

Freemasonry and the Catholic Church

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Kerry Costigan, priest of Toowoomba Diocese, is chaplain of the Freemasonry Ashlar Lodge, Oakey, Queensland. In this article he talks of his experience as a member of the Lodge.

Some months ago, I was the victim of a silent protest. People knew I was a Freemason and distributed copies of the 1884 Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII which condemned Freemasonry in the foyer of the church where I was about to celebrate Mass. These people never had the courtesy to front me, face to face about their complaint.

From my research, Freemasonry as exists in Australia is different from the sectarian and political way some European Lodges act. The blanket condemnation of Freemasonry does not consider that each Grand Lodge is responsible for its own regulations, constitution and way of acting. So Freemasonry must be considered on a national basis. Freemasonry is not a single, united body.

It is interesting to note the religious history of European Freemasonry. Comparing the religious views expressed in the oldest Masonic Constitution of the 14th century with those set forth in the later ones of the 16th century and 17th century and again with those views laid down in the Charge of 1717, we can find a transition which took place in the religious aspect of Freemasonry in England and in some other countries.

At first, Masonry was Roman Catholic in its character and ecclesial domination. After the Reformation, which rejected many of the doctrines and teachings of the Catholic Church and the influence of its priests, Masonry became Protestant in its peculiar views, retaining its Christian character. Please note, I use the word "peculiar" in its correct sense.

With the so called Revival of the 18th Century, Masonry assumed the form it has retained to the present day. It abandoned its sectarian and political character and adopted a cosmopolitan and tolerant rule which required of its members, only a belief in God. Freemasonry is not a single

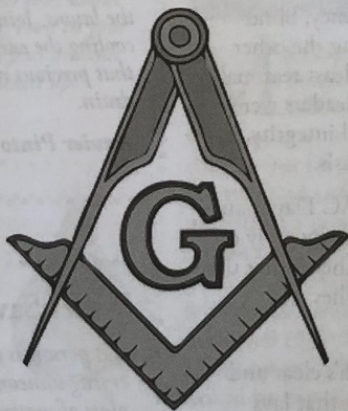
united body. Each Grand Lodge is its own supreme authority. The Grand Lodge is the sole authority over Freemasonry in its own territory.

In 1885, a French journalist Leo Taxil, following the publishing of the Encyclical of Pope Leo, decided to mount a Campaign against Freemasonry. He had previously been a non believer and as such wrote scandalous stories about the Pope. A book he wrote was called *The Secret Lovers of Pope Pius IX*.

Amazingly, he became a Catholic and, as I've said, began a vile and outrageous campaign to discredit Freemasonry, which he identified as a form of devil worship. His misguided views received great publicity in his day; and, dare I say it, sad to say, even today some immature minds are still affected by his views. Later in life, he again had a new lifestyle and thought experience, he repented of his lies and accusations saying they had all been a literary creation. Furthermore, he said he had done it all for the sole purpose of exposing the idiotic gullibility of the Catholic Church and its Popes. He wanted to show intelligent people everywhere how ridiculous the Church was.

The Church reacted with predictable scorn and disgust. Every so often, the Taxil accusations resurface as part of some, ill advised attacks against Freemasonry and the Church.

Upset by the silent protest, I made even further enquiries. In 1984, it appears that the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) initiated an investigation into Australian Freemasonry. The result of that investigation was never published. The probable reason for this was that the investigation found that nothing in Australian Freemasonry was prejudicial to the Catholic Church and its teachings.



This finding runs counter to the official finding of Vatican authorities on what I call European Freemasonry, especially some French and Italian Lodges.

In 2016 as it happened, the Grand Masters of the WA Grand Lodge; the Queensland Grand Lodge and the SA/NT Grand Lodge were Catholics. The Grand-Master of the SA/NT Grand Lodge was moved, with brotherly concern, to make a formal approach to the ACBC about the standing of Catholic men in the Craft. He presented a request that was well researched and full of merit and conviction that the ACBC make some official ruling about the relationship of Freemasonry and Catholicism.

The Secretary of the ACBC asked for a combined affirmation of the request by all the Grand-Masters of all the Grand Lodges of Australia and a statement giving in detail the fundamental ideals and principles of Freemasonry as exists in Australia.

This information was duly presented to the ACBC through its secretary. The reply given in writing on the official letterhead of the ACBC was that any Catholic man may join Freemasonry as exists in Australia as long as his conscience agrees. The reply also asked that membership for Catholics in the Craft was to be carried out discreetly and without publicity. No doubt, this was not publicly to go against the teaching of the Catholic Church about Freemasonry, existing in other countries

This ruling of the ACBC would certainly be appreciated by Catholics who are members of the Craft. Gratitude is expressed to the Bishops of Australia for their open handed, sensitive and pastoral approach to the matter.

It is hoped that before long this approval will be made public. At the moment, the many Catholic men who belong to the Craft here in Australia have been condemned unjustly by the blanket condemnation of all Freemasonry. Good tidings of their very essence, need to be shared and ignorance overcome by information.

Freemasons are not just names, faces and aprons but hearts, spirits and personalities – they, too, are loved by Christ. The brethren I have met over 10 years, have been an inspiration, motivation and example to me. May God prosper in the Craft. ☺