SILENT HOMILIES

Little Treasures

THE LODGE AND THE ALTAR

Why Catholics Cannot Be Freemasons



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Small books on questions a Catholic is actually asked.

The Lodge and the Altar

Why Catholics Cannot Be Freemasons

A little book for the Catholic who has a Mason in the family, or an invitation in his pocket, and would like the Church's reason rather than a rumour.

Before You Begin

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Somebody stays behind after Mass. His grandfather was a Mason. Or a friend has asked him to join. Or he joined twenty years ago, and he has only now discovered that the Church forbids it. He wants to know why, and he does not want his grandfather called a bad man in the process.

This book is that conversation. It explains what a lodge is, in the words the lodges use of themselves. It explains why popes have said no since 1738, and why the reason is not only secrecy. It keeps the Church's judgement on the principles distinct from any judgement on a particular man's soul.

It will not do the internet's work. There is no Satanism here, and no secret government. There is a disagreement about Christ, about truth, and about what a Catholic may promise. That disagreement is enough.

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Chapter 1

But my grandfather was a Mason

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A man stays behind after Sunday Mass, which is often how the difficult questions arrive. He waits until the porch has emptied. Then he says that his grandfather was a Mason for forty years. He went to church, at least sometimes. He helped the neighbours. He left money to a charity. The grandson has an apron in a cupboard and does not know what to do with it, and he does not know whether the Church has judged the man he loved.

If that is the question you have brought, I want to begin with the man, not with a document. A good life is a real thing. Neighbours who were helped were really helped. A Catholic can thank God for that without pretending that every society a good man joined is therefore compatible with the faith. The Church's difficulty is with the principles of Freemasonry, and with what a Catholic undertakes by joining. It is not a verdict on your grandfather's soul. I have not been given that verdict, and neither have you.

The other way the question comes is more immediate. A friend has invited you to a lodge. He says it is not a religion, that nobody will ask you to stop being Catholic, and that the evenings are about friendship and a charity dinner. He may be describing his own experience quite accurately. English Freemasonry does say that it is not a religion, and it does forbid the discussion of religious doctrine in the lodge. The invitation can be kindly meant. The Church's answer is still that a Catholic may not join.

There is a third man, and he is often the hardest to answer well. He joined twenty years ago. Nobody in the parish mentioned the prohibition. He has friends there. He has done useful work. He has now read something, or a child has asked him, and he wants to know what he is

supposed to do. That man is not a villain in a pamphlet. He is a parishioner. The way back is a real conversation, not a scene.

This little book is that conversation, written down. It will say what Freemasonry is, as far as a fair outsider can say it from the lodges' own public accounts and from the history that can be checked. It will say why popes have objected since 1738. It will say why the objection is not only about secrecy, and why it has not been withdrawn. And it will try not to confuse a person's kindness with the question the Church is actually asking.

A Reflection

Most of us want the people we love to be uncomplicated. A grandfather who was kind, and also a Mason, does not fit the picture we were given in either direction. Nobody is asking you to tidy him into a villain or a saint. You loved a real man. The Church's difficulty is with a society, not with the whole of that man.

You can pray for him. You can keep the memory of the neighbour he helped. You can still hear, without insulting him, that the society he joined asks a Catholic a question he may never have been helped to ask.

A short prayer

Lord, keep us faithful to the truth, and gentle with the people who did not have it explained. Amen.

Chapter 2

What happens behind the lodge door?

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Freemasonry is a fraternal society of men, organised in lodges, with private ceremonies, signs of recognition, and a moral teaching carried by symbols. That is the plain description, and it is enough to begin with. In Britain the governing body for the great majority of what is called regular Freemasonry is the United Grand Lodge of England, which also covers Wales and the Channel Islands. There are separate Grand Lodges in Scotland and in Ireland. A man who says he is a Mason in Port Talbot or in Swansea is usually speaking of a lodge under one of these.

The craft, as members call it, has three degrees. A candidate is received as an Entered Apprentice, then passed as a Fellow Craft, and then raised as a Master Mason. Further orders exist beyond the craft, and a man may or may not go into them. When people speak of "the lodge," they usually mean this craft Masonry. The United Grand Lodge has said publicly that it is not a religion and not a substitute for religion. It requires a belief in a Supreme Being. It does not offer a doctrine of its own about who that Being is. It says there is no separate Masonic God, and that a Mason remains committed to the God of the religion he professes.

An open Volume of the Sacred Law is part of every meeting. For a Christian that book is the Bible. For a Jew it is the Hebrew Scriptures. For a Muslim it is the Qur'an. Other sacred books are used where the membership requires them. Prayers are said. The United Grand Lodge's own statement says that these prayers are so worded that men of different faiths can join in them, to God as each sees him, without the wording causing an argument. Discussion of religion, and of politics, is forbidden in the lodge.

The obligations a candidate takes are sworn on that Volume, or on the book he holds sacred. The United Grand Lodge says they are undertakings to keep secret the means by which Masons recognise one another, and to follow the principles of Freemasonry. Older ritual language spoke of penalties. English Freemasonry has said that these are symbolic and are not to be understood as literal threats. I am not going to invent the private text of a ceremony. What can be said from the public account is already enough for the Catholic question, and I will come to that question in its own place.

Charity is a large part of the public face. Masonic charities support hospices, medical research, and people in need, including people who are not Masons. A man who invites you to a dinner is often inviting you to that, and to the friendship of the lodge. None of this is imaginary. A fair account has to include it, or the rest of the book will sound like a quarrel with a caricature.

A Reflection

People like a door that is not quite open. A society that receives you by stages, and gives you a sign that others do not have, answers an old hunger to be inside something. The hunger is not shameful. Parish life answers it too, which is why a man can feel the pull of both and not notice the difference until somebody asks him which promise comes first.

Belonging is a good thing. It is not, by itself, a reason to join.

A short prayer

Lord, you have already called us by name. Keep us from looking for a second name that asks us to set the first aside. Amen.

Chapter 3

From the stonemason's tools to the modern lodge

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The tools in the symbol are older than the society that uses them. Operative masons, the men who actually cut stone, had guilds in the Middle Ages. They kept a craft knowledge, trained apprentices, and had religious customs like other guilds in a Christian country. That much is ordinary history. What cannot be shown is a secret chain from those guilds, through the Knights Templar or the builders of Solomon's Temple, to the lodges of the eighteenth century. Those continuities are later legends. They appear in ritual and in popular books. They are not documented history, and a Catholic does not need them in order to understand the thing he is being asked to join.

Speculative Masonry, the society of men who are not working stonemasons, emerges in Britain in the seventeenth century. The date people know is 1717. Four London lodges are recorded as meeting on 24 June that year at the Goose and Gridiron, a tavern in St Paul's Churchyard, and forming a Grand Lodge. The account comes to us from James Anderson, writing in 1738, so it is a later report of the event rather than a minute we can hold. Historians treat 1717 as the traditional foundation of organised Grand Lodge Masonry. They do not treat it as the birth of everything that later called itself Masonic.

Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 contain a sentence that still matters. After saying that a Mason will not be a stupid atheist or an irreligious libertine, he writes that it is now thought more expedient to oblige Masons only to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves. You can hear, already, the principle the popes would not accept. Not atheism. A common religious ground, with the particular creed set to one side.

