



REFLECTIONS A YEAR AFTER DECLARATION OF CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

Irreconcilability between Christian faith and Freemasonry

On 26 November 1983 the S. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (S.C.D.F.) published a declaration on Masonic associations (cf. *AAS* LXXVI [1984], 300). At a distance of little more than a year from its publication, it may be useful to outline briefly the significance of this document.

Since the Church began to declare her mind concerning Freemasonry, her negative judgment has been inspired by many reasons, both practical and doctrinal. She judged Freemasonry not merely responsible for subversive activity in her regard, but from the earliest pontifical documents on the subject and in particular in the Encyclical *Humanum Genus* by Leo XIII (20 April 1884), the Magisterium of the Church has denounced in Freemasonry philosophical ideas and moral conceptions opposed to Catholic doctrine. For Leo XIII, they essentially led back to a rationalistic naturalism, the inspiration of its plans and activities against the Church. In his Letter to the Italian people *Custodi* (8 December 1892), he wrote: «Let us remember that Christianity and Freemasonry are essentially irreconcilable, so that enrolment in one means separation from the other».

One could not therefore omit to take into consideration the positions of Freemasonry from the doctrinal point of view, when, during the years from 1970-1980, the Sacred Congregation was in correspondence with some Episcopal Conferences especially interested in this problem because of the dialogue undertaken by some Catholic personages with representatives of some Masonic lodges which declared that they were not hostile, but were even favourable, to the Church.

Now more thorough study has led the S.C.D.F. to confirm its conviction of the basic irreconcilability between the principles of Freemasonry and those of the Christian faith.

Prescinding therefore from consideration of the practical attitude of the various lodges, whether of hostility towards the Church or not, with its declaration of 26 November 1983 the S.C.D.F. intended to take a position on the most profound and, for that matter, the most essential part of the problem: that is, on the level of the irreconcilability of the principles, which means on the level of the faith, and its moral requirements.

Beginning from this doctrinal point of view, and in continuity, moreover, with the traditional position of the Church as the aforementioned documents of Leo XIII attest, there arise then the necessary practical consequences, which are valid for all those faithful who may possibly be members of Freemasonry.

Nevertheless, with regard to the affirmation of the irreconcilability between the principles of Freemasonry and the Catholic faith, from some parts are now heard the objection that

essential to Freemasonry would be precisely the fact that it does not impose any «principles», in the sense of a philosophical or religious position which is binding for all of its members, but rather that it gathers together, beyond the limits of the various religions and world views, men of good will on the basis of humanistic values comprehensible and acceptable to everyone.

Freemasonry would constitute a cohesive element for all those who believe in the Architect of the Universe and who feel committed with regard to those fundamental moral orientations which are defined, for example, in the Decalogue; it would not separate anyone from his religion, but on the contrary, would constitute an incentive to embrace that religion more strongly.

The multiple historical and philosophical problems which are hidden in these affirmations cannot be discussed here. It is certainly not necessary to emphasize that following the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church too is pressing in the direction of collaboration between all men of good will. Nevertheless, becoming a member of Freemasonry decidedly exceeds this legitimate collaboration and has a much more important and final significance than this.

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.

Even if it is stated that relativism is not assumed as dogma, nevertheless there is really proposed a relativistic symbolic concept and therefore the relativizing value of such a moral-ritual community, far from being eliminated, proves on the contrary to be decisive.

In this context the various religious communities to which the individual members of the lodges belong can be considered only as simple institutionalizations of a broader and elusive truth. The value of these institutionalizations therefore appears to be inevitably relative with respect to this broader truth, which instead is shown in the community of good will, that is, in the Masonic fraternity.

In any case, for a Catholic Christian, it is not possible to live his relation with God in a twofold mode, that is, dividing it into a supraconfessional humanitarian form and an interior Christian form. He cannot cultivate relations of two types with God, nor express his relation with the Creator through symbolic forms of two types. That would be something completely different from that collaboration, which to him is obvious, with all those who are committed to doing good, even if beginning from different principles. On the one hand, a Catholic Christian cannot at the same time share in the full communion of Christian brotherhood and, on the other, look upon his Christian brother, from the Masonic perspective, as an «outsider».

Even when, as stated earlier, there were no explicit obligation to profess relativism as doctrine, nevertheless the relativizing force of such a brotherhood, by its very intrinsic logic, has the capacity to transform the structure of the act of faith in such a radical way as to become unacceptable to a Christian, «to whom his faith is dear» (Leo XIII).

Moreover, this distortion of the fundamental structure of the act of faith is carried out for the most part in a gentle way and without being noticed: firm adherence to the truth of God, revealed in the Church, becomes simple membership, in an institution, considered as a particular expressive form alongside other expressive forms, more or less just as possible and valid, of man's turning toward the eternal.

The temptation to go in this direction is much stronger today, inasmuch as it corresponds fully to certain convictions prevalent in contemporary mentality. The opinion that truth cannot be known is a typical characteristic of our era and, at the same time, an essential element in its general crisis.

Precisely by considering all these elements, the Declaration of the Sacred Congregation affirms that membership in Masonic associations «remains forbidden by the Church», and the faithful who enrolls in them «are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion».

With this last statement, the Sacred Congregation points out to the faithful that this membership objectively constitutes a grave sin and by specifying that the members of a Masonic association may not receive Holy Communion, it intends to enlighten the conscience of the faithful about a grave consequence which must derive from their belonging to a Masonic lodge.

Finally, the Sacred Congregation declares that «it is not within the competence of local ecclesiastical authorities to give a judgment on the nature of Masonic associations which would imply a derogation from what has been decided above». In this regard, the text also refers to the Declaration of 17 February 1981, which already reserved to the Apostolic See all pronouncements on the nature of these associations which may have implied derogations from the Canon Law then in force (Can. 2335). In the same way, the new document issued by the S.C.D.F. in November 1983 expresses identical intentions of reserve concerning pronouncements which would differ from the judgment expressed here on the irreconcilability of Masonic principles with the Catholic faith, on the gravity of the act of joining a lodge and on the consequences which arise from it for receiving Holy Communion. This disposition points out that, despite the diversity which may exist among Masonic obediences, in particular in their declared attitude towards the Church, the Apostolic See discerns some common principles in them which require the same evaluation by all ecclesiastical authorities.

In making this Declaration, the S.C.D.F. has not intended to disown the efforts made by those who, with the due authorization of this Congregation, have sought to establish a dialogue with representatives of Freemasonry. But since there was the possibility of spreading among the faithful the erroneous opinion that membership in a Masonic lodge was lawful, it felt that it was its duty to make known to them the authentic thought of the Church in this regard and to warn them about a membership incompatible with the Catholic faith.

Only Jesus Christ is, in fact, the Teacher of Truth, and only in him can Christians find the light and the strength to live according to God's plan, working for the true good of their brethren.

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