

FREEMASONRY IN SOCIETY

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On his initiation, the Brethren are assured that the candidate is 'living in good repute amongst his friends and neighbours.' He is therefore, or should be, a peaceable and law-abiding citizen who gets on well with others. A little later on, the candidate affirms that he comes 'with a preconceived notion of the excellence of the Order, a desire for knowledge and wishing to make himself more extensively useful amongst his fellow men.' Later again, on being charged, he is told that the foundation of Freemasonry is 'the practice of every social and moral virtue.' He is exhorted to learn how to discharge his duty to his God, his neighbour and himself, to be an exemplary citizen and that, as an individual, he should practise every domestic as well as public virtue and maintain those truly Masonic characteristics, benevolence and brotherly love.

Following his second degree, he is told that he should 'not only assent to the principles of the Craft, but steadily persevere in their practice.' Finally, following his third degree, he is told that 'his own behaviour should afford the best example for the conduct of others.'

Later still, at the peak of his Craft career, on being installed in the Chair of his Lodge, he consents to a comprehensive list of instructions as to his attitude and behaviour. All in all, the entire underlying principle is that by entering Freemasonry and by his acceptance and practice of its tenets and precepts he should become a credit to himself and an example to, and benefactor of, others.

It is expected and hoped that Freemasonry will bring about this state of affairs but that, in his daily life, a Freemason will interact with others as an individual and not in his capacity as a Freemason. Freemasonry is therefore an intellectual and philosophic exercise designed and intended to make an individual's contribution to society, and development of self, greater than they might otherwise have been had he not had the opportunity of extending his capacities and capabilities through membership of the Order.

What Does Freemasonry Provide?

Election to membership of a Lodge and initiation into that Lodge are an overt indication and confirmation of one's worth or value; and recognition of such, by the Brethren. In itself, this should increase self-esteem and hopefully generate a conscious or sub-conscious desire to prove worthy of others' confidence and trust. Subsequent promotions through the second and third degrees are symbolic of the Brethren demonstrating their satisfaction that their original choice and decision were correct and that the candidate is worthy, both innately and by virtue of his zeal, interest and proficiency in the symbolic Craft, for such promotions. These additional and consequent marks of esteem should engender in the candidate further personal satisfaction and self-confidence.

The Lodge teaches many skills, often untaught, or not experienced, elsewhere. A Brother must speak in public, think on his feet, make decisions, vote on issues, and chair meetings. These are invaluable assets in all other aspects of his life and for many this may well be the only opportunity of learning, practicing and perfecting these skills and techniques.

Is Freemasonry a Charity?

Freemasonry is not a Charity, but as in any fraternal setting, the need of a Brother or his dependents, will receive the sympathy and support of his Brethren, not always or necessarily, financial. Charity is a natural off-shoot of Brotherly Love and is promoted explicitly in the Masonic ethos, but it is not the 'raison d'etre' of the Order.

The Purpose of Freemasonry

The purpose of Masonry is 'self-improvement'-not in the material sense, but in the intellectual, moral and philosophic sense of developing the whole persona and psyche so as, in the beautiful and emotive language of the ritual, 'to fit ourselves to take our places, as living stones, in that great spiritual building, not made by hands, eternal in the Heavens.' Such a hypothetical whole, developed, complete person must, in his journey through life, and in his interaction with others, make a more extensive contribution to society in general, thus realizing and fulfilling his expressed wish on initiation, to become 'more extensively useful amongst his fellow-men.' Such are the lofty, lawful and laudable aspirations of the Order.

Society Today

As world changes happen faster, and in more complex and unpredictable ways, our natural needs for security, control, certainty and predictability- are being undermined. This type of environment is a breeding ground for what is now termed the 'Achilles Syndrome' where more and more people who are, in fact, high-achievers, suffer from a serious lack of self-esteem - men apparently more so than women. This is gleaned from an article on the work of Petruska Clarkson, a consultant chartered counsellor and clinical psychologist.

Dr. Donal Murray, former Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin and now Bishop of Limerick, identifies 'a hunger which is not being satisfied. People need to feel they belong; they need to feel they can be fully committed to something. The prevailing mood, in Ireland and elsewhere, is one of disillusionment and cynicism. We have come to see ourselves as living in a world of institutions and structures-we think of ourselves as belonging not to a country but to an economy; we think of our national life and resources in terms of statistics and of the machinery of Government, rather than of people and culture.'

Dr. Murray goes on to say 'it is increasingly presumed that the ideal citizen possesses no strong religious or moral beliefs, or at least has the decency not to intrude them into the public arena. Strong moral beliefs are, we are told, divisive; religious belief is, at best, embarrassing. In other words,' he continues, 'one is not meant to participate in national life with one's whole self, with one's religious beliefs and moral convictions. These are private matters. We are in danger of trying to build a culture which regards as irrelevant the very realities which make people tick. Divisiveness results only when religion and morality are misunderstood. The individual conscience is worthy of respect because it seeks the truth, as every human being is obliged to do.' Freemasons will hardly fail to notice these references to ethics, morality and truth the very foundation of Masonic teaching and endeavour. But these cultural jewels-without-price are coming under increasingly powerful destructive forces which are eroding the foundation and base on which they rest. Conor Cruise O'Brien-a distinguished Statesman and commentator-says that 'for as far back as we can go in history, human discourse concerning ethics has been infected, in varying degrees, with hypocrisy.' Another commentator states that the term 'business

ethics' is fast becoming an oxymoron-that is a contradiction in terms; and the Bishop of Waterford felt it necessary to denounce publicly 'the Cult of Excessive Individualism.' What is needed, in all this, is some form of mental sheet-anchor-a. sort of fixed navigational point like the pole-star which, when the clouds pass, can be seen and provides the traveller with the means to identify his exact position and thereby the knowledge to return to the true path.

