

# **WALoR 1991 Vol.41 No.02.1**

## **THE FIRST DEGREE, The First Lessons in Masonic Morality**

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The First Degree is that momentous time when the new member joins the Order and has explained to him the virtues and moral values we profess to uphold and maintain.

Like the commandments they are few in number, but all embracing and give a pattern for a life of virtue and morality.

Moses encompassed the "Mosaic Law" in ten short sentences and we encompass our credo in five short words which are "brotherly love, relief and truth". In the ritual of the "First Degree", the four main words are expanded on and fully explained to the candidate during the ceremony of his initiation.

It is certain our new candidate does not fully grasp all that is told to him on this, a most momentous time in his life. He enters the lodge bereft of 'light' and a short time later he has heard and seen so much and is probably quite confused. He has been given light or knowledge usually far beyond his total comprehension at that moment of time. Fortunately not all is lost, for he is given a copy of the ritual to study at his leisure and if he is diligent, he will study that little pale blue book. If he is fortunate, and he should be, for it is his sponsor's duty to help him understand the ceremony, he will come to understand all he has been through. This is a vast improvement on bygone days when the new candidate was put through his degree and, depending on the work in the lodge, may have waited six months or more before he saw another degree or even took his second degree. By this time he could well have forgotten the import of the ceremony in which he was a central figure, even if a rather mute one at times.

Let us examine what our new candidate is taught during the First Degree.

On his entry into the Lodge, he must openly declare his belief in GOD and satisfy the brethren of the Lodge that he is a fit and proper person to become a Freemason by stating he is of proper age and a free man. At this point, he also discovers that, in Freemason's Lodges, prayers are used to invoke blessings on the candidate and the proceedings which are to take place. Before entering into his obligation of fealty to Freemasonry, he is assured his obligation does not in any way conflict with his civil, moral or religious duties and that Freemasonry is founded on the purest principles of piety and virtue. Thus is set the scene for the exposition of "Masonic Morality" which is the aim of the degree.

Having received light, he has explained to him the three great emblematical lights in Freemasonry which are, the Volume of the Sacred Law to rule and govern our faith, the Square to regulate our actions and the Compasses to keep us in due bounds with all mankind or, in other words, to give due praise and homage to our God, to observe the civil code and at all times to practise brotherly love, relief and truth.

Now we come to the time for moral lessons which begin with the investiture of the "Apron". Our candidate is informed that the apron is more honorable than the Garter or any other Order in existence, being the badge of innocence and the bond of friendship, always to be worn and considered as such, being made from the skin of a lamb, the universally acknowledged emblem of purity, which is to remind him of the purity of life and action which distinguishes a Freemason.

This message is reinforced by the moral teaching in the added observations as to his conduct with his fellow masons. He is not to bear animosity or disrupt the harmony of the lodge by feuding with a brother or brethren within the confines of the Lodge Room. Rather he is enjoined to leave the room and peacefully settle his differences or, if this is not possible, he is to stay without until such time and circumstance settle the issue.

The address in the North East of the Lodge Room is one of the really great, if not the greatest, piece of prose to be found in the ritual. Unfortunately far too many Freemasons do not fully comprehend the full meaning as they fail to critically analyse what is said or even learned for delivery in ritual work on the floor of the lodge.

Our candidate is now exposed to the full teaching of the Order. After a short preamble, his principles are put to the test by requiring him to donate to charity. To the new initiate, this may seem somewhat bizarre but it is intended to drive home certain moral teachings, including the one that everyone arrives on this earth devoid of all material wealth and so shall you depart. In addition you have a moral obligation to your fellow man to aid and assist him in his time of need to the best of your abilities and resources. As our candidate cannot carry out the request made to him, he is congratulated on his honourable sentiments and on his inability to comply at this stage.

