a Catholic Mason is a contradiction. "In-depth research on the ritual and on the Masonic mentality make it clear that it is impossible to belong to the Catholic Church and to Freemasonry at the same time."

## **Solutions**

The study's concluding section deals with possible solutions to the pastoral problems of ministering to Catholics who, during the recent years of confusion, have joined a Masonic association in good faith.

In addition to the Law study, there is a recent pronouncement on the matter by the Holy See. On November 26, 1983, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated, "The Church's negative position on Masonic associations...remains unaltered since their principles have always been regarded as irreconcilable with the Church's doctrine... Catholics enrolled in Masonic associations are involved in serious sin and may not approach Holy Communion." This statement was specifically approved by Pope John Paul II.

In March, 1985, "L'Osservatore Romano," the Vatican's newspaper, also called Masonry and Christianity incompatible. The article said that Masonry was much more than an association of men of good will. It also involves moral obligations for its members, a rigid discipline of mystery and a climate of secrecy that put its members at risk of becoming pawns of strategies unknown to them.

Although the movement had sprung up at the end of the Middle Ages, Freemasonry, as we know it today, began in 1717 in London with the establishment of the Grand Lodge of England. A little more than two decades later, Pope Clement XII forbade Catholic memberships in these lodges. Since then, seven other popes have reiterated the Church's opposition to Freemasonry.

Presently, there are an estimated 6 million Masons worldwide; 4 million of them live in the United States.