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18th Century; the Beginning of a Conflicting  
Relationship Marked by Misunderstandings,  
Conspiracy Theories and Campaigns of Defamation**

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**The Freemasons and the Roman Catholic Church in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century; the Beginning of a Conflicting Relationship Marked by Misunderstandings, Conspiracy Theories and Campaigns of Defamation**

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**Abstract**

“... *Condemnatio Societatis, seu conventicularum vulgo De liberi muratori, aut Des franc masons, sub poena excommunicationis ipso facto incurrenda, eius absolutione, excepto mortis articulo, summon Pontifici reservata ...*” With these words Pope Clement XII condemned the Freemason in the papal bull “*In eminenti apostolatus specula*” of 28<sup>th</sup> April 1738. He threatened anyone belonging to this association with excommunication regardless of their social ranking. Despite this the freemasons enjoyed a large increase of their numbers through enlightened thinkers, including even the clergy. 21 years after the foundation of the Great Lodge in London in 1717 and the declared beliefs to the “Old Charges”, formulated by Andersson, the misunderstandings had become insurmountable. From the very beginning the Freemasons were challenged with conspiracy theories and defamation campaigns. Direct, ubiquitous attacks, hundreds died after painful questioning by the Inquisition. Tolerance and human understanding – above all the latter concept – should have had some meaning in the Christian conscience, and a society which set its goals towards attaining these concepts should surely be spiritually supported. Did not Christian charity mean love one’s neighbour, whether friend or foe, to forgive one another and to support one another in times of difficulty? Freemasonry was never conceived as a religion. It never stood to oppose the Christian community, on the contrary the Freemason alliance obliged all its members to attend church regularly; as for example, written down in the Draskovich Observance, a freemason document from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Croatia. However the point about its secretiveness caused an uproar and opposition and led to huge suspicions about them. In the following 250 years the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards the Freemasons never changed. Only in the last few years after the Lichtenauer Manifesto has the wall begun to crumble.

**Keywords:** Stonemasons, guilds, Roman Catholic Church, suspicion, papal bull.

## Introduction

When representatives of four lodges met at the “Goose and Gridiron”, a simple tavern in London, on June 24, 1717 (St. John the Baptists’ Day), no one imagined what a success the outcome of this meeting would be, and how this success would permeate throughout eighteenth century Europe.

This tavern was located in St. Paul’s Church Yard. At first those who joined here were simple people, bourgeois tradesmen and mostly craftsmen of the building profession. They wanted to let the old traditions live on in social gatherings.

There have always been meetings and secret codes of the individual craft trades, the medieval stonemasons in their Crafts Guilds, f. e. „Gild of Masons“, 1380, in Lincoln is an example of this. In this document the craftsmen are referred to as „caemenatarii“, and this fraternity „Company of Freemasons“, was applied to „fratres et sorores“ (brothers and sisters). The reason for the establishment of the fraternity was a religious one in a Christian sense. The duties were stipulated precisely as: reading masses on certain days, care of sick and poor, support of the pilgrims, donation activity, so-called light donations in the form of wax. Each member was guaranteed a decent burial and the reading of masses for the soul. Failure to comply with the orders resulted in penalties.

Similar associations with their own laws existed in Strasbourg (1459, 1563) or Torgau (1462), or Lansdowne Manuscript Orders of 1599, the Lodge of Kilwinning. Brotherhoods, guilds, and assembly of the estates were based on Christian customs and practices and were anchored in the liturgical year. Various brotherhoods and sisterhoods were already firmly integrated into society in pre-Christian times. They were, economically and politically aligned. Depending on the common interest, there were various types of brotherhoods and sisterhoods, operating as cult-religious associations for common religious or charitable tasks.

Regulations of stonemasons were known in England since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, e. g. „Lord Warden General of the Masons“, (Scotland 1598/99). In Scotland the meetings were called lodges. Lodge means shelter. Stonemasons and masons needed a shelter on the place where they worked to take their breaks. Among these workers were two ranks: the entered apprentice and the fellow crafts (masters). There were special initiation rites, words, and recognition codes.

