

HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND FREEMASONS...WHY ROMAN CATHOLICS ARE PROHIBITED BY THE CHURCH FROM BECOMING FREEMASONS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Gate City II for inviting me to speak with you tonight about a rather difficult topic, the historical relationship between the Catholic Church and Freemasons, and why Roman Catholics have been and continue to be prohibited by the Church from becoming Freemasons. My name is John McManus and in my civilian life I am an attorney who has been practicing law for just over 27 years. I am Roman Catholic Christian from birth, and since my ordination in 2002, I have been a member of the Roman Catholic Clergy as a Deacon, the lowest of the three levels of clerical hierarchy in the Catholic Church. Since 2007, I am also a Canon Lawyer, which means that I have a pontifical licentiate that allows me to practice as a lawyer in the Tribunals, or courts, of the Roman Catholic Church, and also to advise the Archbishop or others regarding canonical issues, or those issues related to the law of the Roman Catholic Church.

I have provided you with that personal background to let you know that my studies have been related to the Roman Catholic Church and its laws. I am not a Freemason, nor have I studied in any detail, other than for the preparation of this presentation, the laws, rules, creeds, or other constitutive documents of Freemasons. Nothing presented herein is intended to criticize, condemn or otherwise cast aspersions on either Freemasonry or Freemasons, as a group or to any individual Freemason, whether Roman Catholic or not. Instead, this presentation is intended to provide historical and current information on the subject matter that may be used in civil discussions and personal reflections about the issues presented in order that each person may be informed and form their own consciences about the issues presented.

This presentation is being given from the Roman Catholic Church's point of view, particularly since that is the only point of view I can articulate, and the material presented about Freemasons has been gathered from various sources, primarily within the Roman Catholic literature. While I have examined quite a bit of literature preparing this presentation, I have relied to a great extent on a very fine paper entitled "The Evolution Of The Church's Prohibition Against Catholic Membership In Freemasonry" by Msgr. Ronny E. Jenkins.

For those of you interested in the complete text of that paper, it was published in 1996 in The Jurist, Volume 56, pages 735-755. I was particularly interested in that paper because Msgr. Jenkins was one of my instructors at The Catholic University of America where I received my Juris Canonical Licentiate. During my preparation for this presentation, I had an opportunity to communicate with Msgr. Jenkins about recent developments in this area since the publication of that paper, and those developments have been incorporated into this presentation. I wish to thank Msgr. Jenkins for his kind assistance in this matter.

As the title of that article and this presentation suggest, the Roman Catholic Church has for centuries, and continues to this day, to prohibit its members from membership in Freemasonry. That prohibition remains applicable today in the Archdiocese of Atlanta for all members of the Roman Catholic Church. There has certainly been a great deal of confusion regarding whether this prohibition continues today, engendered in large part by the language of the 1983 Code of Canon Law that omitted the specific prohibition against Freemasonry stated in the 1917 Codex Juris Canonici. In response to this confusion, in November of 1983, the Congregation for the Doctrine of The Faith issued a declaration stating that the prohibition was still in force and that Catholic Masons were barred from receiving Holy Communion. However, that declaration did not quell the debate about that prohibition, and the debate continues. It is my purpose here tonight to address the foundational reasons for this centuries old prohibition, clarify the confusion created by the new Code of Canon law, and explain why the Roman Catholic Church through the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith continues that prohibition today.

As advertised, I will begin this presentation with a look at the origins and historical issues related to this prohibition, then address in passing some of the official canonical documents related directly to that prohibition, then review in some detail the efforts in modern times to reconcile the differences between the parties, and finally address the canonical issues developed by both the 1917 Codex Juris Canonici and the 1983 Code of Canon Law. It is my sincere hope that at the end of this presentation the fundamental inconsistencies between the basic tenants of the Roman Catholic Church and those of Freemasonry will allow at least a better understanding of the prohibition that the Roman Catholic Church asserts in this matter.

In order to understand why the Roman Catholic Church has the authority to prohibit one of its members from belonging to Freemasonry, or to prohibit or allow its members to do or not do other things, it is important to understand a little about the Roman Catholic Church itself. The Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ himself. To be Catholic, one must believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and that he established the Church with divine authority. The Gospels state that “As the Father gave authority to Christ,” [Jn 5:22] Christ passed that authority on to his apostles [Lk 10:16], and they passed it on to the successors they appointed as bishops.

For nearly two thousand years, through unbroken apostolic succession, bishops have taught the Catholic faith that was received from Christ in the Gospels, Sacred Tradition, and through the Magisterium, the teaching office of the Church. The Church is not a democracy. The authority of the Church rests in the Bishop of Rome, The Roman Pontiff, the successor to St. Peter, who Jesus himself selected to guide the Church. It is important to note that this “authority” held by the Holy Father is not power, but a right...it is humble in both its origin, as received from Christ, and in its end, which is to serve as Christ served. In fact, all of the laws and all of the traditions of the Church have one goal, one end, and that end is the salvation of souls.

