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A HISTORY OF CATHOLIC-FREEMASON RELATIONS

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Many Religious organizations have expressed concern regarding Freemasonry in the past such as the Salvation Army (1925), the Free Presbyterian Church in Scotland (1927), and the Methodist Conference in England (1927).¹ The Roman Catholic Church (hereafter “The Church”), however, has leveled the harshest criticisms toward the Craft and has concluded that Freemasonry is incompatible with Church teachings. Eight different Popes have issued twenty-one proclamations against Freemasonry.

Despite all of these missives, much confusion exists within the Craft as to why the Church has adopted its positions towards Freemasonry as well as the current status of Catholic-Masonic relations. The work to follow examines the major developments in Church thought regarding Freemasonry so that we, as Freemasons, can not only understand the thinking of easily our most vocal opponent but also provide good and proper counsel to our Catholic Brethren and petitioners.

The Encyclicals

Shortly following the arrival of Freemasonry onto the European continent, the Church issues its first condemnation of the Craft. Pope Clement XII (hereafter “Clement”) in 1738 released *In Eminenti apostolatus* declaring that Freemasonry represents a threat to the teaching of the Church as well as to secular governments. In the tract Clement imposes the penalty of excommunication reserved to the Papal See on all members and supporters of the Craft and further, commands Church officials, including inquisitors, as well as secular authorities to pursue and punish these transgressors as “being most suspect of heresy.”

This short encyclical is rather vague in its language to justify such an extreme form of punishment and relies on terms like “common gossip” and “rumor”. The offenses which Clement levels against the Craft that apparently merit excommunication and possibly torture are: 1) its nonsectarian nature, 2) its use of oaths, 3) its secrecy, 4) its lack of civil or canonical sanctions, and 5) “other just and reasonable motives known to Us.”

As these charges, on their face value, do not appear to warrant such harsh measures, perhaps, there are other elements at play here. Worshipful Brother Christopher Powell, Royal Brunswick Lodge #296, Sheffield, UGLE flatly states that *In Eminenti* is “wholly political in intent”.² So, what is the possible political nature of this Papal encyclical that attacked Freemasonry in this manner?

Let’s look at the early lines of the encyclical to start a thoughtful examination:

¹ Whalen, William. *Christianity and American Freemasonry*, 3rd Edition. Ignatius Press (San Francisco) 1965.

² Powell, Christopher. “Pure, Antient Masonry and the Catholic Church”, *Ars Quator Coronatorum* Vol. 132 Quatuor Coronati Lodge #2076 (London), 2019, p115-52.

... certain Societies, Companies, Assemblies, Congregations, or Conventicles called in the popular tongue Liberi Muratori or Francs Massons or by other names according to the various languages, are spreading far and wide and daily growing in strength.

Evidently, there are men who at this time are joining the Craft at a rate that is creating some concern in Rome. More importantly we should ask, who are these men who are joining this new fraternity? For starters, Francis I the Grand Duke of Tuscany (he's the key player here as he later becomes the Holy Roman Emperor), Frederick the Prince of Wales, Frederick the Crown Prince of Prussia, and the French philosopher Montesquieu have joined Freemasonry. King Louis XV of France is also an overt supporter, though not a member, of this new Brotherhood.³ More importantly, Freemasonry appears to be a fulcrum on the Continent for a sort of Cold War being waged between the Jacobite movement supporting the (now Catholic) Stewart claim to the English Crown and the existing (Protestant) Hanoverians⁴. That rabbit hole will not be further explored as it is very convoluted, involving double-dealing among several different factions within both the Jacobite and Hanoverian camps that is simply too difficult to track and beyond the scope of this work.

With this new precedent, however, Popes throughout the years will continue to level charges against Freemasonry (12 encyclicals, 1751-1882). These subsequent encyclicals generally reaffirm the findings within *In eminenti* though a few outlined new offences: 1) *Litteris altero* (1830), 2) *Etsi multa* (1873), and 3) *Etsi nos* (1882).

