

## DEALING WITH INDIVIDUAL CATHOLICS – MEMBERS OF MASONRY

### *Towards a Pastoral Approach*

To this day, the issue of how to deal with Catholics who join Masonic associations remains problematic and ticklish for the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Despite repeated pronouncements from the Magisterium of the Church and the *Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines*' (CBCP) own statements on the issue through the years, the subject simply refuses to go away. In their July 2019 Plenary Assembly, the Filipino Bishops raised once again fresh concerns regarding matters posed by the issue in pastoral practice. It seems that the number of prominent Filipino Catholics joining Masonic associations is growing and there is just no consistent way of dealing with them when they or their family members approach the Church for pastoral attention. Questions on whether Catholics may join Masonry and whether or not they are excluded from the sacramental life of the Church, continue to be asked. The perception among the bishops is that the situation in the present time may have changed and that there is a need once more for guidelines in aid of pastoral practice. The present document will attempt to do this by *a*) reviewing past Magisterial pronouncements, *b*) outlining the errors of Masonry, *c*) recalling the CBCP's interventions until 2013, *d*) peering into the present situation in the country, and only then *e*) offer some observations and recommendations.

### **Consistent Position of the Holy See**

Since the Papal Bull, *In eminenti apostolatus specula*, by Clement XII in 1738, up until the *Declaration on Masonic Associations* by Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1983, the position of the Holy See on Masonry has always been consistent, namely, *Masonic principles and rituals are incompatible and irreconcilable with Catholic doctrines*. That being the case, Catholics were prohibited from membership in Masonic organizations and other secret societies. The same prohibition (either explicitly or implicitly) was enforced by succeeding Popes: Benedict XIV, *Providas Romanorum* (1751); Pius VII, *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo* (1821); Leo XII, *Quo graviora* (1825); Pius VIII, *Traditi humilitati* (1829) and *Litteris altero* (1830); Gregory XVI, *Mirari vos* (1832); Pius IX: *Qui pluribus* (1846), *Quibus quantisque malis* (1849), *Quanta cura* (1864), *Multiplikes inter* (1865), *Apostolicae Sedis moderationi* (1869), and *Etsi multa* (1873); Leo XIII: *Etsi Nos* (1882), *Humanum genus* (1884); *Officio sanctissimo* (1887), *Dall'alto dell'Apostolico Seggio* (1890), *Custodi di quella fede* (1892), *Inimica vis* (1892), *Praeclara gratulationis publicae* (1894), and *Annum ingressi* (1902).

The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* (Canon 2335) not only reiterated the ban on membership. It also explicitly stipulated that Catholics associated with Masonry were automatically (*latae sententiae*) excommunicated, incurring thereby other subsequent penalties. After Vatican II, the Church started evaluating its understanding of Masonry. Given the different situations in various countries, confusion hounded some Episcopal Conferences on the interpretation of CIC Canon 2335. The *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (CDF) weighed in by issuing a private letter to these Episcopal Conferences in 1974, in which it reiterated that the 1917 CIC canons which established a penalty were subject to strict interpretation. Yet it also stated that the same Canon

applied *only* to Catholics who were members of Masonic associations that *militated against the Church*.<sup>1</sup>

To some, however, such a statement may have implied that there may be *associations not necessarily adverse to the Church*, thereby spawning more ambiguity and implicitly suggesting a more lenient approach to members of these associations. Thus, in 1981, the CDF issued another *declaration concerning the status of Catholics who become freemasons*. Referring to Canon 2335, the CDF insisted that the present canonical discipline remains in full force and that it has not been modified in any way. Moreover, it reiterated that neither the excommunication nor the other penalties envisaged have been abrogated. This time, though, the CDF made it clear that “*it was not the intention of the Congregation to permit Episcopal Conferences to issue public pronouncements by way of a judgment of a general character on the nature of Masonic associations, which would imply a derogation from the aforesaid [canonical] norms.*”

The stern position of this 1981 declaration was beclouded anew with the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law in 1982. Canon 1374 of this new Code, unlike the previous Canon 2335, does not mention any groups in its condemnation. It states: “A person who joins *an association which plots against the Church* is to be punished with a just *penalty*; one who promotes or takes office in such an association is to be punished with an *interdict*.”

