

FREEMASONRY—THE CHURCH’S LAW UP TO VATICAN II AND BEYOND

Is not that oath contrary to Divine Law... by which someone obliges himself to... [commit] murder, and... to despise the authority of... Church or legitimate civil society...? Isn't it the most unjust and the greatest indignity to call God as a witness and surety of such crimes?

Leo XII, Quo Graviores, March 13, 1826

Consistent with the teachings of Leo XIII in his encyclical, *Humanum Genus*, and elsewhere, the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* (Pius X—Benedict XV) provided, in Canon 2335, as follows—

All those who enrol their names in the sect of Freemasons or similar associations which plot against the Church or legitimate civil authorities, incur by this very fact the penalty of excommunication, absolution from which is reserved simply to the Holy See.

This proscription on Freemasonry was enforced consistently for close on 50 years. However, as Martin Short remarks in his book *Inside the Brotherhood*¹, a turning point in the Church’s trenchant opposition occurred with the Papacy of John XXIII.

In 1962 his second Vatican Council promoted a new climate of religious tolerance and raised hopes of a coming together of all churches and faiths. It called for a dialogue with all 'men of goodwill' who showed a readiness to talk with the Church. Leading Masons felt this must include them because their order was built on a similar concept... It was also told that Masonry's moral values encourage men to embrace their own religions even more strongly, so that Catholics who are Masons become even better Catholics.

In the decade after Vatican II, Catholic leaders in several countries were solicited by Freemasons. In 1968 a prominent English Mason named Harry Carr persuaded the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster to propose a softer line on Freemasonry to the Vatican. Cardinal Heenan was sympathetic because of the sad tale of one of his parishioners. In his autobiography he told of his visits to a Yeoman of the Guard (a Beefeater at the Tower of London) who was 'over seventy with a well-trimmed white beard'. The man always attended Sunday Mass and 'prayed with great recollection', but never took Communion. 'There was only one black mark in the Yeoman's record. He had not received the sacraments within living memory. His children knew the reason. In the army he had become a Freemason in the belief that this would further his career.'

Heenan felt it was 'probably only a matter of time' before the general ban on Masonry would be lifted, but not even he dared ask the Vatican to allow the Yeoman to take Communion while he was still a Mason. Instead the Cardinal urged the

¹ Harper Collins, 1989, Ch.8.

Beefeater to quit the Craft, but he never did because he 'was under the almost certainly false impression that he would have to cease to be a Yeoman if he resigned from his masonic lodge'.

As it happens, the Yeoman's 'impression' was almost certainly correct for the Craft is strong in the army, the Territorials and in many quasi-military organizations. At that time it may have held sway among Beefeaters. Ignoring such worldly obstacles, Heenan embraced Carr's view that 'regular' Masons had never plotted against the Church and accepted the need to draw a 'sharp line' between English-style Freemasonry and the 'atheistic or anti-Christian Grand Orient type'. In his own book Carr says he urged Heenan to urge Rome that it could use the English model to distinguish between good and bad Freemasonry. He added: 'What we really need is an intermediary, to convince your authorities.' Heenan replied: 'I am your intermediary.'

The Cardinal then took up the cause of 'regular' Freemasonry with Pope Paul VI. By 1971 he was able to report some progress...

Anecdotal evidence indicates that, at least as early as 1967, parish priests in Australia were advising members of the laity that there was no longer any barrier to Catholics joining Masonic organizations.

In an article he wrote for *The Remnant*, Paul A. Fisher, author of *Behind the Lodge Door*, quotes American 33rd Degree Mason, Henry C. Clausen in his book, *Commentaries On Morals and Dogma*, published in 1974—

Many of our friends who are members [of the Catholic Church] reject as foreign to America the medieval fulminations against our Fraternity, realize how very much we have in common, accept the standards of American democracy, recognize we have a pluralistic system in a new and permanent form of relationship between religion and government, and call upon their church leaders to stop attacks upon Masonry and upon Masonic ceremonies...

Actually, a start, at least, has been made right in the Vatican. There have been discussions for liberalization of the restrictive provisions of canon laws. It has been said that since the codification of the canonic laws in the Codes Juris Canonici, the papal Bulls and Briefs are only the expressions of personal opinions.²

Yet the Church had never abrogated her laws on the topic.

