

Il Sole 24 ore February 14th, 2016

The Church & The Lodge

Dear Brethren Masons

Beyond the different identity, common values aren't lacking: as communitarianism, charity, fight against materialism

by Gianfranco Ravasi

On an American review, some time ago, I was reading that the international bibliography on freemasonry exceeds one hundred thousand entries. The atmosphere of secrecy and mystery enveloping the different "freemasonries" and masonic "rites" in a sort of nebula, whether right or wrong, surely contributes to this interest; not talking about the same genesis of freemasonry, which according to the English historian Frances Yates, "is one of the more discussed and disputable problems of all the field of historical research" (strangely, this essay was dedicated to the Enlightenment of Rosicrucianism, translated by Einaudi in 1976). Of course, we do not want to explore this hodgepodge of "lodges", "orients", "arts", "affiliations" and denominations, the history of which, for better or for worse, often intersected with the political one of many nations, (I am thinking, for example, to Uruguay, where I recently attended some different dialogues with representatives of the community and the culture of masonic tradition), in the same way, to trace some demarcation lines among the authentic freemasonry, and the false, the degraded, or the paramasonry, and the several esoteric or theosophical circles, is not possible.

To draw a map of the ideology which contains a so fragmented universe, is also arduous, so that perhaps we can talk about an horizon and a method, more than about a codified doctrinal system. In this fluid setting, we find some rather defined crossroads, like an anthropology based on the freedom of conscience and intellect, and on the equality of rights, and a theism which recognises the existence of God, but leaving undefined the definitions of his identity. Therefore, anthropocentrism and spiritualism are two routes rather well traced on a map that is variable and movable, that we are not able to trace in a meticulous way.

Yet we are satisfied just to inform you about an interesting little book, that has the very circumscribed aim to define the relation between freemasonry and catholic church. Let us understand each other: this book is not an historical analysis of this relation, nor of the eventual contaminations between the two subjects. In fact, it is evident that freemasonry has acquired some Christian even liturgical models. We must not forget, in fact, that in the seventeenth century, many English lodges recruited some members and masters among the Anglican clergy, so much so that one of the first and fundamental masonic "constitution" was compiled by the Presbyterian pastor James Anderson, who died in 1739. It stated, among other, that an adept "will not be a stupid atheist nor an unreligious libertine", also if the proposed credo, in the end, was the most undefined, "the one of a religion all men agree with".

Now, the oscillation of the contacts between Catholic church and freemasonry was characterized by very different movements, coming also to evident hostilities, marked by anti-clericalism, from one side, and excommunications, from the other side. In fact, on the 28th of April, 1738, pope Clemente XII, the Florentine Lorenzo Corsini, promulgated the first explicit document on freemasonry, the apostolic *Letter In eminenti apostolatus specula*, where he stated "the duty to condemn and forbid ... the said Societies, Unions, Meetings, Assemblies, Gatherings or Conventicles of Free Masons and Françs Maçons or whatever called". A condemn that has been reiterated by the popes who will follow, from Benedetto XIV to Pio IX and Leone XIII, who affirmed the incompatibility between the belonging to the Catholic church and the masonic affiliation. The *Codice di Diritto Canonico* (Code of Canon Law) of 1917, that at canon 2335 stated that "He who enrolled himself to the masonic sect or to any other associations of the same kind which plot against the Church or the legitimate civic authorities, *ipso facto* incurs the excommunication, reserved by the Holy See", was lapidary.

The new Code, in 1983, tempered that formula, by avoiding the explicit reference to freemasonry, keeping the essence of the punishment, also if it was destined in a more general sense to "he who names an association plotting against the Church" (canone 1374). But the more articulated ecclesiastic text on the incompatibility between the belonging to the Catholic church and freemasonry, is the *Declaratio de associationibus massonicis*, that was issued by the Vatican Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, on the 26th of November, 1983, signed by the Prefect at that time, cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. It stated indeed the

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value of the assertion of the new *Codice di Diritto Canonico*, by reaffirming that “the judgement of the Church on the masonic associations” remained “unchanged, because their principles always have been considered un-compatible with the doctrine of the Church and therefore the affiliation to that remains forbidden”.

The little book we are now referring to, is interesting because - besides of an introduction by the present Prefect of the Congregation, cardinal Gerhard Müller - it presents two articles commenting this *Declaratio*, which had been published at that time by “Osservatore Romano” and “Civiltà Cattolica”, and two documents issued by two local episcopacies, the German Episcopal Conference (1980), and the one of the Philippines (2003). Both are significant texts, because they face the theoretical and practical reasons of the un-compatibility between freemasonry and Catholicism, like the concepts of truth, religion, God, man and the world, spirituality, ethics, rituality, tolerance. In particular, the method used by the Philippine’s bishops is significant, because they articulate their argumentation in three trajectories: the historic one, a more specifically doctrinal one, and that of the pastoral leanings. All is articulated according to the scheme of the catechesis of questions and answers: they are 47 and allow us to go deep also in some particulars, like the ceremony of initiation, the symbols, the use of the Bible, the relation with the other religions, the oath of brotherhood, the hierarchical degrees, and so on.

But those different declarations on un-compatibility between the belonging to the Church and freemasonry do not prevent the dialogue, like it is explicitly stated in the document of the German bishops, who indeed at that time had listed some specific fields of discussion, like the communitarian dimension, the charity, the fight against the materialism, the human dignity, the mutual acquaintance. Furthermore, that particular attitude of certain catholic fundamentalist milieu who – to damage some representatives, also the hierarchical ones - used the arms of the apodictic accusation of their masonic affiliation, must be overtaken. Reaching the conclusion, we must overtake any mutual “hostility, outrages, prejudices”, because, “in comparison with past centuries, the tone, the level and the way to express the differences, are improved and changed”, also if these differences clearly persist.