Without *masonic associations* being singled out, some Catholics and Freemasons supposed that the prohibition on Catholics becoming members of these associations might have been relaxed. Consequently, based on this loose interpretation of Canon 1374, many Catholics joined the fraternity, justifying further that by so doing it was not their intention to plot against the Church. The Church hierarchy was not spared from being misled by such an interpretation.

The reaction of the Holy See was thus swift. In the same year the new Code came into effect, the CDF issued another declaration to clarify the issue and to insist that in fact *nothing has changed* in the Church’s position. According to this 1983 declaration, the omission was simply meant to extend the application of the prohibition of membership to *other associations*, whose principles – like those of masonic associations – are perceived to be irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church. The declaration also reiterated that the faithful who enrol in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may therefore not receive Holy Communion.

Repeating the stipulation of the 1981 Declaration, the 1983 Declaration concludes by stipulating that the Holy See does not allow any individual bishop nor any bishops’ conference to permit Catholics to join masonic lodges.

As if all these were not enough, the CDF further wrote in 1985 a reflection on its 1983 Declaration. Here, the CDF restated the position of the Holy See that banned Catholics from membership in any masonic association. It pointed out that, otherwise, membership meant putting oneself in a state of grave sin that should prevent one from receiving Holy Communion. Finally, as a reminder to all bishops, it declared that it was not within the competence of local ecclesiastical

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<sup>1</sup> CDF Letter to Episcopal Conferences on July 19, 1974: “Proinde tuto doceri et applicari potest opinio eorum auctorum qui tenent praedictum canonem 2335 respicere eos *tantum* catholicos qui nomen dant associationibus quae *revera contra Ecclesiam machinantur.*”

authorities to give a judgment on the nature of Masonic associations which would imply a derogation from what has been decided in previous declarations.

To sum up, from the point of view of *practice* and *discipline*, there are four salient points that have been consistently insisted upon by the Holy See in regard to masonry:

1. Catholics are forbidden from joining masonic associations.
2. The penalty incurred by a Catholic who joins a masonic association is *latae sententiae* excommunication.
3. A Catholic who becomes a member of a masonic association is in the state of grave sin and may therefore not receive Holy Communion.
4. It is not within the competence of local ecclesiastical authorities to give a judgment on the nature of Masonic associations which would imply a *derogation* from what has been canonically stipulated.

The consistency, almost to the point of obstinacy, with which the Holy See has laid down these points to constitute its position on masonry is compelling – as it is in fact mandatory. The reason, therefore, for detailing them here is to show that these points cannot simply be glossed over in any attempt to formulate a pastoral approach towards the issue without departing from official Catholic teaching and practice.

### **The Errors of Masonry<sup>2</sup>**

Enough has been written about the errors and pernicious philosophical tenets of Masonry and the objections of the Church against them. A summary of Masonry's main tenets would suffice here to demonstrate why the Church has always forbidden Catholics from becoming members of Masonic associations.

*Religion, Faith and God.* Belief in *God* is a requirement for membership. A candidate (member), however, is never required to say what *god* he believes in. It simply requires that one believes in some deity and give him whatever name according as one pleases. In other words, any god will do. Thus, Masons speak of the deity using various names as the "*Great Architect of the Universe,*" or the *Supreme Being, Grand Artificer, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge Above, Jehovah, Allah, Buddha, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, or Great Geometer.*<sup>3</sup>

This may appear like an attempt to respect all religions and uphold the fundamental right of religious freedom, but at root it reflects Masonry's *religious indifferentism*, a tendency to regard all religions as of equal worth. As such, all religions are mere competitive attempts to know God, who remains *unknowable*. Consequently, to say that one religion (e.g., Christianity) is the true religion would be unacceptable. Similarly, therefore, there is no one true Church. That is the reason why Masonry also subordinates faith (the Catholic faith in particular) to that of the lodge,

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<sup>2</sup> On this, see CBCP, *A Primer on Freemasonry, Pastoral Guidelines, Historical Background, Religious Aspects of Freemasonry*, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Little Masonic Library*, Macoy Publishing, 1977, Vol. 4, p. 32.

obliging members to place a fundamental secularist fraternity above communion with the Church.