² Reproduced at <http://www.cathinsight.com/apologetics/fisher1.htm>

Rulings Of The Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith

On 18th July 1974, Franjo Cardinal Seper, Prefect of the Catholic Church's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, wrote to the Presidents of the various Episcopal conferences concerning the interpretation of Canon 2335³—

Many bishops have questioned this Sacred Congregation concerning the weight and meaning of Canon 2335 which forbids Catholics under penalty of excommunication to join Masonic associations and associations of a similar nature.

The Holy See has consulted often with those Episcopal conferences particularly involved with the issue that it might better know the nature of these associations and their present resolve, as well as the mind of the bishops.

The responses received, despite the great variety among them because of the diverse situations in each nation, do not permit the Holy See to change current legislation which, therefore, continues in force until some new proposal for a law should be passed by the competent Pontifical Commission for review of the Code of Canon Law.

However, it is to be kept in view when considering particular cases that a penal law is subject to strict interpretation. Hence the opinion advanced by those authors who hold that Canon 2335 applies to those Catholics who join associations that, in truth, plot against the Church can safely be taught and applied.

Nevertheless, in every case it remains prohibited for clerics, religious and members of secular institutes to join any Masonic association.⁴

This document came to be interpreted as allowing membership by Catholic laymen in any particular Masonic (or similar) lodge which, in the judgement of the local bishop, was not actively plotting against the Church or against legitimate civil authorities. Why this is so may appear from a commentary on the letter by English journalist, Stephen Knight—

[S]omeone had pointed out that, as there was no comma in the definitive Latin text of Canon 2335, it was not clear whether all Freemasons were automatically excommunicated, or only those Freemasons whose particular group plots against Church or legitimate civil authorities. Wherever a Canon provides for penalties, Seper was obliged to point out, the most restrictive interpretation had to be given in the case of ambiguity. Therefore, the Canon reserved automatic excommunication only for plotters.⁵

³ Paul A Fisher says that this was a response to an enquiry from John Cardinal Krol, Archbishop of Philadelphia and President of the American National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Behind the Lodge Door*, Tan, Rockford Illinois, 1994, p.197

⁴ *Complures Episcopi*, 18 July 1974, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, n.563, p. 350. My translation.

⁵ *The Brotherhood*, Panther Books, London, 1985, p. 250.

Paul A Fisher offers a slightly different rendering of the fourth paragraph of Cardinal Seper's Letter cited above⁶—

As for particular cases, it is appropriate to recall that penal law must always be interpreted restrictively. One can therefore teach with certainty and apply the opinion of the authors stating that Canon 2335 concerns only Catholics who belong to associations acting against the Church.

The critical Latin word in the passage is *tantum*, an adverb meaning *so much or, so many*. The latter rendering of the passage has translated it as *only*.

An Italian Jesuit, Giovanni Caprile, described later as Director of Catholic Civil Affairs in the Vatican, in a conciliatory article in the Italian journal *Civiltà Cattolica*, wrote:

*If your faith as a Catholic doesn't detect anything systematically hostile and organised in the Masonic group to which you belong against the Church and its principle doctrines and morality, you can remain in the organization. You should no longer feel yourself excommunicated, and therefore like all other believers, you are entitled to share in the sacraments and participate fully in the life of the Church. You do not need a special absolution from the excommunication.*⁷

Stephen Knight continued—

*Of itself the cautious letter signalled no change in the Church's attitude to the Brotherhood. But Caprile in Civiltà Cattolica published what was allegedly an 'authorised commentary' suggesting that the Church now officially accepted that there were Masonic associations which did not conspire against the Church or state, that the Church now intended to leave it to local Episcopal Conferences to decide whether their local Masons were in this category—and if they were, there need be no ban on Masonry.*⁸

It appears that many Catholics joined Masonic lodges throughout the world in consequence.

In an attempt to clarify the issue Cardinal Seper issued a formal Declaration concerning canonical discipline on 17th February 1981 which rejected Fr Caprile's reported interpretation of the letter as allowing local Episcopal conferences to decide

⁶ The Latin text is as follows—*In considerandis autem casibus particularibus prae oculis tenendum est legem poenalem strictae subesse interpretationi. Proinde tuto doceri et applicari potest opinio eorum auctorum qui tenent praedictum canonem 2335 respicere eos tantum catholicos qui nomen dant associationibus quae revera contra Ecclesiam machinantur.*

⁷ Quoted in *Shroud of Secrecy, The Story of Corruption Within The Vatican*, by 'The Millenari', Ontario, 2000, p.176. This work is the English translation by Ian Martin of *Via col vento in Vaticano*, Kaos edizioni Milano, 1999.