The trial was made for three especial reasons :

1. To put his principles in some measure to the test.
2. To evince to the brethren that he could not genuinely respond to the Charity Steward's request.
3. To impress on him his need to remember that moment and freely practise that virtue he professes to admire.

Thus are the moral teachings on relief explained to our candidate.

With the Working Tools, the candidate receives an introduction to symbolism and more moral instruction. He is advised what the 24 inch Gauge represents to us and how to apportion its various divisions. He is instructed that part of his time is to be spent in prayer to the Almighty Creator of the world and all mankind. Thus he is not to be a sluggard or a layabout nor is he to neglect the preservation of self by not allowing adequate refreshments for his needs. While man cannot exist without bread neither can he exist for long without necessary rest and refreshment. This was well known to our Antient Operative Brethren who laid down the requirements of the day. The time for rising and going to the workplace, time for breakfast, time for lunch, time for prayer, time for rest and time to return to and cease labour for the day. Finally he is directed to his conscience which must keep down all vain and unbecoming thoughts so that he may approach the Throne of Grace in a fit and proper condition. The Chisel and its significance as a tool of education is also stated.

Now comes the final charge which summarises it all for your candidate. Firstly he is directed to the Volume of the Sacred Law or more commonly "the Bible" for those of the Christian or Jewish faith. He is recommended to study the V.S.L. in a most serious manner in order that he may become fully conversant with the teachings contained therein, for it is the unerring standard of truth and justice. Our new mason is admonished to regulate his life and actions by the divine precepts contained in this sacred volume.

By the earnest study of the Volume, he will be taught the duties he owes to God, to his neighbour and to himself. To his God, by treating him with all the awe and reverence due from the creature to his Creator and by never taking the Creator's name in vain. In other words, do not be a blasphemer. By imploring His aid in all lawful undertakings and looking to Him in every emergency for comfort and support. This means we are to pray to our God and give praise and thanks as well as ask His aid. Such is the basis of moral teaching in regard to God.

In the case of his neighbour, a code of conduct is laid down for the candidate who is always to act towards his neighbour on the square and render every kind office which justice or mercy might require of him. In addition, our masonic brother is to relieve his neighbour's necessities and soothe his afflictions and in all cases act towards him as he, the Freemason, would wish on all occasions to be directed towards himself. In other words to always be a true and faithful friend to your neighbour.

If every brother was to observe these two directives towards God and to his neighbour, what a beacon it would be to the rest of the world in these troubled times.

Still under instruction, our brother is told of the duties he owes to himself. He is to carry out a course of prudent and well regulated discipline to best ensure the well being of his mental and corporeal or bodily faculties. By this means he can devote his fullest energies and talents given to him by God to the glory of the Creator and the welfare of his fellow man. Do not squander your talents or cast your pearls on the ground. Be diligent, prudent and husband your physical and mental resources for the good of all.

Proceeding on, his duties as a citizen of the world are detailed to him while as an individual. He is recommended to practise every domestic as well as public virtue. He is to practise Temperance in all things while acting with Prudence and being supported by Fortitude and always with Justice in mind. He is especially to maintain that great pillar of Freemasonry "Charity" in every facet of life and in its fullest splendour at all times. Advice which can be disregarded only with peril to one's well-being.

Finally he is to devote himself to such pursuits as will enable him to continue respectable in life, useful to mankind and a fitting ornament to the craft of Freemasonry which he has just joined. The study of the liberal arts and sciences which may lie within his attainment is strongly recommended. These are seven in number and are designed to polish the mind and are Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy. At the same time he is not to neglect the duties of his ordinary station in life as a family man and a workman. Sound advice for living in this modern world.

These are the practical and moral teachings of the First Degree. By a strict adherence to the moral precepts given each member, irrespective of station or rank in life, will be a shining beacon for good in the world.

The world lies before us and cries out for morality and we, the Brethren of the Craft, can show by example the way to all who are troubled, distressed and seeking for the truth. Remember by your example will you be seen and known.

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