*Morality, Relativism and Subjectivism.* As a consequence of its indifferentism, Masonry also actually promotes *relativism*, that is, as there is no one true religion, no one can also claim to possess any truth in an absolute way. Thus, with respect to morality, objective and moral standards do not exist. No Church can exercise any “teaching authority” in terms of faith and morality. Man is the last arbiter of what is right and wrong. In the absence of objective moral standards, the only alternative is to fall into *subjectivism*, that is, to each his own, without any reference to the deity.

*Deism and Naturalism.* Without reference to the deity in human behavior (morality), Masonry also founds itself on *deism* for it may believe in the existence of a supreme being (specifically of a creator), but this being does not intervene in the universe. In fact, Masonry rejected belief in a supernatural deity who interacts with humankind, so one cannot speak of *divine providence* or *revelation*. If so, man is not accountable to God for in fact he is the master of the world. Because Masonry teaches that a supernatural deity is completely uninvolved in this way, it also tends towards *naturalism* which holds that there can be no supernatural or spiritual explanations for reality since everything arises from natural properties and causes.

*Jesus Christ.* The name of Jesus Christ is rarely mentioned in Masonic literature, apparently to please members who are non-Christian. Some Masonic leaders even teach that the Messiah will not be an individual, but “*the perfection of the human race*”. If ever Jesus’ name is cited, it is to honor him in the same way that it honors the great thinkers and moral leaders of man’s history. But Masonry, given its philosophical tenets, cannot accept that Jesus is God, nor can they accept that complete divine revelation is to be found in his Person and teachings. Masons, therefore, consider the discussion about Jesus’ divinity to be an endless and futile effort.

*Masonic Rites.* Ritual practices of Masonry contain considerable material which are heretical, and in some instances explicitly anti-Catholic. They involve blasphemous solemn oaths since these are taken with the Bible without any important motive. These rituals, along with the oath-taking

*show, from the words used and through the symbols, a character similar to that of the Sacraments. This leads to the impression that, in such circumstances, with symbolic actions, something objective takes place in man, which transforms him. The content is a symbolic initiation of man which, for all its characteristics, clearly coincides with man’s sacramental transformation.*<sup>4</sup>

From all these, one can clearly see that Masonry is a threat to the faith of Catholics and the freedom of the Church to act in society. The undermining of the teachings of the Church, and the subordination of her authority on matters of faith and morals, indeed constitute a plot against the Catholic faith.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a statement taken from the *Declaration of the German Episcopal Conference* cited in the CBCP’s *A Primer on Freemasonry*, p. 24.

## Interventions from the Philippine Hierarchy<sup>5</sup>

Among the Catholic Episcopal Conferences around the world, that of the Philippines was one among the first to reaffirm the official position of the Holy See on masonry. Already before Vatican II, in 1954, the *Catholic Welfare Organization* (CWO), the official organization of the Philippine Hierarchy then, issued a statement on Masonry, in which it sought to clear the lingering doubt on whether a Catholic may legitimately “become a mason” on the ground that “the various Masonic societies here in the Philippines [were] non-secretarian organizations which Catholics may join without injury to their Catholic faith.” The CWO minced no words in denying such a supposition and reiterated instead the position of the Holy See that “a Catholic who knowingly and willingly becomes a Mason automatically incurs excommunication, may not receive any of the Sacraments of the Church”, and adding that such a Catholic “may not be buried in a Catholic cemetery.”

The above 1954 statement sounded like it had settled the issue in a definitive manner, yet in 1967 the Bishops received from the *Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the Philippines* a request to petition Rome for the repeal of the official proscription of Freemasonry. In 1969, following a dialogue triggered by this petition in 1968 between Catholic experts and the Masonic panel, several points were raised that would eventually urge the Bishops to at least reconsider the official Catholic position. All this happened following the time the bishops were reorganized into what is now the *Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines* (CBCP) in January 1968.