Freemasonry - A Part of, or Apart from, Society

Every individual, on occasion, is forced to be a little introspective and ask himself 'who am I and where am I? Even an organization such as the Masonic Order must also occasionally ask itself 'what are we and where are we'? What we are has, to some extent already been dealt with. We are a fraternal organization, the aims of which are brotherly love, the relief of our distressed Brethren and their dependents and the search after 'Truth' which we may express as, and expand into, public and private morality, the knowledge and fear of God and, following on from that, respect for, and love of, our neighbour. This respect includes toleration of his personal viewpoint, his religious beliefs and his political opinions. If we pursue the aims of the Order, our search should widen, yet focus our vision, while ever making us more deeply aware of, and closer to, the Great Architect of the Universe, heightening our spirituality and deepening our insight into that which we may never hope fully to understand-and something like the search after the mystic Grail as sought for, and fought for, by our possible, even probable operative forebears, the Knights Templar who followed on, in their own way, from the mythical Knights of the Grail Romances and Arthurian Legend. There is so much more to Freemasonry than the shallow depth of today's assessment and its scant inspection by today's society, obsessed as society is with material success for the individual rather than his contribution to society.

Into the Next Millennium

I have endeavoured to identify who we are, what we are and where we are-now it is time to speculate on where we go from here. We are an unfashionable group whose numbers are falling-not perhaps in the developing countries, but in the developed world we are viewed as an anachronism with an ethos which may represent an embarrassment to many of today's moral lepers. 'Whence comest thou Gehazi'? You will remember Elisha's devastating question to his servant who had run after Naaman, seeking to profit from his Master's-that is, someone else's performance and use of his talents.

As those who joined Freemasonry in great numbers after the Second World War, because they found it the closest alternative or substitute for the fellowship and support they found within the Forces, now pass on to their reward, there is no surge of candidates to replace them. So recruitment becomes a necessity, though the means and emphasis must be very carefully gauged. We must try to correct the false perception of us by, in particular, the media and the Churches for they are the agencies who can and do formulate and direct public opinion; and both are highly suspicious and/or antagonistic.

What I am trying to emphasise is that as we move into the next millennium we must be steadfast in our adherence to the Aims and Principles and not attempt to obtain public acceptance through promoting or pursuing non-masonic activities which can only, in the long term, prove our undoing. We must be patient and bide our time for we will come again. I have heard it said that the pace of life and its stresses will get even more frenetic than at present and that while we may

be able to cope with this intellectually, it is questionable if many can cope with it emotionally. In these circumstances with the Internet bombarding us with a Quatermass-like availability of ethical and unethical information in the privacy of our own homes, I believe that Brother Michael Yaxley, President of the Board of General Purposes of the Grand Lodge of Tasmania is quite correct when he writes 'Society does have a need for a body such as Freemasonry. I believe that this need will increase rather than decrease. In the next century the work place will not offer fellowship and camaraderie sufficient to satisfy the social instincts that people have. Many people will work at home, linked to the office by computer and telephone. Others will work in an office with complex but nevertheless inanimate equipment. The irony of the Age of Communication is that people spend, and will spend, more time by themselves.'

Conclusion

As the American writer, Henry Adams saw it, 'The Indian Summer of Life should be a little sunny and a little sad, and infinite in wealth and depth of tone just like the season.'

I think that pretty closely describes Freemasonry today-a little sunny and infinite in wealth and depth of tone-we all can sympathise with that. A little sad too with memories of past greatness; and quieter more settled times when bogeymen were not found everywhere and Freemasonry was a recognised, accepted and fashionable part of society. Will our time come again? I think it will-not perhaps an exact replica of the past, for we cannot turn back the clock, but a slimmer, trimmer version with new vigour and enthusiasm ready to meet the new millennium.

But remember, Brethren, as we enter and endure 'the Winter of our discontent' we must maintain our standards and our dignity. There can be no compromise with quality in any facet of our Institution. One of Ireland's greatest actors and one of its best-known characters, Michael Mac Liammoir, was once accused by a critic of being 'square.' 'Yes' said Mac Liammoir, 'perhaps you are right, but so much better to be square than shapeless.' How appropriate for Freemasonry at this time-let us hold firm to the symbolism of the square and the compasses and let them be the means of restoring Ordo ab Chao - order out of mental and moral chaos--as we strive to readjust emotionally to the crushing pressures and stress of modern life.

Now Brethren, let me close on one final exhortation taken from the beautiful language of our ritual - 'See that you conduct yourselves, out of Lodge as in Lodge, good men and Masons'; and remember those immortal words of Polonius giving advice to his son Laertes as he departs from Denmark, on his return to France, in Shakespeare's greatest play, Hamlet 'This above all, to thine own self be true; and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.' Almost the entire Masonic ethos can be found in those few words-so easy to remember, so difficult to put into practice.