

The history of the Church's position on Freemasonry **by Adam Blai**

1. Introduction

Freemasonry is a global secret society comprised primarily of businessmen, male politicians, and other socially influential men. Freemasonry is sexist in that only men can join, and it is racist in that black men may not join. There is an, often unrecognized by white Freemasons, form of Freemasonry for black men called Prince Hall Freemasonry.

The position of the Catholic Church on Freemasonry, and particularly on membership in Freemasonry is not clear to some of the public. This lack of clarity has occurred because for a time it was not clear what the Church's position on membership in Freemasonry was. This paper seeks to clarify the nature of Freemasonry, the history of the Catholic Church's view on Freemasonry, as well as its view on membership in Freemasonry.

2. The origin and history of Freemasonry

In the Middle Ages (400-1500AD) there were many trade guilds in Europe. These were groups of workers in various trades such as carpentry, shipping, arts, and stone masonry. The guilds existed to ensure a minimum level of competency in work to the public, royalty, Church, and other institutions. Guilds also existed to regulate and protect trade secrets, and they included secret signs of membership to other guild members. A similar system is still in use today in many trades. For instance there are apprentice electricians, journeyman electricians, licensed industrial electricians, and professional electrical engineers. There are also systems of licensure in many intellectual disciplines that involve apprenticeship, membership in a professional organization, and the oversight of the government through exams and other licensing requirements.

Most trade guilds in the Middle Ages were indentured servants of the local royalty or Church: local workers who must work for their leaders. The Free Masons were stonemasons who were not bound to a local leader, but were free to move about Europe as jobs required, hence the "Free". They were initially a practical trade organization that did the stonework for many projects such as forts, castles, government buildings, and cathedrals through the Middle Ages. This type of Free Mason, who did actual stonework, is called an "operative" Freemason within Freemasonry today. Operative Freemasons were generally of the religion of the region in which they worked, which was Catholic or Protestant in most cases. There are indications in early Operative Freemason documents that the organization was essentially Christian at that time. It is not clear how far back the Operative Freemasons guild goes. There are myths about the origins of Freemasonry going back to the building of Solomon's temple in the Old Testament but these myths are not accepted by modern Freemason scholars.

Over time other useful types of people were admitted to the Freemasonry organization: merchants, bankers, philosophers and others. These were called "Accepted Masons" to

delineate them from the Operative Freemasons. Over time this group of “Free and Accepted Masons” become less operative and more “speculative.” This meant that they were less and less actual stonemasons and more of a social group.

On June 24, 1717 the Grand Lodge of England was formed and modern Freemasonry Began. This “Modern Grand Lodge” was completely speculative and it developed the blueprint for today’s Masonic rituals. This blueprint included the three degrees of Freemasonry: Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. This group retained many traditions and symbols that were used in the Middle Ages by the Operative Freemasons, such as the square and compass that are used to lay out stones. This group aligned with royalty and other people of influence by attracting them to become members. They also tended to elect royal members as leaders of the group, which greatly accelerated their growth and influence.

By the early 1730s in England there were “Scotch Masons” and “Scotch Master Masons.” These were degrees beyond the Master Mason degree in the regular lodge. In 1745 the Grand Lodge of France gave the Scotch Masons special privileges. By 1766 an elaborate sequence of degrees within the Scottish rite were being developed in France. In its modern form Scottish Rite Freemasonry has 32 degrees and one honorary degree. Other variants of degree systems competed within various Freemasonry Lodges in different countries, but the Scottish rite thrived.

Some argue that modern Freemasonry was a system of thinking and government that emerged from the Reformation. Freemasonry emerged in a time when Enlightenment philosophy was a powerful force in European society. Church dogma and ecclesiastical authority was seen as oppression by many and the rational study of nature was championed. Freemasonry’s degrees eliminated Christian prayer. It did however require a belief in a deity: the “Grand Architect of the Universe” and an afterlife. The constitution of the Free-Masons (1723) by Dr. James Anderson states,

“though in ancient Times, Masons were charg’d in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet ‘tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves.”

There was also a trend of rejecting royal authority in many countries, which would take a dramatic form later in the century during the American Revolution (1765-1783) and the French Revolution (1789-1799). Nine signers of the Declaration of Independence were Masons (16%), thirteen signers of the U.S. Constitution were Masons (33%), and fourteen U.S. Presidents have been Freemasons. Notably Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Andrew Jackson were Freemasons.

In modern North-American Freemasonry a 32nd degree Scottish Rite Mason, or a York rite Mason in good standing can join the Shriners. The Shriners are the “Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine.” They swear an oath to Allah on the Koran, promising under

gruesome penalties to not disclose the secrets of their order. Shriners are most known for red fezzes (hats which are red in symbolism of the blood of Christians), parades, and children's hospitals.