The Roman Catholic Church believes that it has an innate right and obligation to speak the truth about all human matters, and that truth is directed at the one primary end, the salvation of souls. And, therefore, throughout the ages, the Church has issued decrees, which are decisions regarding a particular case, and encyclicals, which are writings approved by the Holy Father, and she has held Councils and synods, discussing various issues related to the faith. The most recent Council was the Second Vatican Council held in the 1960's which has had a significant effect on the law of the Church, and the Church itself. The rules and laws that are articulated by the Holy Father become laws that Catholics must respect and follow because of the aforementioned authority from which they are derived. Willful failure to follow the teachings of the Church has consequences for Catholics, including excommunication in the most serious cases.

The laws of the Church, codified as canon laws, set forth both the requirement and the penalty for not following the teachings of the Church, and there is a judicial process involved in determining whether the law has been broken and what sanction, if any, is appropriate in the individual case.

The best way for me to explain the relationship between the law of the Church and the essential end of human behavior is in a statement by Mother Teresa. She said, "God did not put me on earth to be successful, he put me here to be faithful." Catholics have an obligation to be faithful to the teachings of the Church, all of the teachings of the Church, and they are not allowed to pick and choose which teachings they like and which they don't like as if they were ordering from a menu at McDonalds. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Catholics to understand the teachings of their faith, the reasons why the Church teaches as it does, and then live a life accordingly, constantly striving to be faithful to Christ and his teachings.

It was difficult to determine the precise historical origin of the Freemasons, primarily because there is little historical evidence of the Masons before the eighteenth century. It does appear, however, that on June 24, 1717, four independent guilds of stone cutters met in a London inn to form the first grand lodge. It appears that this new order of masons spread to France by 1732, Hamburg, Germany by 1737, and then throughout much of the rest of Europe, including Italy.

On April 28, 1738, the Roman Catholic Church published the first of many condemnations of this new society when Clement XII issued the constitution *In eminenti*. In that constitution, Clement XII declared the basic tenants of Freemasonry to be a threat not only to the basic teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but also to the stability of governments and society. Clement XII imposed the penalty of excommunication reserved to the Holy See on persons who either belonged to or externally supported the society. This document was significant because subsequent popes repeated the condemnations for the next two hundred years. For example, on May 18, 1751 in his decree *Providas*, Benedict XIV repeated the *gravissima damna* [the "most serious condemnations"] and appended Clement XII's constitution to his own decree.

The nineteenth century brought renewed and continued confirmation of the charges and penalties against Masons, particularly Catholic Masons. Here are a few examples:

1. On September 13, 1821, Pius VII issued his decree *Ecclesiam Christi* in response to the growing influence of a particular form of Masonry called Carbonarism on the movement to form liberal governments in much of Europe.
2. On March 13, 1826, Leo XII issued his decree *Quo graviora* in which he not only reaffirmed past condemnation, he added more condemnations, and he offered a particularly critical view of the influence of Masons on universities.
3. On August 15, 1832, Gregory XVI in his decree *Mirari Vos* reaffirmed all previous papal decrees condemning Freemasons, and he added more justifications for the Church's condemnation of Freemasons.
4. On October 12, 1869, Pius IX in his decree *Apostolicae Sedis* that reformed certain automatic [*latae sententiae*] penalties, retained membership in the Masons among those excommunications reserved to the Holy See. *Apostolicae Sedis* can be found in *Acta Santa Sedis* [ASS] 5 (1869) beginning at page 311.
5. On April 12, 1884, Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Humanum genus* which was a document dedicated entirely to the condemnation of the Masons and reaffirmed the *latae sententiae* penalty imposed by Pius IX in *Apostolicae Sedis*. *Humanum genus* can be found in *Acta Santa Sedis* [ASS] 16 (1883-1884), pages 417-433.

The twentieth century canonized the penalties and condemnations of the previous two hundred years. It should be noted here that the law of the Roman Catholic Church, which was developed through Tradition, Sacred Writings, synods, Councils, Decrees and Encyclicals, was not codified in one in a single code of canon law until the Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1917. Three canons in the 1917 code spoke directly against Freemasons:

Canon 1240: Canon 1240, Section 1, paragraph 1, denied Freemasons a Catholic burial.

Canon 2335: This canon, with only a few changes, reaffirmed the reserved ipso facto excommunication of catholic masons promulgated by Pius IX on *Apostolicae Sedis*. The English translation of that canon reads: "Those giving their name to Masonic sects or other associations of this sort that machinate against the Church or legitimate civil powers contract by that fact excommunication simply reserved to the Apostolic See."