In any case, from the side of the Masons, it was pointed out during the dialogue that they did not really hold communion with their masonic counterparts elsewhere in the world who were manifestly anti-Catholic. Furthermore, they stressed that there was nothing essentially *anti-Catholic* in their constitution and that they were in fact fully committed to cooperate with the Catholic Church. Besides, Philippine Masonry admitted people of any faith who believed in God and in the immortality of the soul and who were never urged – presupposedly as a condition for their membership – to have themselves separated from their respective religions. Neither did Filipino Masons, the panel asserted, oppose the dogmas and official doctrines of the Church. Finally, if ever the practice of making ancient oaths was continued, these have in fact become more symbolic in character and no longer imposed with the accompanying terrible punishments.

From the side of the Catholic experts, based on their conclusion that masonic lodges in the Philippines had been established more for fraternal and social purposes, and that masons in fact in the country wanted a new era of mutual cooperation with the Church, a more favorable attitude towards the masons was proffered. They recommended that it was good and opportune at that time that the Catholic Hierarchy of the Philippines requested the Vatican for the lifting of excommunication from Filipino Catholic members of the *Free and Accepted Masons of the Philippines* (FAMP).

Coming that is from Catholic experts themselves, the recommendation persuaded the CBCP to petition the Holy See in 1970 to exempt from the provision of Canon 2335 the first three masonic degrees of the FAMP. It was understood that this exemption would apply only to Catholics who, in the judgment of their Local Ordinaries, joined freemasonry in *good faith*. There seemed,

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the details in this section were taken from the CBCP *Document on Masonry* which was prepared by the *Episcopal Commission on the Doctrine of the Faith* (ECDP), at the January 2000 CBCP Plenary Assembly.

however, to have been no immediate reply to the petition from the Holy See. Meanwhile, though, the CDF issued a circular letter in 1974, which, while calling for a strict interpretation of CIC Canon 2335, nonetheless expressly laid down that *the excommunication imposed by said canon applies only to persons who are members of associations that militate against the Church* – thereby opening as it were some room for leniency, that is, towards groups that do not necessarily militate against the Church.

This prompted the CBCP to further inquire from the Holy See in 1975 whether the said 1974 provision applied in effect to the 1970 CBCP petition. All that the CBCP got in reply that very same year was practically a restatement of the same 1974 provision: *“In accordance with the circular letter dated July 18, 1974, which recalls a strict interpretation of Canon 2335, the excommunication applies only to the persons who are members of associations that militate against the Church. It is on the basis of this principle that the position of the members of the different groups must be judged in each particular case.”*

Far from settling the issue, the CDF reply occasioned more uncertainty. In 1979, a second panel of experts formed by the CBCP *Commission on Doctrine of the Faith* urged the bishops to decide whether in particular the Grand Lodge of FAMP was anti-Catholic and whether the Catholic members thereof were (to be) excommunicated. Before the Bishops could take action, the 1982 new Code of Canon Law came into force. Canon 1374 of this new Code stated that *a person who joined an association which plotted against the Church was to be punished with a just penalty and that one who promoted or took office in such an association was to be punished with an interdict*. Stated in this way, the new Code noticeably did not specify masonry as one such association. Yet, as already mentioned above, the CDF went on to clarify in 1983 that the new Code’s general statement was simply meant to extend the prohibition of membership to *other associations*, whose principles were perceived to be irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church. Thus, the CDF stressed that membership in masonic associations remained forbidden and that Catholics who enrolled in these associations were in a state of grave sin and may therefore not receive Holy Communion.

Nothing since then was heard from the CBCP in regard to the issue until 1990, when it issued some guidelines that specified more penalties against Catholics whose membership in any Masonic association could be proven in the external forum. Such Catholics, the guidelines pressed, *“(a) may not receive Holy Communion; (b) may not be allowed to act as sponsor in Baptism, Confirmation, and weddings; (c) may not be admitted as members of religious organizations; (d) Church funeral rites may be denied unless some signs of repentance before death has been shown; (e) where Church funeral rites were allowed by the Ordinary, no Masonic services shall be allowed in the church or cemetery immediately before or after the Church rites in order to avoid any public scandal.”* It should be noted that most of these stipulations were not explicitated in any of the Holy See’s statements up until then, and even beyond.