There are auxiliary groups: the Order of the Eastern Star for women, DeMolay for boys, and Job's daughters for girls. Other Masonic groups include Tall Cedars of Lebanon, the Mystic Order of Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm, the Knights of Pythias, the Knights of the Red Cross of Constantine, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Acacia Fraternity, the White Shrine of Jerusalem, the Order of the Rainbow, the Daughters of the Nile, the Order of Amaranth, and others.

There is no one central authority in Freemasonry, each Grand Lodge speaks for its state or region. There are "Landmarks," which are beliefs adopted by most Grand Lodges that give some uniformity to the beliefs and practices of Freemasonry. These include things like the belief in the Great Architect of the Universe, the belief in the soul, and the belief in the resurrection of the body.

Albert Pike (1809-1891) was the Sovereign Grand Commander of the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States from 1859-1891. He is considered the father of Scottish Rite Freemasonry and he is a famous figure in the south in general. He is most remembered within Freemasonry for his book *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry*. There are some oft-cited quotes from this book:

"Lucifer, the Light-Bearer! Strange and mysterious name to give to the Spirit of Darkness! Lucifer, the Son of the Morning! Is it he who bears the light, and with its splendors intolerable blinds feeble, sensual or selfish Souls? Doubt it not!" (page 321)

"The devil is the personification of Atheism or Idolatry. For the Initiates, this is not a Person, but a Force, created for good, but which may serve for evil. It is the instrument of Liberty or Free Will. They represent this Force, which presides over the physical generation, under the mythological and horned form of the God Pan; thence came the he-goat of the Sabbat, brother of the Ancient Serpent, and the Light-bearer or Phosphor, of which the poets have made the false Lucifer of the legend." (page 102)

"The true name of Satan, the Kabalists say, is Yahweh (GOD) reversed; for Satan is not a black god, but a negation of God...the Kabala imagined Him to be a "most occult light." (page 102)

A perhaps more telling, but debated, quote is from *Albert Pike's Instructions to the 23 Supreme Councils of the World* (July 14, 2889):

"That which we must say to a crowd is—We worship a God, but it is the God that one adores without superstition. To you, Sovereign Grand Inspectors General, we say this, that you may repeat it to the Brethren of the 32nd, 31st, and 30th degrees—The Masonic Religion should be, by all of us initiates of the high degrees, maintained in the purity of

the Luciferian Doctrine. If Lucifer were not God, would Adonay whose deeds prove his cruelty, perfidy and hatred of man, barbarism and repulsion for science, would Adonay and his priests, calumniate him? Yes, Lucifer is God, and unfortunately Adonay is also god. For the eternal law is that there is no light without shade, no beauty without ugliness, no white without black, for the absolute can only exist as two gods: darkness being necessary to the statue, and the brake to the locomotive. Thus, the doctrine of Satanism is a heresy; and the true and pure philosophical religion is the belief in Lucifer, the equal of Adonay; but Lucifer, God of Light and God of Good, is struggling for humanity against Adonay, the God of Darkness and Evil.”

Therefore, there seems to be some indication that at these more advanced degrees in the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry there is a more developed and focused religious sense beyond a general belief in a deity. Most Masons never progress beyond the third degree in their local Blue Lodge, but some do progress toward these upper degrees. It is perhaps interesting that the headquarters of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry founded by Albert Pike is a few blocks from the White House amongst other grand buildings of our Federal Government.

Now that we have explored the origins and later expression of Freemasonry in the United States let us turn to the Catholic Church’s authoritative position on Freemasonry expressed through the centuries.

3. Authoritative Church statements on Freemasonry

In 1738, only 21 years after Freemasonry started in London, Pope Clement XII wrote in his Pontifical constitution *In Eminenti*:

“Freemasons are to be condemned and prohibited, and by Our present constitution, valid forever, we do condemn and prohibit them.”

Beyond this condemnation, a very specific command is given to the faithful, with the penalty of excommunication attached to it:

“Wherefore We command most strictly and in virtue of holy obedience, all the faithful of whatever state, grade, condition, order, dignity or pre-eminence, whether clerical or lay, secular or regular, even those who are entitled to specific and individual mention, that none, under any pretext or for any reason, shall dare or presume to enter, propagate or support these aforesaid societies of Liberi Muratori or Francs Massons, or however else they are called, or to receive them in their houses or dwellings or to hide them, be enrolled among them, joined to them, be present with them, give power or permission for them to meet elsewhere, to help them in any way, to give them in any way advice, encouragement or support either openly or in secret, directly or indirectly, on their own or through others; nor are they to urge others or tell them, incite or persuade them to be enrolled in such societies or to be counted among their number, or to be present or to assist them in any way; but they must stay completely clear of such

Societies, Companies, Assemblies, Meetings, Congregations or Conventicles, under pain of excommunication for all the above mentioned people, which is incurred by the very deed without any declaration being required, and from which no one can obtain the benefit of absolution, other than at the hour of death, except through Ourselves or the Roman Pontiff of the time.