The eighteenth century multiplied the lodges. In 1751 a rival Grand Lodge appeared in London, the Antients, accusing the older body of having departed from older forms. The two united in 1813 as the United Grand Lodge of England. That is the body a British reader is usually meeting. Scotland and Ireland have their own histories and their own Grand Lodges. On the Continent the story divided more sharply. In 1877 the Grand Orient of France removed the requirement of belief in a Supreme Being. English Freemasonry did not follow it, and does not recognise it. If someone tells you that "the Masons" are one organisation with one policy in every country, he has not looked.

So the honest picture is narrower than the internet, and more interesting. A British craft lodge is not a surviving Templar order, and it is not the Grand Orient. It is a fraternal society with a London origin in the early eighteenth century, a requirement of belief in God, a ritual built from the old craft, and a rule that particular religious opinions are not to be argued in the lodge. That is already a theological fact. It does not need a conspiracy to make it one.

A Reflection

We like a beginning that flatters us. A family will prefer the story in which an ancestor was noble to the parish register that says he was a labourer. A parish will prefer the legend of its foundation to the minutes of the meeting that actually started it. The pleasure is ordinary. The danger is that a beautiful account begins to matter more than the plain one, and truthfulness is the virtue that notices the exchange.

A short prayer

Lord, give us a love of the truth that does not need a legend to make it weighty. Amen.

Chapter 4

Why a pope became concerned in 1738

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Pope Clement XII published In eminenti apostolatus specula on 28 April 1738, twenty-one years after the traditional date of the London Grand Lodge. He was not writing about a medieval guild. He was writing about a new society, already spread, in which men of different religions were bound together by a secret and an oath. He said that this was a danger to the purity of religion and to the peace of civil society, because the secrecy stopped the society from being examined, and because an oath of that kind bound a man in a matter he could not judge.

The penalty he attached was severe. Catholics who joined, or who helped the lodges, incurred excommunication reserved to the Holy See. He was using the discipline of his century. The reason under the penalty is the part that has lasted. Men of every religion, meeting under an obligation that their own pastors could not see, looked to him like a rival form of belonging.

Pope Benedict XIV confirmed the ban on 18 March 1751, in Providas Romanorum. He had been asked, in effect, whether Clement's judgement still held, and whether a man was safe if he could say that his particular lodge meant no harm to Church or state. Benedict said the prohibition stood, and that the excuse did not remove it. You can already see the shape of the modern argument. A lodge that is polite to the parish is not, for that reason, outside the question.

Later popes returned to it as the lodges grew and, in some countries, entered politics. The nineteenth century is not the eighteenth. In Italy, France, and parts of Latin America, Masonic bodies were often anti-clerical, and sometimes openly hostile to the Church's public life. A British reader is right to say that this was not the atmosphere of a Yorkshire

lodge. He is not right to think the papal file begins and ends with that hostility. Clement wrote before the French Revolution. He was worried about secrecy, the oath, and the mixing of religions under one obligation.

I am not asking you to admire every phrase of an eighteenth-century penalty. I am asking you to notice what the pope thought he had seen. A Catholic was being offered a bond that his Church could not share, in a room his Church was not allowed to understand, with men whose creeds were to be left at the door. That was enough, in 1738, to say no.

A Reflection

A hard teaching is easiest to refuse while it is still only a rule. A man hears that the Church forbids something his friends do, and his first feeling is that the Church has not understood his friends. The slower work is to ask what the Church has actually seen, and to sit with the answer long enough to find out whether the difficulty is in the teaching or in the wish that it were otherwise.

A short prayer

Lord, when your Church has spoken for a long time, give us the patience to hear the reason and not only the penalty. Amen.

Chapter 5

The problem is deeper than secrecy

†

Secrecy is the part people expect the Church to mind, and it is not nothing. A Catholic belongs to a Church that hands on her faith in public. The creed is said aloud. The sacraments are done in the sight of the people. A society that binds a man not to tell what he has undertaken is already at an angle to that. But if secrecy were the whole objection, a lodge that published its ceremonies would have answered the Church. It would not.

Pope Leo XIII put the deeper objection in Humanum genus, on 20 April 1884. He said that Freemasonry taught, in practice if not always in a creed, a naturalism. Human reason and human brotherhood were treated as enough. Revelation, dogma, and the Church's account of salvation were the "particular opinions" a man could keep, provided he did not bring them into the common work. Leo thought this was a different religion of man, even when it spoke respectfully of God.

You do not have to accept every political judgement in that encyclical. Leo was writing against lodges that, in his Italy, were not shy of the Church. The principle he named is still the one the Holy See uses. In 1985 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said that it was setting aside the question of whether this or that lodge was hostile. The irreconcilability it affirmed was at the level of principles, which means at the level of faith.

That is a different accusation from the ones on the internet. It does not say that your neighbour worships Satan. It does not say that his lodge runs the council. It says that the lodge gathers men on a religious basis that is deliberately less than the faith of the Church, and asks a Catholic to treat that basis as a sufficient common ground. A man can do that politely. He cannot do it and still say, without qualification, that Jesus Christ is the one mediator.

This is why a Catholic who has only been told "the Church dislikes secret societies" has been told the smaller half. The secrecy is not the whole problem, though people often think it is. A lodge keeps its ceremonies private. Plenty of families keep things private. The difficulty is what the privacy is protecting: a religiously shaped obligation that a Catholic is asked to take without being able to bring the Creed into the room. The disagreement is about who God is, and about whether Christ can be left among the opinions that the lodge has agreed not to discuss.

A Reflection

We are used to thinking that the serious argument is the one with the loudest opponent. A lodge that funds a hospice and never mentions the pope is harder to explain to a family than a lodge that publishes an attack. The quieter disagreement is often the deeper one.

Charity can be real, and the principle underneath it can still be a principle a Catholic is not free to make his own.

A short prayer

Father, keep us from mistaking a quiet error for a small one. Amen.

Chapter 6

Is the Great Architect the God of the Creed?

†

English Freemasonry says there is no Masonic God. A Mason's God, it says, remains the God of the religion he professes. The names used in the lodge, including the Great Architect of the Universe, are there so that men of different faiths can pray together without the wording starting an argument. That is the lodge's account, and I am not going to replace it with a crueller one.

A Catholic can still ask what is happening when he prays in that way. The God he professes is not a Supreme Being with the details left open. He has been baptised into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He says the Nicene Creed. He speaks of a Son who is consubstantial with the Father, who was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, who suffered, died, and rose. A prayer that has been worded so that a Muslim, a Jew, a Deist and a Catholic can all say it without difficulty is a prayer that has left that Creed outside.

The lodge will say that he has not denied the Creed. He has only agreed not to insist on it in that room. This is the point at which the Church thinks the agreement is already too much. Faith is not a private opinion added on top of a more basic belief in a designer. Faith is the confession that God has spoken, and that the Son is the one through whom he has spoken. To meet, religiously, on the ground where that confession must be silent is to treat the confession as optional for the evening.

John says that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. Peter, in Acts, says there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. These are not slogans for a quarrel with a lodge. They are the Church's account of why she cannot hand her members a second religious belonging in which that

name has to be manageable. A Catholic who believes them cannot treat Christ as one of the particular opinions Anderson told the lodges to leave to themselves.

None of this means that a Mason who is not a Christian is insincere when he prays. He may be praying, truly, to the God he knows. The Church has something to say about the salvation of those who do not know Christ, and she says it without contempt. She does not say that a Catholic, who does know him, may step into a rite that asks him to pray as if the Creed were a difficulty to be avoided.

A Reflection

There is a way of being unashamed of Christ that does not turn supper into an argument. A Catholic can eat with people who do not share his faith, and enjoy them, and still not agree to pray as though the name he was given at the font were an embarrassment to the room. Courtesy is not the same thing as hiding him.