In 1993, the CBCP issued another document entitled *“Declaration of the CBCP Commission on the Doctrine of the Faith”*. The just-cited document simply invoked the Holy See’s 1983 Statement on Masonry and the CBCP 1990 guidelines. As to be expected then, the document simply repeated the Holy See’s ban on Masonic membership and the strict penalties imposed by the CBCP guidelines on those who enlisted themselves in Masonic associations. The document indicated that these penalties reflected the serious irreconcilable points between Christian faith and Masonic philosophical tenets, which it then briefly described.

The next time the CBCP would speak on the issue would be in 2000. This time, the CBCP *Episcopal Commission on the Doctrine of the Faith* (ECDF) prepared a more lengthy document on masonry in that it offered a *historical, doctrinal* and *pastoral* treatment of the relationship between the Catholic Church and Freemasonry. What was significant with this 2000 document was that it had something new to say, partly because it made reference to the statements of the *Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*' (PCP II) in its *Conciliar Document*.<sup>6</sup> PCP II reiterated the official position of the Church which forbade Catholics from joining any masonic lodge because the principles of Masonry remained incompatible with Church doctrine. Yet it also declared that restating such a position was *not a judgment passed on the conscience* of Catholics who joined Masonry but rather an indictment of the *objectively serious wrongness of Catholic membership in Masonry* – a point that the present CBCP 2000 document has taken as its own as well. There seems to be a suggestion here that if the individual conscience were to be considered, other things must be taken into account before any judgment could be made, for instance, whether the individual is fully aware of the true nature of Masonry and is thereby fully committed to its principles.

In its historical account, the 2000 Document revealed that there was a time when the CBCP had softened in its position, when it was persuaded to petition the Holy See to have the excommunication of Catholics, who joined masonry in *good faith* lifted (*supra*). That was because these Catholics may not have known of nor consciously adhered to the Masonic principles that contradicted the Catholic faith. It was possible that these Catholics may not have been aware of the Church prohibition or knew of it only vaguely or confusedly. Thus, the document stated in its conclusion that although enrolling in Masonic associations was a grave moral disorder and would thus put one in the state of grave sin, excommunication from the Church was not necessarily thereby *ipso facto* (automatically) incurred.

The document also offered a clarification not to be found elsewhere. Namely, the incompatibility of Masonic principles with the Catholic faith was what explained the Church's continuing and unchanged condemnation and rejection of Masonry *and not* the militancy or non-militancy of a particular Masonic association against the Catholic Church. In other words, a Catholic could not join a Masonic association, whether this be hostile to the Church or not, without being untrue to Catholic beliefs and without adhering to Masonic principles.

In the end, the CBCP's position in this document hinges on the distinction between Catholics enrolled in Masonic associations who are "*in the know*" and those who have joined these associations "*in good faith*". The *former* refers to those who were aware of the Church prohibition but remained in active membership and may be long-standing members familiar with Masonic principles and consciously adhering to them. In contrast, the latter refers to those who may have joined the association only recently and have reached the initial low degrees in membership, and who did not know of nor consciously adhered to the Masonic principles that contradicted the Catholic faith as described above. The former deserved the penalties imposed by the CBCP 1990 guidelines, whereas the latter would incur such penalties only if they remained members even after they have been informed of the content and intent of the same guidelines. In fact, the 2000 document continued, provided no scandal were involved, they deserved greater tolerance in their

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<sup>6</sup> See *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 20 January – 17 February 1991, Manila (1992), nn. 229-233, pp. 82-84.

gradual understanding of the truth. Yet the document also cautioned at the same time that they needed to be reminded that masonic promises of social or financial advancement or fellowship directed to some worthwhile humanitarian causes should not be heeded at the expense of one's faith commitments.

In 2002, the CBCP did something different. In their *Joint Declaration of the CBCP on Sanctions for Catholics Who Join Freemasonry*, the Bishops, more than simply repeating past declarations, detailed instead the provisions of Canon Law on sanctions against membership in Freemasonry.

