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No. 19.

HASTINGS.

May 2nd. 1938.

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"IN DEFENCE OF FREEMASONRY"**

Freemasonry has since its inception been attacked and criticised.

The attacks have come from its open enemies, and the criticism from both its enemies and its friends. The most consistent attacks have been those launched by its avowed enemy, the Roman Catholic Church, which for a period of 200 years has been bitterly attacking Freemasonry.

In 1738 Pope Clement XII issued a Bull condemning the Societies and Conventicles of Freemasons. In this Bull the Pope alleged with respect to Freemasons:-

- (1) That many men of different religions joined together in a close bond according to laws and orders agreed upon between them.
- (2) That Freemasons bound themselves by strict oaths and by imprecations of heavy penalties to preserve secrecy with respect to these laws and orders.

It does not appear to a Freemason that in these allegations there was any serious criticism of the Craft. It is apparent however, that from the Papal point of view, a very serious condemnation was involved, because based on the allegations to which I have referred, Clement condemned and prohibited all Masonic societies.

The Papal attack on Freemasonry was carried on by Pope Benedict XIV, who in 1751 issued a Bull confirming the Bull of Clement XII, and making further charges against the Craft. The main allegations in this Bull were:

- (1) That men of every religion and sect were associated together in the Societies and Conventicles of Freemasons.
- (2) That the proceedings of such Societies and Conventicles were kept hidden by an impenetrable bond of secrecy.
- (3) That Freemasons bound themselves by an oath to keep secret the proceedings of their society.
- (4) That these Societies were of ill-repute among wise and virtuous men, and in their judgement all who joined them incurred the brand of depravity and perversion.

Benedict's allegations were considered and answered over six hundred years later in a circular addressed by a lodge in Heidelberg to its sister lodges. The following citations from this circular are of interest

"The first and main Charge of all Brethren let us avow it, is true and well-founded. If it be a crime for men of diverse creeds to assemble in peace and harmony, and hold friendly and affectionate communications, irrespective of their religious persuasions, we own and plead guilty to this crime. It is certainly true that our institution has from its beginning professed that there are in all creeds "to be found good and honourable men well adapted to respect and love each other as brethren."

The second hand on which the Bull of Benedict XIV is based is the mystery in which our confederation is encircled; indeed the mystery to which we pledge ourselves has at all times worked much suspicion and been a pretext for misrepresentation . . . Still neither the doctrines nor the objects of the Craft are occult . the signs of recognition alone must remain secret that the Brethren may the more readily distinguish each other abroad; and the internal labours of the Lodge must be private that personal confidence may develop itself more fully and opinions may be uttered more freely."

With respect to Benedict's third allegation the circular contained the following observations:-

"The old Masonic oath with its comminations, full of grave penalties, was Benedict's third motive for the excommunication of Freemasons . . . You are aware Brethren, that this formula has been obsolete for a long time past. . . . You know that we trust more in the plain word of an honest man than in exaggerated oaths The third count therefore which was never very material, has but an illusory existence with us at the present day."

The other allegations in Benedict's Bull were also dealt with in the circular, and a complete and satisfactory answer given thereto,

In 1809 came the Bull of Pope Pius VII. This Bull was concerned mainly with a secret society known as the Carbonei but incidentally it condemns Freemasonry. It does not however make any new charges against the Craft.

A further Papal attack on Freemasonry was made in the Bull of Pope Leo XII, issued in 1825. This Bull was entitled "Condemnation of the' Freemason and of All Other Secret Societies." and contained something new in the way of vilification of the Craft.

It alleges that Freemasons:

- (1) Speak evil of authority.
- (2) Condemn government.
- (3) Call Christ a stumbling block or foolishness.
- (4) Teach that there is no God.
- (5) Teach that the soul of man perishes with the body.
- (6) Bind themselves to punish with death those who reveal their secrets.

The short answer to all these charges is that they are untrue.

In 1860 in an Allocution of Pope Pius IX another attack was made on the Craft. In the opening words of the Allocution reference is made to that perverse society of men called Masonic, which now comes to light for the common ruin of religion and human society. The Craft is also referred to as "this sect pursuing crime and attacking holy and public things."

The answer to these charges is again, as every Freemason knows, that they are untrue.