In 1376, Edward III approved the „Fellowship of Prescription“, a voluntary association. It was equal to various unions or city guilds, but had no charter from the king. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century this „Fellowship“ changed its name into the „Society of Freemasons“. Over time, this association developed to include more and more people who did not belong to stonemasons, people such nobles, clergymen and sons of existing members (so-called „patrimonism“). All were accepted, therefore – accepted freemasons. Often they were accepted for social reasons, it was a matter of honor to be included in this union. For these people the term used was: speculatives, or spiritual or symbol masons, but these „adopted” masons did not call themselves that. Later these terms were integrated into the language of Freemasonry. Nothing mysterious was seen in these fraternities. It is erroneous to

assume that these associations were for any higher spiritual purpose, religious, philosophical or esoteric.<sup>1</sup>

The word „mystery“ in ancient records has nothing to do with a „mystery“ as we understand today, but goes back to the late Latin word „misterium =ministerium“ which means household post<sup>2</sup>, as in the French language „métier“. In Old English we find „mistere“. Misteries therefore were officially recognized guild organizations.

To the outsider these societies practised strange-looking customs or secret signs etc., but they were known to the public, they did not appear as secret societies. Randle Holme said, „I can not but honor the Fellowship of the Masons because of its antiquity, and the more, as being a member of the Free Masons.“ (The academy of armory, 1688)<sup>3</sup>. Meetings were sometimes held in the guild halls of the Free Masons, but over the years they gravitated to the taverns, which slowly led to a decline of the original noble idea. James Anderson (1678-1740) later blamed the English architect Sir Christopher Wren for the decline in maintaining the old traditions by allowing his masons to wander off to the taverns for their meetings instead of providing them with the necessary lodge or shelter. It was decided in 1716 to create a leading organization and hence the Grand Lodge was created and built. It was called „Grand Lodge of London and Westminster“.

### **The New Idea Spreads Rapidly**

On June 24, 1717, its first master (Grand Master) Anthoy Sayer, a gentleman, was elected together with two wardens, Jacob Lamball (a carpenter) and Captain Joseph Elliot. In 1719 Dr. Desagulier took the position of Grand Master followed in 1721 by the Duke of Montague. At this point, the new chapter of Freemasonry in England began – the English aristocracy showed great interest in this society. In 1722 the Duke of Wharton was elected Grand Master. From 1721 the Grand Masters were appointed exclusively from the high nobility in England.

As early as 1718, the old „Gothic Constitutions“ were redesigned and adapted in order to formulate suitable laws for the new lodge. Reverend Dr. James Anderson (Minister of a Presbyterian Chapel at Swallow Street, Piccaldilly, until 1734) was entrusted with this task and presented the manuscript „The Constitution, History, Laws, Charges, Orders, Regulations and Usages of the Right Worshipful Fraternity of Accepted Free Masons from their general Records and their faithful Traditions of many Ages.“ on January 17, 1723. This script was dedicated to the Duke of Montague and, from 1723, formed the basis known as

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<sup>1</sup>A collection of ancient Masonic Constitutions: Hughan William James (1872). *The Old Charges of British Freemasons*. London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., Stationers' Hall Court.

<sup>2</sup>Lennhoff Eugen, Posner Oskar (1932): *Internationales Freimaurerlexikon*. München, Zürich, Wien: Amalthea Verlag.

Niermeyer J. F., Kieft van de C. (2002) *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus, M-Z*. Leiden: Wissenschaftl. Buchgesellschaft: p. 908: 1) mysterium ... hidden thing ... 2) misterium=ministerium. p: 895: ministerium, misterium ... household post ...; p: 892: ministeriales -1) ... serving in his master's household ... 12) artisan ... – craftsmen belonging to a craft guild.