A short prayer

Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, keep your name on our lips when a quieter name would be easier. Amen.

Chapter 7

Can all religions meet on the same ground?

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The lodge's answer is tolerance. Men of different faiths meet as brothers. Nobody is asked to attack another man's religion. In a country that has learned, at cost, what religious hatred does, this sounds like the obvious good. A Catholic who has read the last century ought to want neighbours to live in peace. The Second Vatican Council, in Dignitatis humanae, taught that the person has a right to religious freedom, and that this right is not to be coerced. That teaching is not in doubt in this book.

Religious freedom is a claim about persons. It is not a claim that their doctrines are all true. The Church can defend a Muslim's right to worship and still confess that Jesus Christ is the one mediator. She can respect a Jewish neighbour and still believe that the covenant has reached its fulfilment in him. Respect is not agreement. The Council said both things, and a parish that has only remembered one of them has remembered the easier one.

Freemasonry, in the form we are discussing, does something more than respect. It builds a common prayer and a common moral rite on the ground where the disagreements have been ruled out of order. The United Grand Lodge says it is not trying to join the religions together, and that there is no composite Masonic God. The Church looks at the same arrangement and sees a practical indifferentism. The religions are treated as variations on a belief that is enough for the lodge. For a Catholic, the variation is the faith itself.

In 2000 the declaration Dominus Iesus recalled that the fullness of Christ's revelation cannot be set beside other religious paths as one option among equals. It was not a document about lodges. It was a document about a habit the lodges had already made into a rule: the habit of treating

particular creeds as private additions to a more basic religious respectability. A Catholic can love a man of another faith. He cannot join a society whose religious life requires the Creed to stay outside.

This is the distinction I would want a Freemason to recognise, even if he rejects the conclusion. The Church is not forbidding him to have friends who are not Catholic. She is saying that her own members cannot take an obligation, and share a prayer, in a system that has made their faith one opinion among others. That is not a ban on every prayer said with a neighbour of another faith. The Church has her own guidance for meeting and praying with people of other religions. What she forbids here is entry into the lodge's own rite and obligation, where the Creed has been set aside so that the meeting can proceed.

A Reflection

It is possible to sit at a table with someone and not agree, and for the meal to be honest. Families do it. The difficulty comes when the price of the table is that the disagreement must never be named.

Love does not always look like a shared form of words. Sometimes it looks like staying, and still being allowed to say who you are.

A short prayer

Father, teach us to honour every person without treating every creed as the same creed. Amen.

Chapter 8

The promise made in the lodge

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A candidate in English Freemasonry takes an obligation on the Volume of the Sacred Law. The United Grand Lodge says this is an undertaking to keep the means of recognition secret, and to follow the principles of Freemasonry. I have not set out the private wording, because I am not going to pretend to a text I am not printing, and because the Catholic question does not depend on a sensational reconstruction. A promise made before God, in a ceremony of admission, is already a serious act.

The Church does not teach that every private promise is sinful. Marriage is a promise. A religious profession is a promise. The Lord, in Matthew, tells his disciples not to swear by heaven or by earth, and to let their yes be yes. The Catechism reads that as a call to truthfulness, and still allows an oath where it is made with truth, judgement, and justice, and not in vain. So the mere fact of a solemn undertaking is not the objection. People make solemn undertakings in hospital chapels and in courtrooms.

The objection is the content, and the setting. A Catholic who takes the lodge obligation is promising himself into a society the Church has judged irreconcilable with her faith. He is doing it on the Bible, which makes the promise feel religious, in a rite that has been worded so that the Bible's central claim need not be confessed. He may think he is only promising secrecy and good conduct. The society he is joining understands the promise as entry into its own principles, including the principle that particular religious opinions are left outside.

There is a further, quieter cost, and it arrives later. A man of thirty takes an obligation among friends. At fifty he has offices, and dinners, and people who stood with him when his wife was ill. On the night he made it, the promise felt like friendship. Most promises do. The weight of it

appears later, when he tries to lay it down and finds that the friendships were tied to it. That is not a reason to call him a liar. It is a reason to be slow before making a bond you have not been allowed to examine with your own pastor.

If you have already made it, the way to speak about it is in Confession and in a straightforward conversation, not in a performance of secret knowledge. The Church would rather have the truth from you than a reconstructed ritual from a website. Two older Christian stories belong here, and neither is about Freemasonry. Around 155, St Justin told the emperor that Christians paid their taxes and prayed for rulers, and still would not sacrifice to the gods. In 1534 St Thomas More refused the oath attached to the Act of Succession, because he believed it asked him to set aside the Church's faith about the Pope. His son-in-law, William Roper, records that he stayed courteous to men who took it. St John Fisher refused the same oath and was executed on 22 June 1535. Neither man was judging a lodge. They were judging an oath. A Christian can love the people in the room and still be unable to swear what the room requires. The likeness ends there.

A Reflection

Most of us have said yes to something, in company, that we would not say yes to alone. A job, a quarrel, a silence we kept for the sake of the room. The courage comes later, when a man can admit that the first yes was a mistake, and still not despise the person he was when he said it.

A short prayer

Lord, hold the promises we made in ignorance, and give us courage to walk back from the ones we cannot keep. Amen.

Chapter 9

But they do so much good

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They do. When a Masonic charity pays for a hospice bed, a sick person really does have that bed. When it gives a grant to a family after a death, the family really does receive the money. I am not going to talk as if those things were pretend. The United Grand Lodge and the Masonic charitable foundations attached to it have given large sums to medical work and to relief, and a man who has spent his Saturdays on that work is not imagining his Saturdays. If this book pretended otherwise, you would be right to put it down.

Good work does not answer every question about the body that does it. A Catholic can see this in smaller places. A neighbour who does not believe in Christ can still sit with your mother in the hospital, and the sitting is a real kindness. You thank him. You do not, because of the kindness, take his account of God as your own, and you do not join his religious society in order to be polite about the chair he pulled up. The good and the disagreement are both present. Families manage this more often than pamphlets admit.

The Church's own language for this is old. Grace is at work beyond the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. A person who has never heard the Gospel can do a true good. Vatican II was not embarrassed to say so. Recognising the good is not the same as entering the society. A Catholic who gives to a Masonic charity appeal, because a neighbour asked and the cause is a hospice, has not joined a lodge. A Catholic who takes the obligation has done something else.

There is a temptation, on the Church's side, to talk as if the charity were a disguise. That temptation should be refused. There is a temptation, on the lodge's side, to talk as if the charity had closed the argument. That

temptation should be refused as well. The work remains good whatever we decide about the lodge. What it cannot do is settle the question about God. A Catholic still has to ask whether he can take the obligation, and the kindness of the work does not answer that question for him.

If you are the person who has done the good work, nobody in this book is taking it from you. The question the Church puts is whether a Catholic can do it from inside an obligation she has said he must not take. The work can be done from outside. Many people do.

A Reflection

A good deed can be used as a screen. A man who visits his mother every week may still be unkind to his wife, and the visits are real. A parish that feeds the poor may still be avoiding a truth about its own worship. The question is not only for the lodge. It is for anyone who would like his kindness to close the examination of the rest of his life.

A short prayer

Lord, bless every true kindness, and do not let us use it as a reason to be silent about you. Amen.

Chapter 10

What about British Freemasonry?