One may say generally with respect to the Papal statements with regard to Freemasonry, that in most cases they have no foundation in fact, and that in those cases in which the statements are true, they do not in the minds of reasonable men imply any condemnation of the Craft.

I have so far dealt with criticisms of Freemasonry by those who are its avowed opponents.

Freemasonry is, however, often criticised by people who are certainly not definitely antagonistic to it These criticisms are based on various alleged imperfections in the constitution and working of the Craft. In connection with criticism of this kind, I deal first with an allegation to the effect that Freemasonry is lacking in universality. The critic asks why it is that Freemasonry if it believes in universal brotherhood does not admit all men to its ranks. It is true that we are not prepared to admit men to Freemasonry unless they are of good moral character. This course however is adopted for the purpose of protecting the ideals of brotherhood for which the institution stands. If there were no careful enquiry into the character of candidates it might well happen that the Craft would pass into the control of men who would change the objects and ideals thereof.

To this the critic replies that Freemasonry refuses to admit many men of good character, by insisting that every candidate for admission shall express a specific religious belief, vi., a belief in a Supreme Being.

An answer to this criticism was made by the Earl of Carnarvon, Pro. Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England, at the time when the Grand Orient of France amended its constitution to provide that it excluded no person on account of his belief.

The Earl said—"It is no light matter for any body of men to make such a change as this, no light affair for them to declare that they have no belief in God, no belief in the immortality of the soul . . . These questions to which I have alluded are really of the essence of Freemasonry. The history, the traditions of Freemasonry are based on them, and bound up in them . . . we hold that our Masons should be bound by these considerations—religion (and there can be no religion without belief in God and the immortality of the soul)—religion, morality, and obedience to the civil government of the country."

This may be regarded as the official answer of Freemasonry to those who criticise the institution because it demands a belief in a Supreme Being. The official answer does not seem entirely satisfactory. There is something to be said for the view that a society such as ours, which believes in universal brotherhood should not refuse to admit to its ranks a man of good character merely because he is unable to avow that he accepts a belief in a Supreme Being. It is probable, no doubt, that a majority of the Brethren in English speaking countries are at the present time prepared to accept the official view as correct. I venture to say, however, that the last Masonic word on this matter has not yet been said.

In connection with the allegation of lack of universality I refer to another criticism. The critic asks why it is that an institution which claims universality refuses to admit women to its membership.

It is pointed out by the critic that in all parts of the world women are being admitted to equality with men. They are admitted into full membership in many religious bodies. They are being admitted into the schools and universities and into occupations formerly regarded as the preserves of men. The critic asks how the craft can persist in its refusal to admit women into membership.

The exclusion can be justified on several grounds. The 1st round to which reference may be made, one may call the historic ground. The Freemasons' Lodge carries on the traditions of the ancient "men's house." In the early days of the human race the men of the tribe withdrew at certain seasons from the rest of the tribe and carried out secret ceremonies. Women were rigidly excluded. There is probably more than a mere fanciful connection between these ancient ceremonies and the present Freemasons' Lodge.

A 2nd justification of the exclusion of women is that in all probability the smooth working of the institution is facilitated thereby.

This view doesn't involve any criticism of women. It may well be that in some institutions it is better that men and women should not intermingle. The Craft is such an institution and there is a general agreement among Freemasons that the rule excluding women should be maintained.

Another criticism of Freemasonry is the allegation that the society is not really carrying out its avowed object of extending universal brotherhood, but that its main object is the obtaining, by improper means, material advantages for its members, or at least for some of them. This charge was stated by Archbishop Mannix in an address delivered in 1916 in the Catholic Federation of Australia in the following words:

"I wish that the Federation could boast in its report that it had at some point met, unmasked, and overthrown the most insidious enemy of God and country—the Freemason Brotherhood. Catholics who know Australian life better than I can pretend to know it assure me that the sinister influence of that body is felt at every turn—in politics, in trade, in commerce, in the professions. From the making of a law, and the shaping of a policy, to the letting of a contract, and the hiring of a wharf labourer, the secret grip of this Brotherhood makes itself felt, and not for the common good, but for the exclusive good of the Freemasons."

Is there any truth in these charges? We may, I think, speaking generally, say that the charges are untrue. We must however admit that sometimes Masonic influence has been used for improper purposes. No good

Freemason can, however, justify the use of his membership of the Craft for the purpose of gaining an advantage for himself, to which he is not justly entitled.