<sup>3</sup>Holme Randle. *The academy of armory, or, A storehouse of armory and blazon containing the several variety of created beings...* Chester: Printed for the author, 1688.

„Old Charges“. Despite some burgeoning criticism, it was decided in the spirit of the masons, turning away from dogma, the will to leave the divide aside and to accept the longing for friendliness, work and contemplation as the basis, because the „building material was no longer the wood, the stone, not ore not mortar, but life and soul.“ (According to Horneffer, *Der Bund der Freimaurer*, 1913). In the first years of existence the grades were also determined.

With these rules Anderson set a different religious focus for the Brotherhood, moving away from a specific, Christian orientation. He paved the way for a modern, universal concept of a universal God, „*the architect of the world*“s, using familiar symbolism of architectural writings. Tolerance played a major role. Atheists were denied entry into the brotherhood: „*All Masons shall work honestly on working Days, that they may live creditably on holy Days; ...*“

However, the story Anderson gave for the origin of Freemasonry, that its origins can be traced back to the stories of Noah and Moses is pure fantasy. Also his description of Master Hiram Abiff, the builder of Solomon’s temple, as an historical person who proclaimed the masonic doctrine is also the result of his very fervid imagination.

The new focus for the brotherhood soon led to a counter-movement in England. Politically, some Freemasons had a strong connection with Scotland and could pose a threat to the English monarchy. There was evidence in France that supporters of the Catholic Stuarts campaigned for their reinstatement on the English throne. The Grand Lodge of England, however, tried to take an impartial attitude.

Freemasonry’s success soon spread across the continent, and widened rapidly in the following years. It is believed that lodges existed in Tuscany in the early 1730s. English noblemen loved traveling to Tuscany, it is known that the Earl of Middlesex, Charles Sackville, belonged to a lodge in Florence in 1733. In 1735 the first lodge in Rome was established, but its existence was short lived.

### **The Cause of Suspicion**

On June 25 1737, a conference was convened by the heads of the three papal chancelleries Ottoboni, Spinola and Zandadori, under the chairmanship of the inquisitor, at the instigation of the Sacra Congregatione Inquisitionis. Whether Pope Clement XII also participated is not sure. The edition of the *Vossische Zeitung*, No. 85 reports from Lombardy on June 30, 1737:

*„... the sacred office of that inquisition, in which the founding society of Freemasons had been denounced ... had judged that among them a secret Molinism and Quietism must be hidden ...“*

An old issue was raised again! Molinism was understood as bringing human freedom into harmony with divine grace and providence. This theory goes back to the Spanish Jesuit Luis Molina (1535-1600, *Concordia liberi arbitrii*), which repeatedly flared up in numerous theological works, but was left open by the Catholic Church and the popes (*de auxiliis*).

Quietism, described by the Catholic Church as heresy, is a form of Christian mysticism, theology and asceticism. Man must give up his ego completely and surrender to God in order to live in perfect peace and equanimity afterwards. This state was achieved through inner prayer, all external actions became unnecessary. Quietists rejected an oral prayer and the reception of the sacraments, which meant rejection of all external forms. Pure virtue striving against evil stood in the foreground. After various interpretations of the doctrine Pope Innocent XII rejected it and declared this movement a heresy in 1699.

In 1737 there was a ban on Freemasonry in Tuscany by the Grand Duke Gaston Medici. When the papal curia received news that there was a lodge in Livorno where Catholics, Protestants and Jews came together, they suspected a cell of unbelievers and people were arrested. However, legal proceedings later were abandoned.

On April 28 1738, Pope Clement XII issued the papal bull „In eminenti apostolatus specula“, banning Catholics from participating in Masonic gatherings and punishing them with excommunication. That was throwing down a challenge:... *Condemnatio Societatis, seu conventicularum vulgo De liberi muratori, aut Des franc masons, sub poena excommunicationis ipso facto incurrenda, eius absolute, excepto mortis articulo, summon pontifici reservata ...*

The Pope was convinced that this union would arouse so much suspicion among the faithful, that a righteous and intelligent person would not be able to join these societies without being tainted with „the stain of perversion and evil“.