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This is the question a man in Wales is actually asking, and it deserves the long answer. English Freemasonry is not the Grand Orient of France. It did not follow the Grand Orient in 1877, when that body dropped belief in a Supreme Being. It requires the belief. It forbids political talk in lodge. It is not, in its public life, a party devoted to removing the Church from the country. A grandfather in a British lodge may never have heard a word against the parish. To describe him as if he had joined an Italian anti-clerical campaign of the 1880s is to describe someone else.

The Holy See knows the distinction and has not treated it as an exemption. The 1985 article in L'Osservatore Romano said that the Congregation was setting aside the practical attitude of the various lodges, whether hostile or not. The judgement was about principles. A lodge that is courteous to Catholics is still a lodge that gathers men of different faiths into a common obligation and a common prayer, on a ground that is less than the Creed. Courtesy does not change that ground.

You can test this against the United Grand Lodge's own statement, the one it has repeated since 1962 and amplified in the 1980s. Freemasonry is not a religion. It demands belief in a Supreme Being and provides no system of faith of its own. It is open to men of all faiths. Religion is not discussed. There is no Masonic God. A Mason remains committed to the God of his own religion. An open Volume of the Sacred Law is essential. The obligations are sworn on it. Read as a description of English practice, this is fair. Read as an answer to the Church, it states the difficulty rather than removing it. The system of faith is missing on purpose. The Catholic system of faith is the thing that is missing.

Local bishops are not free to decide that British lodges are a different case. The declaration of 26 November 1983 said that it was not within the competence of local authorities to give a judgement that would derogate from the Holy See's. A priest who tells you that English Masonry is fine because it is not French is telling you something the Congregation has already declined to say. He may be a kind man. On this point he is not speaking for the Church.

None of this requires you to think that a British Mason is a political enemy. It requires you to see that the Church's present reason is not the politics of another century. It is the religious shape of the lodge he is actually being invited to join.

A Reflection

Familiar things escape examination. A man can drive the same road for twenty years and never notice the turning he passes every morning. A commitment can be like that. It is kept by decent people, it has a place in the diary, and nobody at the table has ever asked what it asks of a Catholic. The reluctance to look is not usually malice. It is the comfort of a habit that has never been questioned by the people who share it.

A short prayer

Lord, save us from thinking that a familiar error is a different error. Amen.

Chapter 11

Why the Church has not changed her mind

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In 1917 the Code of Canon Law said, in canon 2335, that a person who joined a Masonic sect, or another association of the same kind plotting against the Church or legitimate civil authority, incurred an excommunication reserved to the Holy See. That was a penalty, and it was automatic. When the new Code was promulgated in 1983, that canon was not repeated. Canon 1374 speaks of a person who joins an association which plots against the Church, and it provides a just penalty, not the old automatic excommunication. Freemasonry is not named.

People concluded, quite reasonably, that the prohibition had been dropped. The Holy See said they had concluded wrongly. On 26 November 1983, the day before the new Code came into force, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a declaration. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger signed it. Pope John Paul II approved it and ordered it published. The omission, it said, was an editorial criterion. Associations were left unnamed when they fell under wider categories. The Church's negative judgement remained unchanged, because the principles had always been considered irreconcilable with her doctrine. Membership remained forbidden. The faithful who enrolled were in a state of grave sin and might not receive Holy Communion.

A year later the same Congregation published a reflection, in L'Osservatore Romano of 23 February 1985, so that nobody would think the declaration had been a short way of keeping an old political quarrel. It said again that the issue was the principles, not the hostility or otherwise of a particular lodge. Only Christ, it said, is the Teacher of Truth.

On 13 November 2023 the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith answered Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete, in the Philippines, who had

asked how to deal with Catholics joining lodges. Cardinal Víctor Fernández signed the note. Pope Francis approved it. Active membership, it said, is forbidden because of the irreconcilability between Catholic doctrine and Freemasonry. Those who are formally and knowingly enrolled, and who have embraced Masonic principles, fall under the 1983 declaration. The same applies to clerics. The note asked for catechesis, not for a new teaching. Nothing in it cancels the prohibition, and nothing in it invents one.

So the position a Catholic has to live with is this. The old automatic excommunication of 1917 was not carried into the 1983 Code in that form. The prohibition was. Grave sin, and the consequence for Holy Communion, were stated again in 1983 and affirmed again in 2023. A priest is not free to offer a private permission. A Catholic is free to come and ask how to return.

A Reflection

An inconvenient answer can be met in two ways. A man can ask what was said, and sit with it, even if it costs him an evening he loves. Or he can look only for the sentence that lets him stay. The second search feels like research. It is a search for permission. Conscience is formed by the first.

A short prayer

Holy Spirit, when a permission would be easier to hear, keep us with the thing that was actually said. Amen.

Chapter 12

The bishop who asked Rome

†

In 2023 the question was not being asked in a library. It was being asked in a diocese. Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete, in the Philippines, wrote to the Holy See because the number of Catholics enrolled in Freemasonry in his diocese was rising. Some were formally members of lodges. A larger number, he said, were sympathisers and associates, personally convinced that there was no opposition between the Catholic Church and the Masonic lodge. He did not settle the matter from his own desk. He asked Rome how a bishop ought to deal with it, doctrinally and pastorally.

That request matters, because it takes the prohibition out of the eighteenth century and puts it in a living diocese. A man can still say that Clement XII was writing about a different world. He cannot say that nobody has asked the question since. A bishop asked it in 2023, and he asked it because his people were joining.

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith answered on 13 November 2023. Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández signed the note. Pope Francis approved it. It is not a long document, and it is not a new teaching. It is an answer to a bishop who had asked for one. The note proposes two approaches, to be taken together by the bishops of the Philippines.

The first is doctrinal. Active membership in Freemasonry by one of the faithful is forbidden, because of the irreconcilability between Catholic doctrine and Freemasonry. The note points back to the Declaration on Masonic Associations of 26 November 1983, and to guidelines the Philippine bishops had already published in 2003. Those who are formally and knowingly enrolled in lodges, and who have embraced Masonic principles, fall under that declaration. The same measures apply to clerics. You have already heard what the declaration said. Enrollment remains

forbidden. The person is in grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion. The 2023 note does not soften that. It says who it applies to: the person who is formally and knowingly a member, and who has embraced the principles. A man who has never joined, but likes the dinners, is not the case the note is deciding. A man who has joined, and knows what he has joined, is.

The second approach is pastoral, and it is the part a parish can easily miss. The Dicastery asked the bishops to give catechesis, in all the parishes, in language people can follow, on the reasons for the irreconcilability. It invited them to consider a public statement. Education is not a softer option than the doctrine. It is how the doctrine reaches the man who joined because his father had joined, or because his friends were there, or because he had seen the charity and had never heard the reason. His lack of teaching does not change the Church's judgement. It does change how a priest should meet him. A man who was never told is not the same pastoral case as a man who heard the reason and stayed. Both still have to leave, if they are to live the sacraments. They are not both spoken to in the same tone.

One limit of the note should be said plainly, because it will be misquoted. The 2023 response is about membership, and about how bishops should teach and accompany Catholics who are involved in Freemasonry. It is not a decree about funerals. It does not mention Canon 1184. It does not say that every Mason is to be refused a Catholic funeral, and it does not say that every Mason is to be given one. A person who tells you that Rome banned Masonic funerals in 2023 is reading a document that is not there. The funeral question is a real one. It is answered, as far as the law answers it, in the canons on Christian burial. We will come to those. They are not this note.

A Reflection

We sometimes think that people in positions of responsibility should know all the answers.

But nobody knows everything. Not even a bishop.