Regardless of the nature of these new charges, these encyclicals, like *In eminenti*, suffer from the influence of events on the ground in continental Europe during those years. By this time Enlightenment ideals have firmly taken root in Europe, and the yearning for self-determination has eroded Church authority. This notion is most clearly seen in *Litteris altero* (Pope Pius VIII) where Freemasonry is viewed as a leader in the push for liberalizing education from Church control (this complaint continues throughout the 19th century⁵). While the language leveled against Freemasonry in *Etsi multa* (Pope Pius IX) sounds very ominous, Pius is really addressing a conflict between the secular government and the Church within the Kingdom of Prussia known as the *Kulturkampf*⁶

Some of you may perchance wonder that the war against the Catholic Church extends so widely. Indeed each of you knows well the nature, zeal, and intention of sects, whether called Masonic or some other name. When he compares them with the nature, purpose, and amplitude of the conflict waged nearly everywhere against the Church, he cannot doubt but that the present calamity must be attributed to their deceits and machinations for the most part. For from these the synagogue of Satan is formed which draws up its forces, advances its standards, and joins in battle against the Church of Christ.

Likewise, in *Etsi nos* Pope Leo XIII (hereafter "Leo") attacks Freemasonry as a "pernicious sect" causing civil unrest within Italy. Note that by this time the unification of Italy has been completed under the leadership of now King Victor Emmanuel II with the military aid of Freemason Giuseppe Garibaldi and that the Papacy is now confined to the area surrounding the Vatican. The loss of the Papal States and its temporal domains clearly plays a role in motivating the encyclical.

³ Powell 2019

⁴ Schuchard, Marsha. "The Political-Masonic Background to the 1738 Papal Encyclical *In Eminenti*", *Heredom* 23 (2015), 55-106

⁵ Franklin, James. "Catholics Versus Masons" *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 20 (1999), pp. 15.

⁶ Anderson, Margaret Lavinia. "Kulturkampf and the Course of German History" *Central European History* Vol. 19 No. 1 (Mar., 1986), pp.82-115.

It was not until 1884 when Leo in his encyclical the *Humanus Genus* levels the most full-throttled attack on Freemasonry. In this prolonged denouncement, Leo reconfirms the *ipso facto* right of excommunication to all Catholics who join Freemason Lodges. More importantly, Leo declares that Freemasons observe a religion of Naturalism that runs counter to the teachings of the Church. What is this thing called Naturalism? *The Oxford Dictionary* defines Naturalism as “[t]he philosophical belief that everything arises from natural properties and causes and that supernatural or spiritual explanations are excluded or discounted relying on reason rather than divine revelation”. This point is extremely important because the Church, as the Universal and only source of Truth, considers itself a monopoly whereby no salvation in any way can be obtained outside of its tenants. As such, any group that it considers offering an alternative path or even tolerating the possibility of an alternative path thereby practices a religious relativism that must be suppressed.

Within this framework then, Leo concludes that Freemasonry is subject to a number of fundamental errors that are anathema to Church teachings. These problematic practices involve: 1) A Separation of Church and State, 2) Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience, 3) Rejection of Divine Revelation, and 4) Equal Rights under the Law.

It must be noted here that in the encyclical Leo is lashing out at a number of phenomena unfolding in the latter part of the 19th Century (“The Spirit of the Age”) and subsumes Freemasonry into and holds it accountable for all of these problems:

There are several sects of men which, though different in name, customs, forms, and origin, are identical in aim and sentiment with Masonry. It is the universal centre from which they all spring, and to which they all return.

Included among these “several sects” which Leo asserts derive from Freemasonry are atheists, communists, and socialists whose aim is

...the desire of overthrowing all the religious and social orders introduced by Christianity, and building a new one according to its taste, based on the foundation and laws of naturalism.

While it is entirely possible (more like probable) that some 19th Century Lodges, especially in continental Europe, were coopted and working in tandem with these groups, the modern Regular Freemason would hardly recognize this description of the Craft in the *Humanum Genus*. Indeed, Leo (and all the Popes before him) mistakenly assumes that all Freemasonry is the same.⁷

Modern Canonical Law

Given the thousands of often conflicting Papal laws and decrees spanning centuries, the First Vatican Council of 1904 under Pope Pius X established a commission to compile and reconcile these items into one single code of canon law. This work was complete in 1917 with the release of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (hereafter “1917 Codex”).