Despite the ban, the bull had little effect in Italy, France, Germany and the rest of Europe, and lodges began to appear everywhere. In the Habsburg lands it had no effect whatsoever. In 1731 Emperor Franz Stephan v. Lorraine was already initiated into Freemasonry in The Hague and there is proof that he visited lodges in London.

One exception was the case of Tommaso Crudello, who was denounced in 1739, pursued by the Inquisition for heresy, tortured and died as a result of the torture. With the appearance of various secret societies, for example, the „Carbonari“ in Italy, all sorts of „secret alliances“ were prohibited and persecuted. Crudello was not the only one tortured, many Freemasons later died under torture.

The Catholic Church feared the loss of its power and influence and believed the universal sovereignty of the Pope was being endangered. The pope saw himself as the supreme guardian of the Catholic faith, and he believed Freemasonry threatened this position. Freemasonry drew together different philosophies of life, of the most diverse kind, as well as different social classes. Above all, the meeting of different religions denominations endangered, in his eyes, the purity of the Catholic faith. The recent religious wars, the spread of Protestantism, political instability in Europe and various new doctrines had also struck deep wounds and weakened the Holy Chair in Rome. A unification of religion seemed to be on the rise, as Anderson put it in the Old Charges in the first major piece, „Of God and Religion“:

*A Mason is oblig'd by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist nor an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country*

*to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be good Men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd; whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance.*

What an affront to the supreme guardian of the Catholic faith, the Curia, and an attack on the Catholic Church! A leveling of the faith...unthinkable, vehement action must be taken!

The points about tolerance, humanity, and charity in the Christian sense were ignored. Tolerance and human understanding - above all human understanding - should have had some meaning in the Christian conscience, and a society which sets its goals towards attaining these concepts should certainly be spiritually supported. Did not Christian charity mean love one's neighbour, whether friend or foe, to forgive one another and to support one another in times of difficulty? Support, humanity, tolerance are main aspects in Freemasonry. Does the word "catholicus" not stand for common, universally applicable in its original form? Recognizing one's own weakness and failings, working on these human lack of resistance and in the end experiencing forgiveness, it is a goal for all human beings. Freemasonry uses this principle in a transferring sense and in its own symbols.

Another affront which dated back much further and which seriously rankled Rome was its turbulent history with the English monarchy. In the earlier centuries the Catholic Church had been rich and powerful on the British Isles. The English monarchy's break with the Catholic Church in 1533, when the Pope refused to annul the marriage of Henry VIII, changed the situation fundamentally. The pope was allied to Charles V of Spain, who was a nephew of Catherine of Aragon whom Henry wanted to divorce. Undeterred Henry made himself head of the church in England divorced his first wife using a secular court, and married Anne Boleyn. The pope excommunicated Henry, but from that time on bishops and abbots in England were no longer appointed and consecrated by the pope, but appointed by the king, who could even impose disciplinary punishments and condemn heresies.

In 1559 Elizabeth I made Anglicanism the state religion. During the reign of Elizabeth I, most people turned to Protestantism. For Catholics and anyone associated with Catholicism it was a difficult and precarious time to live in England. Various attempts to reassert Catholicism as state religion in England failed. One such plot was by Guy Fawkes, a Catholic fanatic, who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament whilst King James I was presiding in November 1605; it ended badly for the conspirators. It also had serious consequences for English Catholics: England's largest minority was henceforth under the suspicion of treason. A century of turbulence followed, finally resulting in the Act of Settlement, 1701, which governed and guaranteed Protestant succession. Those who confess to „papal religion or marry a papist ...“ are excluded of the Succession.



Hence Rome felt increasingly threatened by the the influence of English lodges spreading across Europe weaving what they believed to be religious and political influence. In 1722/23 the Atterbury coup (A Jacobite attempt to restore the Stuarts to the throne of England using French, Spanish and Papal support) was crushed.