When Bishop Cortes faced a difficult situation in his diocese, he did something very sensible. He asked the Church for guidance.

He could have made his own decision. He could have relied on what he thought was right. Instead, he wanted to be sure that he was giving his people the correct teaching.

There is a lesson here for all of us.

Sometimes we are afraid to ask a question because we think people will see us as weak or ignorant. We would rather pretend that we know the answer.

But asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It shows that we care enough to get things right.

And when it comes to our faith, getting things right matters. We are not expected to know everything about the Catholic Church. But we should be willing to learn, especially when something is difficult or confusing.

Perhaps the next time somebody asks us a question about our faith, the best answer might be a very simple one:

"I don't know, but let me find out."

That is a much better answer than confidently telling somebody something that is wrong.

A short prayer

Holy Spirit, give us the humility to admit when we do not know something, and the wisdom to ask for help. Guide us towards the truth, and help us to share it with kindness. Amen.

Chapter 13

What if my father, husband or friend is a Mason?

†

Then you love a Mason, and the love is not the problem. A wife who has just found an apron in a drawer does not have to conduct a trial in the kitchen. A son does not have to announce his father's lodge at the funeral as if he were correcting the record. The Church has not asked families to become investigators. She has asked her own members not to join, and she has asked those who have joined to come and speak.

You can pray for him. If he is alive, you can tell him, once, without a speech, that you have learned the Church's reason and that you will not be joining him. A second speech is rarely more effective than the first. If he is dead, you can have Masses offered, and you can stop trying to settle the state of his soul from the contents of a cupboard. Particular judgement is not a family competence.

A Masonic funeral is a harder practical question. You may be expected to go, because you loved the man. Going to pray, and to stand with a widow, is not the same as taking an obligation. You do not have to wear a lodge emblem, and you do not have to join in prayers that require you to set the Creed aside. A quiet presence is often the honest thing. If you are unsure about a particular ceremony, ask before the day, not in the car park.

Children notice more than the argument. They notice whether a Catholic house can disagree with a grandfather and still speak of him with affection. That is a better catechesis than a lecture about 1738. The lecture can wait until somebody asks.

If the Mason in your family is a Catholic and is still going to Holy Communion, you are not his confessor. You can say what the Church has said. You cannot manage his conscience from the side of the table. Offer

the conversation. Then leave him the dignity of having it himself.

A Reflection

A disagreement in a family does not sound like a pamphlet. It sounds like one careful sentence at supper, and then the ordinary business of passing the potatoes, because the people still have to eat together.

The sentence can be true and still be the only one you say that evening. Love is sometimes the decision not to spend the whole supper on the point you have already made.

A short prayer

Lord, keep charity in the houses where this question has sat down at the table. Amen.

Chapter 14

What if I am already a Mason?

†

Then come and say so. I would rather hear it in the presbytery than discover it from a letter, and I am not going to make the telling into a spectacle. You may have joined because your father was a member, or because a friend asked, or because nobody in the parish ever mentioned Clement XII. The 2023 note speaks of those who are formally and knowingly enrolled and have embraced the principles. Knowledge and freedom are part of any honest account of guilt. They do not make the membership compatible. They do change the way a priest speaks to the man in front of him.

The way back is ordinary, and it is definite. A Catholic cannot keep the obligation and the sacraments as if they were two memberships. The declaration of 1983 says that those who enroll are in grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion. Returning means resigning the membership the Church has judged irreconcilable, saying so in Confession, and taking the guidance of a priest about the rest. There is no private arrangement in which a bishop has been authorised to call British lodges an exception. There is also no automatic excommunication under the present Code of the kind the 1917 Code attached to canon 2335. Those are different facts. Both of them matter, and neither of them is a permission to stay.

The cost is often the friendships. A man who leaves a lodge may lose the room where he was known. I am not going to call that a small price, because it is not. Baptism already gave you a people. It did not promise that every later people could be kept. If the loss frightens you, say that too. A priest who has only heard the doctrine has not yet heard you.

Bring the practical questions with you. Regalia, a charitable commitment you have already made, a son who is about to join because

you did. These can be sorted without a theory. A promise of money to a hospice can often be kept as a gift, once it is no longer the subscription of a member. A son can be told the truth before he takes an obligation of his own.

If you are a priest reading this and you have joined, the 2023 note says the same measures apply to clerics. Tell your bishop. Do not wait to be found.

A Reflection

It takes more courage to undo a belonging than to defend it. Defence can be done in company. Undoing is often done alone, with a letter, and with the knowledge that some of the men will not understand the letter.

Leaving may be lonely for a while. The Church cannot replace those friendships quickly, and it would be unkind to pretend otherwise. What she can give you, at once, is the sacraments, and the people who were already yours in baptism.

A short prayer

Merciful Father, receive the man who has come back, and do not let the way back be harder than you meant it to be. Amen.

Chapter 15

When a Freemason dies

†

A Catholic man dies. He was baptised, he made his First Communion, he was married in the church. He was also a Mason for thirty years. The family rings the parish and asks for a funeral Mass. Somewhere in the conversation, or in a notice the lodge has already posted, the priest learns of the membership. The family is grieving. The funeral director has a time. The question arrives before anyone is ready for it.

The priest should not answer it in the porch with either a yes or a no. The Church does give her children a funeral. Canon 1176 says that Christ's faithful must be given ecclesiastical funeral rites according to the law. The same law, in Canon 1184, names the cases in which those rites are to be denied, unless the person gave some sign of repentance before death. The two canons belong together. A funeral is the ordinary Christian act. It is not an absolute right that no fact can touch.

Canon 1184 is narrower than people fear, and wider than people hope. It denies ecclesiastical funeral rites, unless there was some sign of repentance, to three groups. Notorious apostates, heretics and schismatics. Those who chose cremation for reasons contrary to the Christian faith. And other manifest sinners, to whom a funeral cannot be granted without public scandal to the faithful. These are not the same case. Membership of a lodge is not, by itself, a certificate that this particular man was a notorious apostate. The Church has not said that every Mason has formally left the faith. What she has said is that the principles are irreconcilable with the faith, and that a Catholic who enrolls is in grave sin. Where that membership was public, and where a Catholic funeral would cause scandal, the third heading of the canon is the one a bishop has to weigh. Scandal here does not mean that somebody on the internet will be cross. It means that the faithful would reasonably take the funeral as the

Church's approval of a belonging she has forbidden.

If there is a doubt, Canon 1184 says the priest is to consult the local Ordinary, and follow his judgement. He is not free to announce the funeral while the doubt is still his alone, and he is not free to refuse it against the Ordinary's decision. Canon 1185 adds that where the funeral rites are denied, any funeral Mass is denied as well. A funeral Mass is one form of the ecclesiastical funeral. It is not a separate kindness that survives the refusal. Other prayer is a different question, and I will come to it.

The older law was more explicit, which is why older Catholic books sound more absolute. Canon 1240 of the 1917 Code denied ecclesiastical burial, unless there had been some sign of repentance, to those notoriously attached to the Masonic sect or to societies of the same kind. The 1983 Code does not name Freemasonry in Canon 1184. A provision of the old Code does not stay in force merely because it once existed. What remains is the present canon, read in the light of a doctrinal judgement the Church has not withdrawn. Public membership, no sign of repentance, and the likelihood of scandal are the facts the present law asks about. They are facts about a person and a place. They are not a slogan.

