

Roman Catholic Attitudes - Yesterday and Today

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Unwavering hostility to Freemasonry has characterised the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. The Papal Bull *In Eminenti Apostolatus Specula*, promulgated by Pope Clement XII in 1738, condemned and prohibited any masonic assembly and forbade any involvement whatever in Masonry on pain of excommunication. Article 1240 of the Canon Law went so far as to prohibit Catholic burial for "suicides, heretics, freemasons, and people who have been killed in duels."

There was no such hostility on the part of Freemasonry. In England, Roman Catholics were admitted to the Craft at a time when they remained under several legal disabilities, including being denied the opportunity of taking a seat in Parliament. In fact, the Bull went largely unheeded in England. Baron Petre, regarded by some as leader of the Catholic community in England, was Grand Master from 1772 - 1776. The Marquess of Ripon was Grand master from 1870 - 1874. He subsequently resigned on being received into the Catholic Church, but said that throughout his career in Freemasonry he had "never heard a single word uttered against altar or throne." Even in Ireland the ban appears to have been disregarded during the 18th century.

The timing of Pope Clement's Bull was clearly influenced by the Earl of Middlesex's establishment of a lodge in Florence in 1733. This lodge appears to have been self-constituted and did not hold a warrant from the Grand Lodge of England. A conference of cardinals was held in Florence in 1737 under that city's chief inquisitor, resulting in the first draft of the Bull. The Bull made no specific charges against Freemasonry, referring instead to secret meetings and to the growing strength of the movement.

Significantly, the Bull also stated that such societies had been forbidden in several countries as being contrary to the public interest and security. The key statement referred to the way being opened to uncorrected commission of sin and "*aliisque justis ac rationabilibus causis nobis notis*": "other just and reasonable motives known to Us". *In Eminenti* was confirmed by Pope Benedict XIV in 1751 and a series of further papal condemnations followed between 1821 and 1902.

The great question is *Why?* As the reasons were not stated it is impossible to be sure but a number of answers do suggest themselves. The holding of meetings in secret was a major factor. Any suggestion that there might have been secrets not open to the confessional would have been wholly unacceptable. It seems to have mattered little that Freemasonry was not nor ever has been a secret society. (In any event, the Roman Catholic Church has long had its own secret societies, such as the Knights of St Columba and *Opus Dei*).

Undoubtedly there were theological reasons. Freemasonry admitted men of all religions. It may have been perceived as being pantheistic. The oaths and rituals may themselves have been considered objectionable. Equally, the motivation may have been as much political as religious. The Vatican is both a Church and a State with influence and interests extending worldwide. In condemning Freemasonry, the Vatican was not breaking new ground, but following a lead already set by several secular states.

During the 18th century, calls for religious and political freedoms, now taken for granted, were widespread. Institutions everywhere were being questioned and frequently coming under threat. Conspiracy theories were rife. Freemasonry was widely believed to have been behind both the Jacobite Rebellions and the French Revolution. Some of those involved in these movements, as well as in other struggles, such as the American War of Independence, were indeed Freemasons, or members of *quasi* masonic bodies. Suspicion and hostility from established hierarchies was only to be expected. More importantly, no distinction was drawn (as is often the case today) between regular Freemasonry (which forbids lodge discussion of political or religious issues) and irregular or *quasi* masonic movements.

There was some justification for the Roman Catholic Church being opposed to certain continental lodges. Some Grand Orients were and still are anti-clerical. Some overseas lodges are overtly involved in politics. Recent scandals surrounding the Italian P2 Lodge are a case in point. This however has nothing whatever to do with regular Freemasonry.

Today, Catholic attitudes are very different.

There has been a significant change from the inflexibility of the old hard line. A Vatican Council called by Pope John XXIII gave impetus to the ecumenical movement and signalled a more liberal outlook. In 1968, Father Ferrer Benimelli, a Jesuit priest from Spain, published *La Masoneria despues del Concilio*. Benimelli argued that regular Freemasonry based on a belief in God was not inconsistent with Catholic beliefs and should not give rise to calls for excommunication. In that same year, Harry Carr, a most distinguished Grand Officer, had discussions with Cardinal Heenan of Westminster. The results were to be far reaching.

In 1974, the Holy See recognised the distinction between regular and irregular Freemasonry in ruling that Article 2335 of Canon Law no longer barred a Catholic from membership of masonic groups. Excommunication is now only considered if the policy and actions of the Freemasons in this area are known to be hostile to the Church. This was a great step forward, but falls short of encouraging Catholics to active membership of the Craft. The long tradition of antagonism is embedded in folk memory and continues to be a significant barrier to Catholics entering Freemasonry, particularly in those countries where Roman Catholicism has always been the main established faith. It is equally possible that some Freemasons are reluctant to adopt Catholicism.

It will take more than one generation to reverse two centuries of opposition. The recent establishment of new lodges in Spain, as well as in countries where the Orthodox Church is predominant does, however, give ground for hope.

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This article was published in the "Freemasonry Today" magazine
Issue No. 7 - Winter 1998/99