It should not be forgotten that the universal sovereignty of the papacy - „Dictatus Papae“ - from 1075 was an important turning point in the history of Catholicism. Pope Gregory VII claimed not only universal sovereignty over the Church, but also over secular rulers, emperors and kings. In the 14th century, Boniface VIII clearly stated that „for any human creature for its salvation, it is necessary to be subject to the Pope.“

There was also the major problem of Martin Luther! The court theologian Silvester Prierias formulated in the document which built the basis for the trial of Martin Luther in 1518: „A Heretic is, who denies, that even the Holy Scripture has power and authority only, because of the infallible teaching of the Roman bishop.“ With this sentence the Papacy asserted its authority above that of the scriptures, and set the seeds for the development (especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) of the dogma of the Infallibility of the Pope (Infallibilitas). It was not until 1870 at the First Vatican Council under Pope Pius IX, that this dogma was established whereby the pope proclaims in his office the answers to questions of faith or morality as final as a „teacher of all Christians“ (ex cathedra).

For some Catholics it was precarious to continue living in their ancestral lands when Protestantism prevailed. France slowly moved in the direction of secularism. Through this dogma, Catholics hoped for support and protection against discrimination. Rome was certain it had a protector in the form of the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation (where the Habsburgs undoubtedly saw themselves) and in the countries where Catholicism remained the state religion.

Doubts about the infallibility of the pope and the political action of Rome arose amongst many churchmen. We know that there were churchmen among the Freemasons, one such as Philip Gotthart Count Schaffgotsch (1716-1796), Prince-Bishop of Wroclaw and member of the Lodge „To the Three Skeletons“, was ordered to Rome to renounce freemasonry, he returned and – continued his work as a Mason. After the dissolution of the Jesuit order, a number of former members sought a home in the Freemasonry, as member lists still existing prove. Religious practise was a must in Freemasonry. This point was explicitly stated for example in the so-called Draskovich Observance, a Masonic document in Croatia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In its lists membership of religion was mentioned.

The rapid spread of Masonic thought frightened the men in the Vatican. A second papal bull followed on May 18, 1751, issued by Pope Benedict XIV: "Providas Romanorum Pontificium." The first paragraph states:

*§. 1. Sane felicitis recordationis Praedecessor Noster Clemens Papa XII. per suas Apostolicas Literas Anno Incarnationis Dominicae MDCCXXXVIII. IV. Kalend. Maji Pontificatus sui anno VIII. datas, et universis Christifidelibus inscriptas, quarum initium est: In eminenti; nonnullas Societates, Coetus Conventus, Collectiones, Conventicula, seu Aggregationes, vulgo de' Liberi Muratori, seu des Francs Macons, vel aliter nuncupatas, in quibusdam Regionibus tunc late*

*diffusas, atque in dies invalescentes, perpetuo damnavit, atque prohibuit, praecipiens, omnibus, et singulis Christifidelibus, sub poena excommunicationis ipso facto absque ulla declaratione incurrenda, a qua nemo per alium, quam per Romanum Pontificem pro tempore existentem, excepto mortis articulo, absolvi posset, ne quis auderet vel praesumere hujusmodi Societates inire, vel propagare, aut confovere, receptare, occultare, iisque adscribi, aggregari, aut interesse, et alias prout in eisdem Literis latius, et uberius continetur, quarum tenor talis est ...*

The Age of Enlightenment developed ideas that involved a reordering of church and state. State churches, as some enlightened thinkers prophesied, were doomed in their special form. The dispute with political as well as religious topics found supporters in all social classes. The spread of these ideas took place through salons, academies and also through Masonic lodges. One has to keep in mind that many Masons participated in the political process.

Various conspiracy theories arose again and again, implying a world domination of Freemasons, and causing an intensifying of persecution. It should also be mentioned that Jews and Jesuits fell under this suspicion. What made the Brotherhood extremely suspect was its secrecy. Conversations that were conducted during the lodge work, different rituals, or the oath, were not made public. It was important for members to be discrete, which confirmed the suspicions. The society was seen as the breeding ground for conspiracy. State regulations against Masons were issued repeatedly.