A charge is sometimes made against Freemasonry that it is political in character. With respect to Freemasonry in English speaking countries we know that its rules forbid the discussion of political affairs in its assemblies. In England, however, Freemasonry has been closer associated with Royalty and the aristocracy, and it is sometimes alleged that it is anti-liberalism its membership and outlook. This, it will be observed, is a charge directly opposed to that made by the Roman Catholic Church, which alleges that the Craft is revolutionary and subversive of established government.

Is there any substance in the allegation that the Craft is anti-liberal? The truth appears to be that in English speaking countries Freemasonry is conservative in its outlook.

This is no doubt, to some extent brought about by the method by which we select our candidates 'We generally insist that a candidate shall be in such a financial position, that he will not be a burden on his brethren. The ownership of property seems to make a conservative attitude of mind. Although this is so, it does not follow that the craft is in any direct way political in character. In New Zealand at least it has no association with any political party. The Craft can however, truly be said to be conservative in its outlook, and in English speaking countries at least it exerts a stabilizing influence.

A charge closely allied with the charge of conservatism, is that Freemasonry is an institution with no enthusiasms. Freemasonry it is said is the natural home of the middle-aged comfortable middle-class man, who desires neither poverty nor riches.

It is true, that as Freemasons we commend the golden mean. The ritual says—'Not to be an enthusiast, persecutor or slanderer of religion . . . to observe a due medium between avarice and profusion." Speaking generally, one does not find among Freemasons great reformers or leaders of lost causes. Our appeal is to reason and good sense, and it is not improbable that the happiness of mankind is more likely to be attained by such an appeal than it is by an appeal to the passions and sentiments of men.

Reference has been made to the allegations by the Roman Catholic Church that Freemasonry is secret. The charge so made is one made by our open enemy. There are, however, some of our own members who criticise the secret nature of the institution. There is something to be said for this view that we place too much emphasis on the secret aspect of our institution. The really important parts of our work are not secret. The learning of secret words and signs, is not the really important thing in Freemasonry, and too much emphasis should not be placed thereon. It is however a fact that secret words and signs please a number of the brethren, and this at least can be said that even if they don't do much good, they don't harm anyone.

A charge often levelled by Freemasons against the Craft is that in practice it becomes nothing more than a series of meetings for the purpose of making Freemasons by a monotonous repetition of a dreary ritual. The position is that if a brother doesn't like ritual our ceremonies become for him a monotonous repetition. To such a brother attendance at the meetings of his lodge appears a waste of time. It is true that this is the conclusion to which a number of Freemasons ultimately come. It has been said that on the average a Freemason's active Masonic life is only about 8 or 9 years. If this is so it would appear that most Freemasons ultimately become tired of what they regard as a tedious repetition of the ritual.

Can anything be done to hold the interest of such men? It is suggested that it can. In the first place the ordinary ritual meeting can be varied by lectures and discussions. In the 2nd place work must be found for our members. If we give them work to do we will hold their interest.

It is sometimes said that at best Freemasonry is a harmless institution giving a number of unimportant men the opportunity of bearing for a while high-sounding and dignified titles. There is sufficient truth in this criticism to make it sting a little. Are not some of our high sounding titles rather too great a burden for the men who bear them? However, even if there be some truth in the criticism of our dignified titles, the charge is not a very serious one. The conferring of titles doesn't do any harm even if it doesn't do any good.

It may appear that in what has been said there has been too much attack and too little defence. A defence is, however, best based on a thorough knowledge of the attack. It is the duty of every Freemason to know the nature of the attack that is made on Freemasonry by its enemies. He should also be acquainted with the criticisms of the institution made by its friends. The Freemason who has the knowledge is best fitted to judge of the real value of Freemasonry

When the thoughtful Freemason has considered all the attacks, and all the criticisms directed against the Craft, he will find that, notwithstanding all such attacks, and notwithstanding the imperfections which admittedly exist in the institution, there is nevertheless something in it of value to himself and to mankind in general.

Despite its imperfections Freemasonry is on the side of good as opposed to the side of evil.

It stands for the open mind.

It believes in the appeal to reason.

It does desire to know the truth.

It believes in brotherly love.

Because of these things, Freemasonry has the support and affection of those who are ranged under its banners.