The 1917 Codex largely reaffirmed the prior positions regarding Freemasonry and leveled additional penalties indirectly (these penalties applied to a wide range of forbidden societies and not just Freemasonry). Three items in the Codex that specifically relate to Freemasonry are: Canon 1240 denied

⁷ Powell (2019) In his work Powell cites a line from *Freemasonry: A French View* by Roger Dachez and Alain Bauer, 2015 – “Perhaps one should speak not of Freemasonry but of Freemasonries in the plural.”

Freemasons a Catholic burial; Canon 2335 preserved the *ipso facto* penalty of excommunication against Freemasons as declared in the *Apostolicae sedis* (Pius IX 1869); and Canon 2336 applied penalties against clerics and religious who belonged to the Craft.

Canon 2335 of the Codex seems clear in its intent regarding Freemasonry, but a few changes to the standard established in *Apostolicae sedis* complicate things a bit. For Catholics to receive the penalty of *ipso facto* excommunication under Canon 2335, two requirements must be met: 1) they had to be enrolled in the membership books of the organization; and 2) the organization had to be wholly devoted to heretical or subversive ends.⁸ The first of these requirements is rather benign, but it is the second one that is much more problematic. A Regular Freemason would not consider his Lodge engaged in any of these activities – thus the confusion begins.

In 1962 Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council (hereafter “Vatican II”) to reassess the Church’s positions to better connect with the modern world. A primary goal was to foster a spirit of ecumenism and to reach out to groups the Church had previously opposed. While the Church’s position towards Freemasonry was not a primary concern, a number of bishops began to review this stance such as the Scandinavian Bishops Conference in 1966, the Bishops of England and Wales in 1966, and the Auxiliary Bishops of Paris in 1968.⁹

A significant development in Catholic-Masonic relations occurred in 1969 when a commission of bishops under the direction of Cardinal Franz Konig of the Secretariat for Non-Believers and Cardinal Franjo Seper of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (hereafter “CDF”) met with a group of Freemasons in Innsbruck. The following year the commission released its conclusions from these interactions in the Lichtenau Declaration which states:

We are of the opinion that the papal bulls concerning Freemasons are now only historically significant and no longer relevant to our time. We are of the same opinion regarding ecclesiastical law since, in light of what has been said, they cannot be justified by a Church that follows God’s commandment in teaching fraternal love.

In this declaration the commission maintains that Freemasonry is not a threat to the Catholic Church, nor does it teach a common religious doctrine or claim to be a religion; the statement therefore recommends normalized relations and the removal of all canonical penalties and condemnations.¹⁰ In this context Cardinal Seper issued a statement from the CDF in 1974 regarding Canon 2335:

When considering particular cases, it must be borne in mind that criminal law is subject to a strict interpretation. Therefore, the opinion of those authors who maintain that the aforementioned Canon 2335 only contemplates those Catholics who give their name to associations that actually plot against the Church can be taught and applied with complete certainty.¹¹

⁸ Jenkins, Ronny E. “The Evolution of the Church’s Prohibition Against Catholic Membership in Freemasonry”, *The Jurist* 56 (1997) p738.

⁹ *Ibid* p739.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p740.

¹¹ Seper, Cardinal Franjo. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 73 (1981) p 240. Note that this letter was sent to Presidents of various Bishops Conferences in 1974 but not officially released by Vatican until 1981.