⁸ *The Brotherhood*, op. cit., loc. cit.

the application of Canon law in particular cases. The Declaration appears to endorse the first rendering of the fourth paragraph of the 1974 Letter set out above.

The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on 19th July 1974 issued a letter of direction to each Episcopal Conference concerning the interpretation of Canon 2335 of the Code of Canon Law which prohibits, under penalty of excommunication, any Catholic joining a Masonic sect or other association of the same nature.

Seeing that this letter has given scope to false and captious interpretations, this Congregation, without prejudging the future revision of the Code, confirms and declares as follows—

- 1) *nothing in the letter has changed the canonical discipline, which retains its full force;*
- 2) *consequently neither the penalty of excommunication nor any other of the penalty provisions have been abrogated;*
- 3) *the letter simply recalled the general principles of interpretation to be applied by the local bishop for resolving cases of individual persons. The mind of the Sacred Congregation was not to extend to any Episcopal conference the competence to pass judgment of a general character on the nature of Masonic associations because it alone has the competence to abrogate from the previously stated norms.⁹*

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger replaced Cardinal Seper as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 25th November 1981. Two years later, almost to the day, he issued a directive in the following terms—

The Church's negative position on Masonic associations... 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.¹⁰

The 1983 Code

In January 1983, the new *Code of Canon Law* was promulgated. The new provision, canon 1374, read as follows—

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.

Later in the same year, on November 26, Cardinal Ratzinger issued a *Declaration*, as follows—

⁹ AAS 73, (1981), 240. My translation.

¹⁰ November 26, 1983. Cf. *Origins*, 13/27, 450.

It has been asked whether the Church's view about Masonic associations has changed given the fact that in the new Code of Canon Law express mention is not made concerning them as was the case in the old Code.

This Sacred Congregation is able to reply that this circumstance is due to an editorial criterion which was followed also as regards other associations likewise unmentioned inasmuch as they are contained in wider categories.

The negative judgement of the Church on Masonic associations remains, therefore, unchanged because their principles have always been irreconcilable with the Church's doctrine and, accordingly, the prohibition of the Church remains in force. Those of Christ's faithful who join Masonic associations are involved in grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion.

No faculty is extended to the local Church authorities to pass judgment on the nature of Masonic associations because this Sacred Congregation alone has the competence to abrogate from the norms in accordance with the Declaration of 17th February 1981.¹¹

In March, 1985 there was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* an unattributed article, entitled (in English) *Irreconcilability between Christian faith and Freemasonry*, which reflected on the Congregation's *Declaration* and insisted that Freemasonry's philosophical ideas and moral conceptions could never be reconciled with the fundamentals of Christian faith.¹²

Above all it must be remembered that the community of 'Freemasons' and its moral obligations are presented as a progressive system of symbols of an extremely binding nature. The rigid rule of secrecy which prevails there further strengthens the weight of the interaction of signs and ideas. For the members, this climate of secrecy entails above all the risk of becoming an instrument of strategies unknown to them.¹³

The article went on to say that Freemasonry's relativism and its failure to differentiate between right and wrong paths to God, reducing all religions to facets of 'a broader and elusive truth', are unacceptable.

The Fundamental Defect

Despite their restatement of the Church's long held teaching, it is remarkable that neither the *Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* of 26th November, 1983, nor the article of March, 1985, deals with the *fundamental* defect in Freemasonry, the defect which renders it 'essentially irreconcilable' with Christianity.

¹¹ *Quasitum est*, AAS 76 (1984), 300.

¹² Paul A Fisher says: *Vaticanologists viewed the article as having been written by Cardinal Ratzinger...* [*Behind the Lodge Door*, op. cit., p. 201]

¹³ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 11 March 1985, p.2.

This defect is not the opposition of Freemasonry's philosophical ideas or moral conceptions; it is not the fact that it is, or may be, hostile to the Church; it is not its assertion of humanistic values as the only universal principle of action; it is not its secrecy or the recourse of its members to conspiracy; it is not its bizarre rituals; it is not its asserted possession of the individual lodge member; or the fact that he may become an instrument in unknown activities; it is not even its Gnostic assertion of a higher knowledge.