Canon 2336: This canon levied additional penalties against clerics or religious who belonged to the masons. These penalties included suspension for clerics and loss of active and passive voice for religious.

Other canons indirectly affected Catholic Masons and included:

1. Canon 1065, Section 1: Denied them the right to a Catholic marriage.
2. Canon 542, Section 1: Denied them the ability to enter a valid novitiate.
3. Canon 693, Section 1: Denied them the right to inscribe validly in a pious association of the faithful.
4. Canon 1453, Section 1: Denied them receiving the right of patronage [support].

Two requirements had to be met for Roman Catholics to incur the ipso facto excommunication set forth in Canon 2335:

1. They had to have actually enrolled in the membership books of the organization; and
2. The organization had to be wholly devoted to heretical or subversive ends.

It was easy to establish whether the first requirement was met—all one had to do was examine the membership books of the organization. But it was not as easy to determine when the second requirement had been met. Jenkins poses these questions:

1. What if the charitable or fraternal organizations were only indirectly associated with Freemasons? Were these included in the ban?
2. Masonic lodges themselves varied greatly in their teachings and practices. American lodges were far less subversive than most European ones. Did Catholics who joined an American lodge deserve to suffer the same penalty as one who joined a lodge more patently opposed to the Church?

These and other similar questions gave rise to discussions within the Church hierarchy about a new legal attitude toward Freemasons. Those inquiries led to the hope that the issue would be addressed by the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council, however, did not specifically address the issue with Freemasons. Instead, it sought to open dialogue with various groups that had been counted among the Church's "antagonists."

As a consequence of this new attitude, several groups of bishops began to view the ban on Masonic membership in the light of the particular character of the respective local lodges. This was first done in 1966 by the Scandinavian bishops who determined that each bishop could judge whether or not a particular lodge was acting or teaching in ways contrary to the interests of the Church. If the bishop decided that the lodge was not

manifesting such behavior, the bishop was free to determine whether a particular Catholic could join that particular lodge. Similar actions were taken by the bishops of England and Wales, and the French bishops were even allowed by the Vatican to have limited discussions between the Italian grand master and a priest who was an expert in Masonic affairs.

These events lead to perhaps the most significant advance in Catholic-Masonic relations. In March 1969, a commission of three Catholics and nine masons gathered in Innsbruck to discuss their mutual concerns. The commission met under the auspices of the Secretariat for Non-Believers and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the faith. The committee's dialogue resulted in the July 5, 1970 publication of a document entitled "Lichtenau Declaration," which declared that, contrary to the Church's consistent position, the Masons were not a threat to the Catholic Church. The document recommended that all canonical penalties and condemnations be abrogated and relations opened between Catholics and Masons, stating in pertinent part:

"We are of the opinion that the papal bulls concerning the Freemasons are now only historically significant and no longer relevant in our time. We are of the same opinion regarding the condemnations of 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."

The next significant event in Catholic-Masonic relations occurred in talks that occurred over a six-year period between 1974 and 1980 when representatives from the German Episcopal Conference held talks with a group representing the Grand Lodges of Germany. The conclusion of the German Bishops' Conference was:

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

Jenkins points out that "the bishops reached their unequivocal conclusion after having first considered the positive elements of Freemasonry, including its humanitarian interests, charitable works, anti-materialist ideology, as well as the excellent personal qualities required of its members." He states that the bishop's listed twelve areas of Masonic teaching that were at variance with the Church's own belief, and with which the Church could never reconcile itself:

1. The Masonic World-view: The Masons promote a freedom from dogmatic adherence to any one set of revealed truths. Such a subjective relativism is in direct conflict with the revealed truths of Christianity.

2. The Masonic Notion of Truth: The masons deny the possibility of an objective truth, placing every truth instead in a relative context.
3. The Masonic Notion of Religion: The Masonic teaching holds a relative notion of religions as all concurrently seeking the truth of the absolute.
4. The Masonic Notion of God: The Masons hold a deistic notion of God which excludes any personal knowledge of the deity.
5. The Masonic Notion of God and Revelation: The deistic notion of God precludes the possibility of God's self-revelation to humankind.
6. Masonic Toleration: The masons promote a principle of toleration regarding *ideas*. That is, relativism teaches them to be tolerant of ideas divergent or contrary to their own. Such a principle not only threatens the Catholic position of objective truth, but it also threatens the respect due the Church's teaching office.
7. The Masonic Rituals: The rituals of the first three Masonic grades have a clear sacramental character about them, indicating that an actual transformation of some sort is undergone by those who participate in them.
8. The Perfection of Mankind: The Masonic rituals have as an end the perfection of humankind. But Masonry provides all that is necessary to achieve this perfection. Thus, the justification of a person through the work of Christ is not an essential or even necessary aspect of the struggle for perfection.
9. The Spirituality of Masons: The Masonic Order makes a total claim on the life of the member. True adherence to the Christian faith is thereby jeopardized by the primary loyalty due the Masonic Order.
10. The Diverse Divisions within the Masons: The Masons are comprised of lodges with varying degrees of adherence to Christian teaching. Atheistic lodges are clearly incompatible with Catholicism. But even those lodges comprised of Christian members seek merely to adapt Christianity to the overall Masonic world-view. This is unacceptable.
11. The Masons and the Catholic Church: Even those Catholic-friendly lodges that would welcome the Church's members as its own are not compatible with Catholic teaching, and so closed to Catholic members.
12. The Masons and the Protestant Church: While a 1973 meeting of Protestant Churches determined that individual Protestants could