In 1751 Pope Benedict XIV wrote in his *Providas* regarding *In Eminenti*:

“We confirm, strengthen, renew that constitution...we will and decree that it have perpetual force and efficacy.”

Pope Benedict XIV condemns Freemasonry because its secrecy, demand for oaths, religious indifferentism, and possible threat to the Church and State. It specifically forbids Roman Catholics from seeking membership in any Masonic group.

In 1821 Pope Pius VII promulgated *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo*, launching a Papal excommunication for members of the Carbonari. The Carbonari were a group under the Freemasons, one of many revolutionary groups at the time in Italy. Pope Pius VII describes them as:

“a multitude of wicked men...united against God and Christ, with the principal aim of attacking and destroying the Church...,deceiving the faithful, and leading them astray from the doctrine of the Church by means of a vain and wicked philosophy.”

In 1826 Pope Leo XII wrote in *Quo Gaviora* regarding Freemasonry:

“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.”

In 1829 Pope Pius VII wrote in *Traditi Humanilitati* regarding the religious indifferentism of Freemasonry:

“Among these heresies...who do not admit of any difference among the different professions of faith and who they know the portal of eternal salvation opens for all from any religion.”

In 1832 Pope Gregory XVI also focused on the religious indifferentism of Freemasonry in *Mirari Vos*:

“The perverse opinion is spread...that it is possible to obtain the eternal salvation of the soul by the profession of any kind of religion.”

Pope Pius IX wrote five Papal Bulls condemning Freemasonry. In 1846 he characterized the Masonic movement in *Qui Pluribus* as:

“a very bitter and fearsome war against the whole Catholic commonwealth...”

In 1884 Pope Leo XIII wrote his encyclical *Humanum Genus*, a 12 page document devoted to condemning Freemasonry. He characterized Freemasonry in the following way:

“It’s followers, jointed together by a wicked compact and by secret counsels, give help to one another, and excite one another to an audacity for evil things.”

In 1917 the first code of Canon Law was codified. Canon 2335 reads:

“Those who lend their names to a Masonic sect or other association of the same kind who plot against the Church incur the penalty of excommunication resting simply in the Apostolic See.”

By examining the statements of the Popes, as well as the Canon Law of the Church, we see a clear condemnation of Freemasonry over a 245 year period starting shortly after its formation. Indeed we see the Papal view of Freemasonry becoming clearer and more explicit in condemning the organization as being at war with the church and inherently evil.

In more recent decades there was a change in most lodges of Freemasonry, particularly outside of Europe. Many no longer plotted against the Church, or seemed to address the Church in any particular way. When the new Canon Law came out, it combined with the public perception that Freemasons were a social club for men, led to some confusion among Catholics. Could Catholics become Freemasons? Was the penalty of excommunication still in place? Since their lodges did not actively plot against the Church many assumed Freemasonry was no long forbidden.

In 1974 The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated the Declaration Concerning Status of Catholics Becoming Freemasons. In it, the Congregation writes:

“1) the present canonical discipline remains in full force and has not been modified in any way.
2) consequently, neither the excommunication nor the other penalties envisaged have been abrogated.”

In 1983 the second Code of Canon law was promulgated by Saint Pope John Paul II, thereby abrogating the 1917 code of Canon Law. The 1983 code of Canon Law does not name Freemasonry as the 1917 code does. The Canon that may apply is 1374:

“A person who joins an association which plots against the Church is to be punished with a just penalty; however, a person who promotes or directs an association of this kind is to be punished with an interdict.”

An interdict is a ban that prohibits a person from participating in Church rites, such as communion, burial, or marriage.

The question arose once again about the status of Freemasons. The Vatican set a number of Bishops the task to study the question. They studied Freemasonry beliefs, rituals, and activities extensively. They concluded that Freemasonry is still incompatible with being Catholic. A statement was released from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on November 26, 1983 based on this study, titled Declaration on Masonic Associations. In it then Cardinal Ratzinger writes,

“Therefore the Church’s negative judgment in regard to Masonic association remains unchanged since their principles have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church and therefore membership in them remains forbidden. The faithful who enroll in Masonic association are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion.”

So, between the 1974 declaration and the clarification in 1983 it is currently understood that Catholic Freemasons are excommunicated from the Church, and that Catholics who become Freemasons are excommunicated from the Church.

4. The nature of Freemasonry

The stated aim of Freemasonry is to:

“help make good men better by teaching them universal truths.”

The Masonic Service Association defines Freemasonry in their What does Freemasonry Offer the World? Vol. 43, No. 8 as (quote taken from Masonry Unmasked by John Salza):

“an organization of men believing in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, using the builder’s tools as symbols to teach basic moral truths, thereby impressing upon the minds of its members the cardinal virtues of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.”