In August 2026 the question stopped being theoretical. Bruno Battisti D'Amario, an Italian guitarist who had worked for years with Ennio Morricone, died on 5 August at the age of eighty-eight. A funeral had been arranged for 7 August at Santa Maria in Montesanto in Rome, the church known as the Artists' Church. The Grande Oriente d'Italia published a tribute identifying him as a high-ranking Freemason. The priest told the rector, Bishop Antonio Staglianò, who referred the matter to Cardinal Baldassare Reina, Vicar of Rome. The Cardinal consulted the diocese's legal office and refused authorisation for the funeral Mass. Bishop Staglianò said afterwards that the Cardinal had had no choice. The National Catholic Register, on 14 August 2026, reported that a prayer was offered with the family, the priest present without vestments, and that

Masses for the man's soul were not ruled out later. That detail is journalistic. The refusal of the funeral Mass is the Ordinary's decision, as Bishop Staglianò described it to the Italian Catholic press.

The next day, in the diocese of Ventimiglia-San Remo, Bishop Antonio Suetta stopped the funeral of Mario Tarducci, seventy-three, venerable master of a lodge at Bordighera. The funeral had been fixed at the church of San Marco in Camporosso. The bishop learned of the membership only after it had been arranged, from local papers and from public notices that named Tarducci's office in the lodge. He spoke with the parish priest and the family. He cited Canon 1184, and the decision just taken in Rome, and he directed that the ecclesiastical funeral not take place. Later that month he published a short juridical and pastoral guide for his diocese. In it he applied Canon 1184 to a deliberate and public Masonic membership where there had been no sign of repentance, and he said that refusing the funeral was not a judgement on the man's eternal destiny. That guide is his diocese's. It is not a Roman decree for the whole Church.

On 25 August, Archbishop Antoine Hérouard of Dijon presided at the funeral Mass of François Patriat, a French senator, at the collegiate church of Notre-Dame in Semur-en-Auxois. Patriat had died on 19 August, aged eighty-three, after a bicycle accident. His Masonic membership had been reported in the French press for years, and he had not hidden it. President Macron spoke inside the church. Catholics asked, in public, how a funeral had been granted where the membership was already known. I have not found a canonical explanation from the Archbishop in the reports of those days. Criticism in a newspaper is not a finding that he broke the law. The facts of Patriat's repentance, or of any conversation with the diocese, are not ours to invent. The contrast with Rome and Ventimiglia is real. It is not, by itself, a proof that one side abandoned the faith and the other understood it.

Why can two dioceses differ, if the prohibition on joining has not changed? Because a doctrinal judgement and a funeral decision are not the same act. The prohibition on membership is universal. The funeral canons are also universal, and they ask about this person: was the membership notorious, was there a sign of repentance, would the funeral cause scandal here? The Ordinary has to judge the facts he has. He must not use pastoral language as a way of ignoring the canon. He also must not pretend that a newspaper has given him the whole of a man's last week. The Church does not need to change her teaching for a particular funeral to need a careful look. A careful look is not the same thing as permission. The bishop is there to apply the canon to the facts, not to set the canon aside because the family is grieving. Grief is a reason to speak gently. It is not a reason to pretend the canon says something else.

Refusing the funeral does not mean the Church has declared the man in hell. She has no such register. A funeral is the Church's public prayer, in the name of Christ, for one of her children. It is not a canonisation, and it is not a sentence. Granting it does not place him in heaven. Refusing it, where the canon requires the refusal, does not place him in hell. A family can be told that in a sentence. They should be told it. The mercy of God is not administered by the parish diary.

Signs of repentance are the canon's own door. A man may have resigned the lodge. He may have been to Confession. He may have told his wife, or a priest, that he wanted to come back, and died before the letter was written. The law does not publish a checklist. It says "some sign." A priest should look for one, and he should not invent one in order to avoid a difficult telephone call. He should also not refuse to see one because the lodge notice has already been printed.

What, then, does the priest do? He listens. He asks, gently, what the family knows, and whether anything was said at the end. He does not interrogate a widow. He finds out whether the membership was public,

and whether the lodge is proposing its own signs, its own speakers, or its own rite in the church. Catholic funeral liturgy is Catholic worship. Regalia on the coffin, a Masonic ceremony inside the Mass, a lodge address in place of the Word: these are not details for the funeral director to settle. Where the diocese has given guidance, he follows it. Where he is in doubt about Canon 1184, he consults the Ordinary and waits for the judgement. He tells the family that he is asking, and why. He does not announce that their husband has been condemned.

If the funeral rites are refused, the family has not been handed over to silence. The priest can still pray with them, in a way that is not the ecclesiastical funeral the canon has denied. Masses may be offered for the dead where the Church's law allows the offering, and a priest should ask his Ordinary if he is unsure how that applies in the case in front of him. What he must not do is promise a church service, or a blessing of the body, that the Ordinary has not given. Compassion is not a second permission. It is the manner in which the true answer is given, and the decision not to disappear once the answer has been given.

A Reflection

To entrust someone to the mercy of God is to stop rearranging his life until it looks acceptable. A family can love a father and still know that one large choice of his was not compatible with the faith. Prayer does not ask them to pretend that every decision was right. It asks them to leave the judgement with God.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the judge and the mercy. Receive the dead we cannot arrange, and keep us truthful about the life they lived. Amen.

Chapter 16

The questions people are afraid to ask

†

The short answers are gathered later, where you can look one up. This chapter is about the fear that usually arrives with them. A man who has just discovered the prohibition often wants the worst version of it. He wants to know whether he is excommunicated, whether his father was refused heaven, whether the apron in the cupboard has to be burned. The worst version feels more honest, because the discovery has already embarrassed him. It is not more honest. The true weight is already serious enough.

What people are afraid of, more than the canon, is the conversation. A wife does not want to tell her husband that the lodge he loves has been judged incompatible with the faith she shares with him. A son does not want the funeral director to hear a priest hesitate. A man who joined at thirty does not want his friends to think he has turned on them. Those are human fears, and a priest who has only prepared the citation has not yet met them.

The internet makes the fears larger. A search for Freemasonry and the Catholic Church will offer you a conspiracy before it offers you Clement's letter. Satanism, secret governments, forged rituals: none of that is needed for the Church's reason, and none of it should be repeated as if it were the reason. If you have read it, put it down. The declaration of 1983 is enough, and it is public.

There is a quieter fear, and it is the one I hear most often. People are afraid that agreeing with the Church means despising a good man. It does not. You can refuse the lodge and still thank God for the neighbour he was. The later pages will tell you, in short form, what to do about Communion, Confession, a funeral, an inherited apron, and a priest who

once said it was allowed. None of those answers asks you to rewrite the man.

A Reflection

Fear makes people collect penalties. A man who has just discovered the prohibition often wants the worst version, as if the worst version were the honest one. The honest one is already serious enough.

An excommunication the present law does not impose should not be added to make the conversation feel weighty. Truth is calmer than that, and it is kinder to the person who has come to ask.

A short prayer

Lord, give us the true weight of things, and take away the weights we have added. Amen.

Chapter 17

The freedom of belonging to Christ

†

A Catholic has already been initiated. Baptism was not a club. It was a death and a resurrection, done once, in the name of the Trinity. Confirmation sealed it. The Eucharist feeds it. These are not opinions he has agreed to leave at the door of a second room. They are the form of his life. A man who understands that will see why a further initiation, on a ground where the Trinity cannot be named without disturbing the room, is not a hobby alongside the faith. It is a second belonging, and the Church has said he cannot hold both.

