



A MASONIC MINUTE

SECRETS

JUNE 2013

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“the secrets and mysteries of the order”

There exists a pervasive notion in the public perception, fuelled by subversive conspiracy theorists and malicious mischief makers that Freemasonry is a ‘*secret society*’ that performs bizarre rites behind closed doors. Nothing excites the imagination of the lunatic fringe more than something that is ‘*secret.*’ It cannot be denied that at certain times in the past and under certain circumstances, for example during the Second World War in Hitler’s Nazi Germany, it was necessary for Freemasons to go underground. There are still areas where it is necessary to conceal one’s membership in a Masonic lodge. However, in North America and the free world, members openly display the Square and Compasses indicating their pride in being a member of the fraternity by wearing a ring, lapel pin, or placing an emblem on their vehicle. In Ontario we have an authorized license plate available with the Square and Compasses superimposed on the red Maple Leaf. Meeting places are identified by signs and listed in local telephone directories. Open houses are held when the public is invited to visit our meeting rooms. If all that makes us a ‘*secret society*’ we are not very good at keeping secrets!

To dispel this widespread notion, it has been suggested by some apologists that, while not a ‘*secret society,*’ Freemasonry is a ‘*society with secrets.*’ This subtle semantic subterfuge does little to persuade or convince anyone. Yes, we must readily admit that in Freemasonry there are certain matters that are shared with the members only, just as there are certain matters that are kept private and confidential in any family, organization, or government agency. It would be better to say that we are a ‘*private society*’ – a fraternity open to all sincere men seeking to become better men.

So why all the fuss and bother about ‘*secret handshakes?*’ We have retained the traditional modes of recognition used by our ancient operative brethren to identify themselves and their level of training, skill and ability in the days before trade school diplomas, union cards, or professional licenses. These are among those ‘*private*’ matters that are shared only among members because they can only be understood and appreciated by fellow members.

When a man joins our fraternity he is admitted to ‘*the mysteries and privileges of ancient Freemasonry.*’ He is told that “*it posses great and invaluable privileges.*” Membership in the oldest and largest fraternity in the world is rightly considered a *privilege*. But what are the *mysteries* we promise? These are best understood as the allegories and symbols used to convey the ideas and ideals embodied in the rites and ceremonies of Freemasonry. As they are freely shared with all initiates, they cannot be considered *secrets* as such. We read in the Sacred Writings, “*It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. ... because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.*” ¹

During the transition from operative to speculative, we adopted and adapted many of the forms and characteristics of the medieval stonemasons’ guilds. The form of our degrees evolved from the morality plays that were a feature of the period. Taking the word from the Biblical phrase, “*Behold, I tell you a mystery*” these plays were known as *mysteries*, and are the origin of modern theatrical drama.

Bro. Albert Pike provides us with this definitive insight: “*The mysteries, of which Masonry is the legitimate successor – from the earliest times the custodian and repository of the great philosophical and religious truths, unknown to the world at large, and handed down from age to age by an unbroken current of tradition, embodied in symbols, emblems, and allegories.*” ² Simply stated, it lays the world of human knowledge and the accumulated wisdom of the ages open at one’s feet.

There is, however, a genuine secret in Freemasonry. It is a real *secret* because it can never be expressed in words but must be experienced to be comprehended, understood and appreciated. It is the sincere bond of fraternal affection that exists between Freemasons around the world. It is known as ‘the Mystic Tie’ that binds us in the oldest and largest fraternity of the great Universal Brotherhood of Man.

The Ancient Charges of a Freemason declare: “*Masonry is the centre of union between good men and true, and the happy means of conciliating friendship amongst those who must otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance.*” That is the great secret we share, first among our ancient privileges and mysteries.

For what we have received, we ought to be truly thankful.

RSJD 2013

¹ Matthew 11: vv. 11, 13.

² Albert Pike (1809-1891) **Morals and Dogma.** p. 210