Albert Mackey describes Masonry in Mackey’s Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Vol.1, page 269 as (quote taken from Masonry Unmasked by John Salza):

“a science which is engaged in the search after Divine Truth, and which employs symbolism as its method of instruction.”

the Master Mason Edition of the Holy Bible says on page 62:

“The real object of Freemasonry, in a philosophical and religious sense, is the search for Truth.”

Yet, on page 26 of the Master Mason Edition of the Holy Bible we read:

“By the practice of Freemasonry, its members may advance their spirituality, and mount by the theological ladder from the Lodge on earth to the Lodge in heaven.”

Herein lies one of the Church’s stated objections: religious indifferentism. The Freemasons do not require a belief in Jesus Christ or His Church, yet claim to provide the mechanism of salvation. The Church has condemned indifferentism as heresy because it goes against revelation and reason. Pope Pius VIII states in *Traditi Humilitati* (1829):

“this deadly idea concerning the lack of difference among religions is refuted even by the light of natural reason. We are assured of this because the various religions do not often agree among themselves. If one is true, the other must be false; there can be no society of darkness with light.”

We know that Vatican II said there is some truth in all religions, and the Church has said that human reason is capable of finding God on its own. It has not said that all religions are equally helpful to man in this process.

When one starts from the position that all religions are equally valid, syncretism naturally follows. Syncretism is the blending of beliefs and practices from different religions. Masonic rituals draw from many religions, and extensively from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It borrows vestments, rituals, and language from all of these religions.

It is important to remember that the main conception of God in Freemasonry is deism, the Great Architect of the Universe who is worshipped in all religions. For the Mason the observable proof of God’s existence is in geometry. This is why their primary symbol for God is a “G,” which stands for “God, Geometry, and Gnosis.” This is a necessary consequence of uniting many types of worship: to unite the worshipped. All of the prayers said to God in Lodges omit the name of Jesus, instead addressing the Great Architect.

Another repeated objection about Freemasonry is their secrecy and oaths. At the first initiation into Freemasonry, into the first degree, a few notable things occur. The candidate must agree they are offering themselves freely as a “candidate for the mysteries of Freemasonry.” They then must strip to their underwear and don special Masonic clothing. They are required to remove any religious symbols so that he might “carry nothing offensive or defensive into the lodge.” He is then blindfolded and a noose is placed around his neck. The Junior Deacon speaks for him saying “Mr. _____, who has long been in darkness, and now seeks to be brought to the light...”

Later in initiation to all three initial degrees of Freemasonry there is an oath taken. Licit oaths, such as a marriage or holy orders, are public. These oaths are not licit as they are taken in private. They incur an obligation that is lifelong. The penalty agreed to if the candidate violates his oath of secrecy at the first degree is:

“Of having my throat cut across, my tongue torn out, and with my body buried in the sands of the sea at low-water mark, where the tide ebbs and flows twice in twenty-four hours, should I ever knowingly or willfully violate this, my solemn Obligation of an Entered Apprentice. So help me God and make me steadfast to keep and perform the same.”

The penalty for the second degree is:

“Of having my left breast torn open, my heart plucked out and placed on the highest pinnacle of the temple, there to be devoured by the vultures of the air, should I ever knowingly violate this, my Fellow Craft obligation. So help me God and keep me steadfast in the due performance of the same.”

The penalty for the third degree is:

“Of having my body severed in twain, my bowels taken thence and burned to ashes, the ashes scattered to the four winds of heaven, that no more remembrance might be had of so vile a wretch as I should be to knowingly violate this, my Master Mason obligation. So help me God and keep me steadfast in the due performance of the same.”

These oaths are curses called upon oneself, which is requested to be administered to the candidate by God, not man. If these oaths are not meant to be taken seriously, we may ask why are they sworn before God? One might also consider whether these illicit oaths are a violation of the Second Commandment.

It is clear that the Church has condemned Freemasonry for Catholics, and it is clear that she has, and had, good grounds to do so. Freemasonry is a deistic and synchronistic religion that removes Jesus Christ and offers its own route to heaven without Him. It requires the divesting of religious symbols and the calling down of grotesque curses from God on oneself in secret illicit oaths. Finally, Freemasonry emerged from the intellectual climate of the Reformation and Enlightenment, and historically sought to attack and harm the Church as an institution.

In addition to these issues seen in the first three degrees of Freemasonry we find hints about a more explicitly Satanic or Luciferian mindset in the Scottish Rite as expressed by the “Father” of that order, Albert Pike.

For the three hundred years of its existence, the Church’s position has been clear on Freemasonry. There was a brief period of public confusion about this, which the Church corrected authoritatively. Catholics cannot be, or become, Freemasons without incurring the punishment of excommunication.

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