This is not a grim conclusion, though it will cost some men their evenings. The faith is already a brotherhood. It already has signs that the world does not read. It already binds you to the poor, and it already gives you a people in the pews who are not of your choosing. You do not need a lodge in order to have brothers. You may need courage in order to admit that the brothers you have are enough, and that Christ is not one teacher among the teachers the lodge has agreed not to compare.

Peter tells the Church to be ready to give a reason for her hope, with gentleness and respect. That sentence has governed this book, or it has tried to. A Freemason who reads it should be able to recognise his lodge. A Catholic who reads it should be able to see why he cannot join, without being told that his grandfather is in hell. Gentleness without the reason is only embarrassment. The reason without gentleness is a tract. A parish priest is supposed to manage both, in the porch, after Mass.

If you are the man who stayed behind, you have heard the reason. You are free to go home and think. You are also free to come back and say that you joined twenty years ago, and that you do not yet know how to resign. Either conversation is a Christian one. The Church has not asked you to

win an argument with your friends. She has asked you not to put your baptism under a quieter name.

A Reflection

Belonging to Christ is not a mood. It is a mark you did not give yourself, and cannot quite take off. Other belongings can be put away. Baptism cannot. The mark is not a badge a man can take off when he joins another society.

A man can be grateful for every friend the lodge gave him and still decide that the mark comes first. Gratitude and departure are allowed in the same life.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you have called us by your own name. Let that be the belonging we do not trade. Amen.

The questions people actually ask

†

"Can a Catholic Freemason receive a Catholic funeral?" Not automatically, and not never. Canon 1176 gives the faithful a funeral according to the law. Canon 1184 withholds it, unless there was some sign of repentance, from notorious apostates, heretics and schismatics, from those who chose cremation against the Christian faith, and from other manifest sinners if the funeral cannot be granted without public scandal. Public Masonic membership is weighed under that last heading. The Ordinary judges the facts.

"Does the Church automatically refuse funeral rites to every Mason?" No. The 1983 Code does not name Freemasonry in the funeral canons. A private membership, unknown to the parish, is not the same case as a public office in a lodge. Scandal, notoriety and repentance have to be looked at. Doubt is referred to the bishop.

"What does Canon 1184 say?" It lists those to whom an ecclesiastical funeral is to be denied unless they gave some sign of repentance before death. If there is a doubt, the Ordinary is consulted, and his judgement is followed.

"What did the 1917 Code say, and what changed?" Canon 1240 of the 1917 Code named the Masonic sect among those denied ecclesiastical burial, unless they had given a sign of repentance. The 1983 Code does not repeat that sentence. The old canon is not still in force. The present canon is read alongside the Church's continuing judgement on Masonic membership.

"What if he gave some sign of repentance?" The canon itself says the denial does not apply where there was some sign of repentance before death. Resignation, Confession, a word to a priest or to his wife that he wanted to return: the law does not publish a list. A sign is enough. It

should be real.

"What if the family only discovers the membership after the death?" Then the priest has to learn what can still be learned, without turning the house into an inquiry. If a doubt remains about Canon 1184, he asks the Ordinary.

"What if he still came to Mass?" Attendance does not erase a public membership the Church has called grave sin. It may be part of the picture of his life. It is not, by itself, the sign of repentance the canon asks for, and it is not a reason to skip the Ordinary when there is a doubt.

"Can Masonic regalia be put on the coffin in a Catholic church?" Catholic funeral liturgy is Catholic worship. A lodge apron or jewel on the coffin says something the funeral should not say. Where a diocese has given a rule, follow it. Do not leave the decision to the funeral director.

"Can a Masonic ceremony take place during the funeral Mass?" No. The Mass is not a shared rite with another society. A reading, an address, or a sign that belongs to the lodge does not belong in the Catholic funeral.

"Can the priest still pray if the funeral has been refused?" He can pray. He must not pretend that a private prayer is the ecclesiastical funeral the canon has denied, and he should ask the Ordinary if he is unsure what may still be offered.

"Who decides, if the law's application is doubtful?" The local Ordinary. Canon 1184 says so. The priest consults him and follows what he decides.

"Does a refused funeral mean he has gone to hell?" No. The Church is not declaring a sentence. A funeral granted is not a declaration of heaven either. Both are acts of the Church. Neither is the particular judgement.

"What happened in the Philippines in 2023?" Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete asked the Holy See how to deal with Catholics joining lodges.

On 13 November 2023 the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, with Pope Francis's approval, reaffirmed the prohibition and asked for catechesis. It did not issue a funeral decree.

"Why did the Vatican reaffirm the prohibition?" Because the principles remain irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine, and because Catholics were joining in the belief that the question had gone away. The note points back to the declaration of 1983. It does not invent a new ban.

"What happened in Italy and France in August 2026?" In Rome, Cardinal Baldassare Reina refused a funeral Mass for Bruno Battisti D'Amario after the Grande Oriente d'Italia identified him as a high-ranking Freemason. In Ventimiglia-San Remo, Bishop Antonio Suetta cancelled the funeral of Mario Tarducci, a lodge master, citing Canon 1184. In Dijon, Archbishop Antoine Hérouard presided at the funeral of Senator François Patriat, whose Masonic membership had been public for years. These are reported cases. They are not identical, and press criticism is not a canonical sentence.

"Can a Catholic join the Freemasons?" No. Active membership is forbidden, because the Church judges the principles irreconcilable with the Catholic faith. The prohibition was restated in 1983 and again in 2023.

"Does that include English and Welsh lodges?" Yes. The Holy See has not exempted lodges that are polite, charitable, or uninvolved in politics. Local clergy cannot grant an exemption.

"What if I joined without knowing?" Leave, and bring the matter to Confession, including what you did and did not know. Ignorance affects guilt. It does not make the membership something a Catholic may keep.

"Am I excommunicated?" Not automatically, under the 1983 Code. The old automatic excommunication of canon 2335 was not carried over.

What the 1983 declaration does say is that enrollment is grave sin and bars a person from Holy Communion.

"Can I receive Communion?" Not while you remain formally and knowingly a member and hold to the principles. Be reconciled first.

"Can I go to Confession?" Yes. Come with the intention of resigning. Absolution is not given to a person who means to continue in the thing he is confessing.

"Must I resign?" Yes, if you are to return to the sacraments. The two belongings are not compatible.

"What if my father was a Mason?" Pray for him. Do not appoint yourself the judge of his soul. You are not obliged to join because he did.

"May I go to his Masonic funeral?" You may go to pray and to stand with the family. You need not join a rite that sets the Creed aside.

"Can he have a Catholic funeral?" If he was a Catholic, the pastor judges according to the canons, including the question of public scandal. It is not automatic in either direction. Ask the priest who will have to bury him.

"Are the Knights of Columbus the same thing?" No. They are a Catholic fraternal order, founded by Father Michael McGivney. Charity and a dinner do not make a society Masonic.

"What if a priest said I could join?" He could not set aside the declaration of the Holy See. Come and have it put right.

"What do I do with an apron I inherited?" You need not destroy it. Do not wear it, and do not treat it as a reason to join. Pray for the man who wore it.

"What if he was a good man?" Then thank God for the good, and do not ask the good to answer a different question. Kindness is real. It is not a certificate of compatibility.

Father, what do I do now?

†

If you are thinking of joining, do not join. Read the Church's reason first, and talk to a priest before a friend talks you into an evening you cannot easily leave.

If you have already joined, make an appointment. Say plainly that you are a Mason and that you want to know how to return to the sacraments. You will not be the first man to say it.

Resign the membership. Keep a note of the resignation. If a charitable pledge can be honoured as a personal gift, honour it. The gift is not the problem. The obligation is.