decide whether to be members of both the Christian Church and the Freemasons, it included in its decision the caveat that those Christians must always take care not to lessen the necessity of grace in the justification of a person before God.

The German bishops' statement had a significant influence on the subsequent attitude of Rome toward Catholic-Mason relations, renewing the age-old attitude of distrust and antagonism. The canonical questions about these issues, however, were still to be resolved.

During the period of time between the 1970 Lichtenau Declaration, which indicated a more positive relationship between Catholic's and Masons, and the German Bishops' statements in 1980, the code of canon law was being revised. As a direct result of the Lichtenau Declaration, canons 2335 and 2336 of the 1917 Pio-Benedictine Code of Canon Law were abandoned early in the code revision process and were not included in the penal law schema of 1973. This has led to some confusion among the bishops about the Church's stance toward Masons. In 1974, Cardinal Franjo Seper of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a letter to select bishops stating that "the law toward masons had not changed, but that its application might be more strictly interpreted in favor of lay Catholics." In essence what the Cardinal was saying was that the canon's penalty applied to Catholics who joined a Masonic group "or similar associations that conspired against the Church."

Therefore, if the particular lodge the Catholic joined did not conspire against the Church, then only one of the two requirements for incurring the penalty of excommunication had been met. Therefore, membership in a neutral lodge would not necessarily bring with it an ipso facto excommunication for the Catholic.

The 1977 *coetus* for the revision of penal law formulated its draft of what would become canon 1374 of the 1983 code, and it is stated in English as follows:

"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."

Therefore, the revised canon removed the ipso facto excommunication of canon 2335, and it was broad enough in scope to allow for particular legislators to determine when the penalty was warranted and if, or whether, harsher penalties were called for in certain circumstances.

The broad language provided room for what Catholic's call "pastoral sensitivity" in a particular case. Based upon this canon, it appeared that the decision about whether Catholics were allowed to join a particular lodge was left up to the local legislator, the bishop.

However, the new code promulgated in 1983 did not settle the issue. There are two canons in the 1983 code that most clearly apply to Catholic Masons, although, as indicated, Freemasonry is not mentioned specifically:

1. Canon 1374 against subversive societies; and
2. Canon 1364 against heretics and apostates.

As indicated earlier in the presentation, on November 23, 1983, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith attempted to resolve the doubt created by the 1983 code revisions and issued *Declaratio de associationibus massonicis*, the “Declaration on Masonic Associations.” *Declaratio de associationibus massonicis* can be found in *Acta Santa Sedis* [ASS] 76 (1984) beginning at page 300. The Congregation stated the following:

1. The Church’s position regarding the Freemasons had not changed.
2. Catholic membership in Masonic lodges was still prohibited because Masonic principles were still contrary to the teachings of the Church.
3. Catholics who did, in fact, belong to Masonic associations were committing grave sin and were, consequently, barred from receiving Holy Communion.
4. The reason the Masons were no longer explicitly referred to in the new code was due simply to the principles that guided the revision of the law.
5. Local ordinaries did not enjoy the prerogative of determining which Masonic lodges operated against the interests of the Church and which were neutral towards or even supportive of the Church’s interests.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States did not officially respond to the Congregations 1983 declaration. However, it did ask the Pastoral Research and Practices Committee to write a report on the compatibility of Masonic principles with the Catholic faith. Their report, which is quite brief, was published in the June 27, 1985 edition of *Origins* [*Origins* 15/6] at pages 83-84. The committee restated the fundamental conclusions of the German bishops, stating:

“Even though Masonic organizations may not in particular cases plot against the faith, it would be still wrong to join them because their basic principles are irreconcilable with those of the Catholic faith.”

While the Congregations declaration reflects the current law in the Church and Catholics are prohibited from joining the Masons, the debate among Church scholars and canonists about this issue and the related issue of enforcement, application, and the canonical implications of each issue remain.

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