*First*, the Joint Declaration decreed that any Catholic who is publicly known to be a member of any Masonic Association and actively participates in its program and activities, or promotes its views, or holds any office therein, and refuses to renounce such membership despite at least one warning (Cf. Canon 1347) is to be punished with an *interdict* (cf. Canon 1374), that is:

- a) he is not to be admitted to Holy Communion and other sacraments (Cf. Canon 1332);
- b) he is prohibited to act as sponsor in Baptism and Confirmation;
- c) he is not to be admitted as member of parish or diocesan structures;
- d) he is to be denied funeral rites, unless some signs of repentance before death have been shown (cf. Canon 1184, §1, no. 3);
- e) where Church funeral rites are *allowed* by the bishop no Masonic services shall be allowed in the Church or cemetery immediately before or after the Church rites in order to avoid public scandal (Cf. Canon 1184, §1, no. 3, and Canon 1374).

*Second*, it was further decreed that any Catholic who is a convinced member of Freemasonry, notoriously adhering to the Masonic vision, is already considered excommunicated *latae sententiae* (Cf. Canon 1364). Elaborating on the penalty of excommunication, reference was made to Canon 1331 which states:

§1 An excommunicated person is forbidden:

- a) to have any ministerial participation in celebrating the Eucharistic Sacrifice or in any other ceremonies whatsoever of public worship;
- b) to celebrate the sacraments and sacramentals and to receive the sacraments;
- c) to discharge any ecclesiastical offices, ministries, or functions whatsoever, or to place acts of governance.

§2 If the excommunication has been imposed or declared, the guilty party:

- a) wishing to act against the prescription of §1 is to be prevented from doing so or the liturgical action is to stop unless a serious cause intervenes;
- b) invalidly places acts of governance which are only illicit in accord with the norms of §1 no. 3;
- c) is forbidden to enjoy privileges formerly granted;
- d) cannot validly acquire a dignity, office or other functions in the Church;
- e) cannot appropriate the revenues from any dignity, office, function or pension in the Church."



*Third*, the Joint Declaration announced that all the individual bishops, in virtue of Canon 455 §4, decided to strictly disallow in their respective jurisdictions these Masons from being witnesses in Marriage, and as members of any associations of the faithful.

With the above canonical provisions so clearly laid out, the issue on Masonry should have been definitively settled, but it would not simply go away. In 2003, the CBCP, with the help of the *Knights of Columbus*, published once more a booklet entitled “*A Primer on Freemasonry*” to serve as guide and quick reference. Following the Q & A format, it is by far the most comprehensive of all documents emanating from the CBCP on the issue. It covered three main items, namely, *Pastoral Guidelines*, *Historical Background* and *Religious Aspects of Freemasonry*.

It also provided very useful appendices, including the CDF’s 1983 *Declaration on Masonic Associations*; two of the CBCP’s previous statements, namely, the 2002 *Joint Declaration of the CBCP on Sanctions for Catholics who Join Freemasonry*, and the 1993 *Declaration of the CBCP Commission on the Doctrine of the Faith*; and two other essays, *Irreconcilability between Christian Faith and Freemasonry*, *Masonry and Naturalistic Religion*, and *The Pastoral Problem of Masonic Membership*. Its Bibliography, though not that extensive gives access to helpful sources, including statements from other Episcopal Conferences (e.g., United Kingdom, Germany, Indian Ocean and the United States).

In its *Pastoral Guidelines*, it highlighted the Position of the Holy See as expressed in the CDF’s 1983 *Declaration on Masonic Associations*: “Therefore, the Church’s negative judgment in regard to Masonic associations remains unchanged since their principles have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church and therefore membership in them remains forbidden. The faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion.”

It also singled out five of the most objectionable tenets of Masonic Philosophy: *First*, that Freemasonry considers all religions of the world as mere competitive attempts to know God, who remains unknowable. *Second*, Freemasonry considers itself as above and beyond all religions, a source of unity among men because it upholds only those beliefs in which all men agree. *Third*, Freemasonry makes human reason as the only source of knowledge. *Fourth*, and as a consequence of the above, Freemasonry teaches that the truth about God and man is unattainable. *Fifth*, Freemasonry seeks the perfection of man only in the development of his natural virtues.