Grave though these shortcomings may be, they are, in a sense, secondary, for they are only *instrumental* causes of the disparity between the Craft and the Church. The *principal* cause of that disparity is that Freemasonry *mocks Almighty God to His face*. This is shown, chiefly, in the fact that its adherents must (implicitly before, and explicitly upon, initiation) sin against the First and Second Commandments in an oath which is not only unjust but an abuse of the solemnity which attaches to an oath, and wicked. This defect was recognised as such by Pope Leo XII in the following extract from his encyclical, *Quo Graviora*.

*We explicitly condemn and declare invalid particularly that clearly impious and accursed oath, by which they bind those who are received into these sects that they will reveal to none those things which pertain to those sects, and that they will strike with death all those members who expose those things to their superiors, either Ecclesiastics or laity. For what reason? **Is not that oath contrary to Divine Law which must be sworn...** to establish... a contract by which someone obliges himself to... [commit] murder, and... to despise the authority of those who [regulate] the Church or legitimate civil society...? **Isn't it the most unjust and the greatest indignity to call God as a witness and surety of such crimes?**...*

*[N]o one can be a member of those sects, without being guilty of the most serious and disgraceful act... [D]rive from your ears the words of those who vigorously declare that you may assent to your election to the lower degrees of their sects; that nothing is admitted there which is opposed to reason; nothing opposed to religion; indeed, nothing proclaimed, nothing performed which is not holy, not right, not undefiled. **Truly that abominable oath...** which must be sworn even in that lower echelon, is sufficient for you to understand that it is contrary to Divine Law to be enlisted in those lower degrees, and to remain in them..."¹⁴*

Such an oath is lacking in justice in at least five respects, as we have elaborated in the first paper in this series, *Leo XIII & Freemasonry*¹⁵, and it is essentially evil.

It is this defect which characterises Freemasonry for what it is—the devil's mocking parody of Christ's Church. This renders irrelevant the asserted distinction between

¹⁴ *Quo Graviora* (13.3.1826), n. 7; emphasis added.

¹⁵ Cf. <http://www.superflumina.org/freemasonry.html>. It should be said that the view expressed here is not shared by Fr Robert I Bradley S J, who sees the fundamental reason for the Church's condemnation of Freemasonry in (quoting Leo XIII in *Humanum Genus*) *the utter overthrow of that whole religious and political order of the world which the Christian teaching has produced*, in its recourse to naturalism. Cf. www.olrl.org/doctrine/

the allegedly benign English form and the European Grand Orient form of the Craft, or that between those versions of Freemasonry which militate against the Church and those which are alleged not to be hostile to her.¹⁶ Paul A Fisher identifies the issue precisely in respect of the United States—

*Masons in the United States are required to take solemn oaths never to divulge the Craft's secrets... accompanied by grave promises to accept cruel and unusual punishment, including death itself... Under such circumstances, how can any bishop, pastor or confessor truly be certain that Masonry in the United States differs from Masonry in Europe or elsewhere?*¹⁷

The Current Position

There is no doubt that the Church's legislation against Freemasonry and similar associations is weaker now than it was under the 1917 *Code*. Canon 1374 in the 1983 *Code* does not condemn Freemasonry by name. It ought to do so. Moreover, Canon 1374 has no provision condemning associations which plot against legitimate civil authorities abandoning a position held by the Church for 250 years. Since all authority on earth comes from God [*Romans* 13:1], the absence of such a provision in the Church's legislation is reprehensible.

Both these defects deserve the attention of Pope Benedict XVI. On 30th June 1998, in his *motu proprio*, *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, Pope John Paul II effected amendments to Canons 750 and 1371 *to defend the faith*. There is no reason why appropriate amendments could not be made to Canon 1374 to the same end.

Michael Baker

29th September 2005—*Sts Michael, Gabriel & Raphael*

¹⁶ See, for instance, Martin Short, *Inside the Brotherhood*, op. cit., chapter 8; Paul A Fisher, *Behind the Lodge Door*, op. cit., chapter 9; and, James Franklin, *Catholics Versus Masons*, *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 20 (1999), pp. 1-15.

¹⁷ Paul A Fisher, op. cit., p. 198.