Another component of the Vatican II agenda involved revising the 1917 Codex. Canons 2335 and 2336 were dropped from early drafts (penal law schema of 1973), and the 1977 *coetus* (later Canon 1374) removed the *ipso facto* penalty of excommunication largely due to the conclusions of Lichtenau Declaration.¹² The final draft of the 1983 *Codex Iuris Canonici* (hereafter “1983 Codex”) includes two specific canons related to Freemasonry though they do not mention Freemasonry specifically: 1) Canon 1374 – against subversive societies that plot against the Church, and 2) Canon 1364 – against heretics and apostates. Both canons present problems to those who seek to apply them to all but the most subversive Lodges.¹³

Most Regular Freemasons probably consider this to be the state of affairs in Catholic-Masonic relations. Unfortunately, things are lurking in the background complicating matters. In 1978, Pope John Paul II is elected the new pope after the very short term of John Paul I. This new pope comes from the more conservative elements of the Church who did not look too favorably on the ecumenism of Vatican II. The German Bishops Conference, under the leadership of Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Joseph Ratzinger, in 1980 published its report after a six-year dialogue with Freemasons in Germany which reaches a very different conclusion from the earlier Lichtenau Declaration:

... the Freemasons have essentially not changed. Membership places the foundations of Christian existence in question. Detailed investigation of Masonic rituals and fundamental ideas, and of their current, unchanged self-understanding make clear: *Simultaneous membership in the Catholic Church and the Freemasons is incompatible.*

This document with its twelve-point condemnation (see handout) would greatly shape the ongoing discussion of Papal policy towards Freemasonry within the more conservative regime of John Paul II.

On November 26, 1983 (just one day before the 1983 Codex goes into effect), the CDF under the leadership of Joseph Ratzinger issued the Declaration of Masonic Associations (hereafter “CDF Declaration”) which states the Church’s position had not changed and that membership in Masonic lodges was still prohibited because Masonic principles were contrary to the teachings of the Church. Catholics who belonged to such Masonic associations were committing grave sin (*peccato gravi versantur*) and as such were prohibited from receiving Holy Communion. Furthermore, local ordinaries could not practice pastoral sensitivity.¹⁴

Ratzinger essentially attempted an end run around the 1983 Codex by ceding Canon 1374 and applying Canon 1364 to Freemasonry on the grounds of heresy, but he knew he could not levy the penalty of excommunication or interdict. The question is whether this statement from the CDF has any legal authority. Simply put, the answer to that question relies on conflicting canonical jurisprudence and is unresolved with arguments both for and against. Either the CDF Declaration has authority as a Canonical law, or it does not, and the 1983 Codex holds implying pastoral sensitivity.

Seeking guidance on the CDF Declaration, the National Conference of Bishops of the United States tasked its Pastoral Research and Practices Committee to submit a report (published in 1985) on the compatibility of Freemasonry and Catholic teachings which while brief and a bit unclear, concurs with the CDF Declaration.

¹² Jenkins (1997) pp743-44.

¹³ *Ibid* p746.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p748.

This conclusion is not particularly surprising with the growing influence of the conservative elements within the Church.

Conclusion

Catholic-Masonic relations have certainly improved over the years through the open dialogue advocated in Vatican II, and are light-years ahead of the situation almost two centuries ago in that the Church no longer claims that Freemasonry actively conspires against the Church. The CDF Declaration of 1983 has created more confusion as to the current status of Freemasonry in the eyes of the Church. Furthermore, it is unlikely that there will be any further movement on the issue while Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI (formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) remains with us.

Pope Francis seems to embrace the ideals of ecumenism and has reached out to just about every group that runs counter to Catholic teaching but has not actively sought to improve Catholic-Masonic relations. Earlier this year, however, the Vatican gave Austrian priest and member of the Vatican Council for Interreligious Dialogue Michael Heinrich Weninger permission to publish his book *Lodge and Altar* that unequivocally states that Freemasonry is indeed compatible with Church teachings, so maybe there is hope.¹⁵

As Freemasons we need to be candid with our Catholic Brethren and especially petitioners that the current situation in the Catholic-Masonic relationship is unclear and that they should consult with their families and parish priests. The best rule is to follow your conscience!

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Note, I did not source any of the Apostolic letters as they are readily available online.

¹⁵ Hodapp, Chris. "New Book by Austrian Priest Urges Reconciliation Between Catholics and Masonry", freemasonsfordummies.blogspot.com February 22, 2020.