Bring the matter to Confession. Say how you joined, what you understood, and what you have now done. The priest will help you with the rest. He cannot absolve a plan to remain.

Stay away from Holy Communion until you have been reconciled. That absence is part of telling the truth, not a humiliation arranged for its own sake.

If you are afraid of losing friends, say so. The fear is not a doctrinal point. It is the actual cost, and a priest should hear it.

If a relative has died a Mason, arrange a Mass for him and let the pastor advise you about the funeral. Do not settle his soul in the car on the way home.

If you are asked to explain this to a Mason who will never agree, explain it once, with the reason, and without a catalogue of rumours. Peter asked for gentleness. He did not ask for silence.

A last word

†

If you have read this far, you have the reason. The Church is not asking you to despise a grandfather, or to pretend a hospice was not a hospice. She is asking you not to take a second initiation, on a ground where the Creed has to be left outside.

A Catholic has already been given a name, at the font. That belonging is enough. It is also the one he is not free to put in second place. If you are still unsure what to do with an apron, or an invitation, or a conversation you have been avoiding, the short answers are in the pages before this one. The reason, at the length it needs, is the book you have just read.

If you are the Freemason reading this

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You may have opened this because a Catholic wife, or a son, left it where you would find it. You are entitled to a description you recognise. English Freemasonry says it is not a religion, that it requires belief in a Supreme Being, that it has no God of its own, and that it does not discuss doctrine in lodge. This book has tried to say that in your own words, before it says why the Catholic Church still cannot send her members through your door.

The disagreement is not about your character, and it is not about the hospice. It is about whether a Catholic, who has already confessed the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, can take an obligation and share a prayer on a ground where that confession has to be set aside. You may think he can. The Church thinks he cannot. A fair argument can survive that difference.

If you are also a Catholic, the door back is an ordinary one. Resign, come to Confession, and speak to a priest. Nobody in these pages is enjoying the cost of that. The cost is real. So is the font you were carried to before any lodge knew your name.

If you are not a Catholic, this book was not written to recruit you by fright. It was written so that a Catholic could tell you the truth without inventing a conspiracy to make the truth louder. You are free to disagree. He is not free to join you.

Sources and Further Reading

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The notes below are the documents a priest, a historian, or a Mason could check. They are not a reading list for a quarrel.

Catholic teaching

Clement XII, In eminenti apostolatus specula, 28 April 1738. Benedict XIV, Providas Romanorum, 18 March 1751. Leo XIII, Humanum genus, 20 April 1884; also Custodi di quella fede, 8 December 1892. Code of Canon Law (1917), canon 2335. Code of Canon Law (1983), canons 1374 and 1184. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Masonic Associations, 26 November 1983 (AAS 76 [1984] 300), signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and approved by John Paul II. Reflections on the irreconcilability of Christian faith and Freemasonry, L'Osservatore Romano, 23 February 1985. Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, note of 13 November 2023, signed by Cardinal Víctor Fernández and approved by Pope Francis, in answer to Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 839–848, 2104–2109, 2142–2155. Dignitatis humanae. Dominus Iesus (2000).

Scripture

Matthew 5:33–37. Matthew 6:24, used here with care. John 14:6. Acts 4:12. Romans 14. 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, in its own context of idol sacrifice. 2 Corinthians 6:14–18, not as a verse about lodges. Ephesians 4:4–6. 1 Peter 3:15. Quotations in this book are paraphrases, not a printed translation.

Freemasonry in its own words

James Anderson, The Constitutions of the Free-Masons, 1723, Charge I, on the religion in which all men agree. The traditional account of the Grand Lodge of 24 June 1717, given by Anderson in 1738. United Grand Lodge of England, statement on Freemasonry and religion, first approved in 1962, reaffirmed in 1981, and amplified in the 1980s: not a religion; belief in a Supreme Being required; no Masonic God; Volume of the Sacred Law; obligations; religion and politics not discussed in lodge. The Grand Orient of France removed the requirement of belief in a Supreme Being in 1877. English Freemasonry did not follow that decision.

Funerals and the 2023 note

Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, note of 13 November 2023, The Request of Bishop Julito Cortes of Dumaguete regarding membership in Freemasonry, signed by

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández and approved by Pope Francis. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Masonic Associations, 26 November 1983. Code of Canon Law (1983), canons 1176, 1184 and 1185. Code of Canon Law (1917), canon 1240, which named the Masonic sect among those denied ecclesiastical burial unless they had given a sign of repentance. The 1983 Code does not repeat that clause. August 2026: Edward Pentin, National Catholic Register, 14 August 2026, on Cardinal Baldassare Reina's refusal of a funeral Mass for Bruno Battisti D'Amario; la Repubblica, 8 August 2026, and the diocese's own reported statement, on Bishop Antonio Suetta's decision concerning Mario Tarducci, citing Canon 1184. The bishop's later juridical-pastoral note is known from Catholic news reports, not from a text I have read. Archbishop Antoine Hérouard's funeral for François Patriat at Semur-en-Auxois on 25 August 2026 is reported by the National Catholic Register, 27 August 2026. Comment on that Mass is not treated as a canonical judgement.

Older Christian examples

St Justin Martyr, First Apology, addressed to the emperor around 155: Christians pay taxes and pray for rulers, and will not sacrifice to the gods. St Thomas More refused the oath attached to the Act of Succession in 1534; William Roper's Life of Sir Thomas More records his courtesy to those who took it. Neither man was speaking of Freemasonry, which in More's lifetime had not yet taken its modern form. They are cited only for the distinction between love of persons and an oath a Christian cannot take.

A distinction

The Knights of Columbus were founded in 1882 by Father Michael J. McGivney. They are a Catholic fraternal order, not a Masonic obedience.

The next man who asks

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You may be holding this because of a grandfather, or because someone has asked you to join, or because a funeral became difficult at the last moment. Another person will have the same question before long. He will want a reason, not a rumour.

This little book is free to read. It was not free to make. The papal letters had to be found and read in their own words. The English lodge's account had to be read as well, so that a Mason would recognise the description. The 2023 note had to be kept apart from the funeral canons, because a family in grief does not need a prohibition Rome did not write. Checking that, writing it in ordinary sentences, and preparing it for print takes time, and it costs money.

I want these little books to stay within reach, including for someone who cannot pay for one. If this has helped you, and you are able to support the work through the website, that support is what lets me research the next question and leave the answer where it can be found. It is a gift towards the work. It is not a payment for this copy, and it does not buy anything from God.

If you cannot give, pass the booklet on. The man who has just been invited, or the daughter who has just found the apron, may need it more than a contribution would. Either way, nothing is owed.

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A note for the priest who is asked

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If a man tells you he is a Mason, do not begin with the penalty. Begin with the question he has actually brought. He may be afraid he is excommunicated. He is not, under the present Code. He may be afraid you will despise his friends. Hear the friendships before you describe the resignation.

Then say the definite thing. Membership remains forbidden. The declaration of 26 November 1983 still governs Holy Communion. The note of 13 November 2023 has not opened a local exception. Absolution belongs with the intention to resign. You cannot offer him a permission the Holy See has said you do not have.

After that, help him with the letter, the regalia, the hospice pledge, and the son who was about to join. The teaching can be said quite briefly. What takes the time is the letter he has to write, the friends he is afraid of losing, and the practical things that follow.

If the question is a funeral, do not decide it in the porch. Canon 1184 sends a doubt to the Ordinary. Follow what he decides, and tell the family that a decision about rites is not a decision about the man's soul.