

The Church — and Freemasonry

In all of the long years of its history Freemasonry has not found itself in conflict with the church, though it has been the subject of pronouncements against it by the Catholic Church and the authorities at Rome have issued numerous Papal Letters, Bulls and encyclicals on the subject. There are also one or two Protestant denominations which have forbidden membership in secret societies and have included Freemasonry in this category. Freemasonry is **not** a secret society, rather it is a society with secrets and these cover only a few matters of ritual and modes of recognition. Unlike the true secret society, Freemasonry has well-marked temples; published lists of its members; advertises its meeting dates, times and places in the newspapers, etc.

Despite the claims of these two groups concerning Freemasonry, the Order has never sought to defend itself or to become involved in any controversy with the church or any religious group. It has let its deeds and the lives of its members speak for it.

The leaders of Freemasonry and its membership generally recognize that there is no conflict between Freemasonry and the church. Both are basic institutions and each has a part to play in the great work of advancing the good of mankind. On the religious side Freemasonry asks that each man express his belief in God as the Supreme Architect of the Universe, but this is simply a statement of faith and not a theological declaration. Freemasonry displays the Holy Bible upon its altars because we believe that it contains the rules which should govern our lives and guide our faith. Freemasonry

recognizes the value of prayer as a means of communication between man and God, and employs it frequently and regularly in its ceremonies and at its meetings.

A Point of Misunderstanding

In some areas in recent years there seems to have arisen certain misunderstandings between some of the members of the clergy and Freemasons concerning the matter of the Masonic burial rites. By means of this little tract Virginia Freemasonry wishes to state its position for the reassurance of our own Brethren both within and without the clergy.

In the first place, Masons or Masonic Lodges do not solicit funeral ceremonies. Each Lodge in Virginia stands ready to perform the Masonic service, which is memorial in nature, whenever requested to do so by the family of the deceased Mason. These rites are never directly offered to any bereaved family under any circumstances.

The Religious Service and Masonic Rites

Freemasonry recognizes and honors the position of the church in performing the last rites for a human being. When Masonic graveside rites are requested by the family and performed by a Lodge, the Worshipful Master usually asks the officiating clergyman to pronounce the benediction at the conclusion of its memorial rites. This is done in recognition of our belief that the church is supreme in all matters of religion and that its chief duty is to minister to the spiritual in mankind. Ours is a service of memorial, bringing the sweet savor of brotherhood and union with the deceased to our living Brethren who surround the open grave.

Certain parts of our rites remind the Mason of our belief in the immortality of the soul. Certain parts remind each of his own

unfitness to enter the presence of God when he has made the last great exodus of death. Certain other parts of the ceremony are symbolic, for Freemasonry is a teaching institution constantly striving to teach man to be better than himself.

Our Virginia Masonic rules provide two types of services for the deceased. One is designed to be held in the funeral home or private residence on the evening before the interment. The other is the graveside service, which is much older than the evening service mentioned. The choice belongs to the family of the deceased and every Lodge stands ready to perform either of the rites as requested.

Freemasonry is Not a Religion

Though it is religious, Freemasonry is not a religion. Our Fraternity has never set itself up as a substitute for the church, the synagogue or for any religion, however denominated. We do not lead any man to believe that his soul will be saved because he is a Mason. We believe and teach that every man has the right to choose his own creed, his own theology and his own church; Freemasonry only tells him that worship of the Supreme Being is a necessary part of life. Our only requirement is that man must believe in God if he would share our brotherhood. The choice of his individual beliefs about God is a personal one, the right of choice having been given each by God Himself.

The Masonic Funeral

When the family of a deceased Mason requests the Masonic rites, the Brethren congregate themselves into a Lodge, properly officered and attend the religious rites at the church, funeral home or residence, as the case may be. They enter the place where the service is to be held as a body of men,

properly clothed in the traditional white apron and gloves of a Mason. Their officers wear the jewel of their particular office suspended from a cord, ribbon or chain around their neck. The deacons and stewards of the Lodge carry the staffs or rods which are a part of their regalia. The oldest member of the Lodge is usually appointed to carry the Holy Bible, Square and Compasses and this Holy Book is always accorded a place of honor in the procession.

At the conclusion of the service in the church or funeral home, the Lodge, by custom, forms an escort for the casket and it is usually carried from the door to the hearse through two lines of Masons. A similar escort is formed at the grave and the Lodge procession follows the casket to its final resting place.

After the clergyman has concluded the religious service at the grave, but prior to the benediction, the Brethren of the Lodge assemble around the bier and the Masonic service is conducted by the Worshipful Master and the Chaplain of the Lodge, with all of the Brethren participating in certain parts of it. There is nothing in it to offend the religious beliefs or sensibilities of anyone and it has been used for nearly two hundred years without major revision.

If The Clergy Objects to The Masonic Service

It is the belief of every Mason that the wishes of the family, as to the rites to be held for their loved one, be the guiding thought in arranging the funeral. At the same time, Virginia Freemasonry respects the right of any clergyman to decide whether or not he desires to have the Masonic Lodges participate in the funeral ceremonies, sharing with the church in these last rites. We think it proper, however, that he make his wishes known to the family

of the deceased well in advance of the hour of the service. This would avoid embarrassment, either to himself, the family of the deceased or to the Masonic Fraternity. The Lodge has no desire to intrude if it offends the sensibilities of a clergyman.

When Death Occurs

When a member of a Lodge dies, the Worshipful Master or one of his Wardens usually make it their business to contact the family immediately. This is done as a friend of the departed brother, and the services of the Lodge and its individual members are offered in a spirit of friendship—not to conduct the funeral—but to care for such details as the family might call upon friends to perform at such a time. Our Lodge Officers understand that whatever the desires of the family might be, their requests should be followed insofar as is reasonably possible.

The Masonic funeral rites are a tribute of love and esteem for the deceased, brought into being to demonstrate the strength of the mystic tie of Freemasonry, which extends beyond the grave. It is intended to demonstrate only these two attributes and is not a demonstration of ritual merely given to impress the public. May it never be misunderstood by those who are not Masons.

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