In the 19th century, other papal measures were taken against the Masons: Pius VII. 1814, opening words „Sollicitudo omnium“, Leo XII. 1826, opening words „Quo graviora mala“, Gregory XVI. (1831-1846), opening words „Mirari vos“. The attitude of the Catholic Church did not change.

Pius IX. in „Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo“ and Leo XIII. in „Humanum genu“ and other encyclical condemnation of Freemasonry. The punishment of automatic excommunication was incorporated into the Canon 2335 of Canon Law (CIC) in 1917. The Masons were called sect „secta massonica“. It was still a forbidden union that did not agree with the Catholic faith.

### **A New Beginning and Hope?**

However, as Catholics, including leading public figures, as well as clergymen, continued to join this fraternity, the Catholic Church felt it necessary to put this problem on the work list at the Second Vatican Council. But ultimately time elapsed and it was not addressed as other urgent issues had to be dealt with.

Tolerance, declared humanity, freedom of conscience and religion finally won and paved the way for dialogue. A bridge-builder of this desired dialogue was the Austrian cardinal at „Secretariatus pro non credentibus“, Dr. Franz König. His maxim: *„The church must act politically, but it must not politicize. The political friend-enemy relationship is out of question for the church, as in principle the*

*church must be there for all people; its sight must always be so clear that it can see tomorrow's possible ally in today's supposed opponent."*

On 5 July 1970, there was a dialogue in the Austrian town of Lichtenau between representatives of the Catholic Church and Freemasons from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. This Lichtenauer Manifesto fundamentally established the view that clearly stated that Freemasonry should not be understood as a religion, that it obeyed the principle of freedom of conscience, belief, and spiritual belief, and that every brother's commitment was respectful. Freemasonry itself was not a coherent and unified body, but was seen as a union of different historical traditions and trends. The papal bulls were considered outdated, so a canonical condemnation was baseless and inappropriate.

Three years later, conversations between Protestants and Freemasonry followed, known as "Tutzing Talks".

In the revised edition of the 1983 Codex, Freemasonry is no longer mentioned. However, one day before the publication of the new CIC, the Prefect of "Congregatio pro doctrina fidei", Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, issued a statement on the Masonic Associations, which corroborated the punishment of membership of the Masons by excommunication. The statement of the "Congregatio pro doctrina fidei" reads as follows:

*The question was raised as to whether the Church's judgment on Freemasonry has changed due to the fact that the new CIC does not explicitly mention it as the earlier one. This Congregation is able to answer that this fact is based on the same editorial criterion as for other associations, which were also not mentioned, because they are integrated into broader categories. The church's negative verdict on Masonic unions remains unchanged because its principles have always been considered inconsistent with the doctrine of the Church and therefore its accession to them is prohibited. Believers belonging to Masonic associations are thus in a state of grave sin and can not receive Holy Communion. Authorities of the local Church are not entitled to comment on the nature of Masonic unions in a judgment overriding the above, in accordance with the declaration of this Congregation of 17 February 1981 (see AAS 73/1981; Pp. 240-241). Pope John Paul II confirmed this declaration, which was adopted at the ordinary session of this Congregation, in the audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect and ordered its publication.*

*Rome, at the seat of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 26 November 1983.*

*Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER  
Prefect*

On March 11, 1985, the "Congregatio pro doctrina fidei" launched another Incompatibility of Christian faith and Freemasonry and again on March 2007 Gianfranco Girotti, bishop, declared, it is forbidden for every Catholic believer to be a member to Masonic associations.

## Conclusion

Up until now, no other statement of the Roman Catholic Church, from Rome, has been issued. Suspicion between Rome and Freemasons still exists .... An old proverb says: hope is the last thing to die, therefore lets believe in the good in people.

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