The Primer also did not fail to invoke Canon Law’s provisions: “An apostate from the faith, a heretic or a schismatic incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication, without prejudice to the provision of can. 194 §1, n.2; a cleric, moreover, may be punished with the penalties mentioned in can. 1336 §1, nn. 1,2, and 3.” [While] Canon 1374 says: “A person who joins an association which plots against the Church is to be punished with a just penalty; one who promotes or takes office in such an association is to be punished with an interdict.”

Citing what was then the latest CBCP Statement on the issue (2002), the Primer listed down the penalties incurred by any Catholic who is publicly known to be a member of any Masonic Association and actively participates in its program and activities, or promotes its views, or holds any office therein, and refuses to renounce such membership (*supra*).

The second part of the Primer provided a historical background of the Masonic movement. Its origin is traced back to 1717 when the Grand Lodge of England was established. From the very beginning *deism*, *naturalism* and *relativism* served as Masonry's philosophical foundation. In the Philippines, the first masonic lodge set up by two Spanish navy officials in 1856, but it was only in 1892 when Filipinos were able to set up the first Filipino Masonic lodge. The Primer also recalled that the CBCP in fact had dialogued with ranking masons in the country and that it attempted to petition the Holy See to exempt from the provision of Canon 2335 Filipino Catholics, who in the judgment of their Local Ordinaries, joined freemasonry in *good faith* (*supra*) – to no avail.

The third part on the *Religious Aspects of Freemasonry* was actually a detailed polemic against Masonic beliefs and practices. In this section, Masonry is identified as a (non-sectarian) "*religion*". Its adherents, in fact, regard it as a "*universal*" religion, thereby reducing Christianity as "simply another of the dozens of sects whose particular opinions have divided mankind over the ages" (p. 19). Its initiation ceremonies imply that "an adherent deny the Christian (and every other so-called sectarian) religion." Its (ritual) symbols likewise convey enlightenment to an initiate. Masonry may honor Jesus Christ as one great thinker and moral leader of man's history but it cannot admit the divinity of Jesus Christ nor the completeness of revelation in His Person and teachings. For Masonry, the Bible is just another book. It has nothing whatever to do with the Bible as it is not founded on it.

Referring to Vatican II's positive attitude to other religions in *Nostra aetate* (n. 2), calling Catholics to respect what is true and holy in these religions, the Primer pointed out that this is not the same as "*religious indifferentism*" which is an offshoot of *relativism* where truth and error are undifferentiated.

Moreover, Freemasonry may aim at fostering brotherhood and philanthropy among persons and nations. That is, however, not enough for genuine brotherhood among men needs to be founded on something higher than man – the Fatherhood of God, revealed as by His Only-Begotten Son made man, Jesus Christ. Masonic brotherhood, on the contrary, is a kind of *closed brotherhood* (seen in exclusive membership) that does not contribute to the openness to others expected of the members of the Church.

Finally, besides, Masonic initiation rituals involve taking oaths with the Bible without an important motive (a practice that is against the second commandment), and which are not merely ceremonial in nature inasmuch as they bind in conscience the person making them.

There is no indication in the 2003 Primer as to who prepared it or who its author was, except that it was printed under the auspices of the CBCP Media Office. But with its Foreword signed by then CBCP President, *Archbishop Orlando Quevedo* (Cotabato), the document could truly be considered as expressing CBCP's official position. That being the case, it was the most comprehensive (authoritative) document the CBCP has by far issued on the subject. (That the bishops found the long-term relevance and applicability of this 2003 document was attested to by the fact the it saw reprinting two more times in 2010.)

Incidentally, in 2013 (?), there was another attempt on the part of the CBCP (through then President, *Archbishop Socrates Villegas*) to obtain a rescript from the Holy See, as it endorsed the

petition of the President of the Grand Lodge of the FAMP to have it exempted (excluded) from the sanctions imposed by Canon 1374. Then CDF Prefect, *Cardinal Gerhard Müller*, with a tone that was rather stern, acknowledged receipt of the petition. He did not say much and simply handed the CBCP President a copy of CDF's 1983 statement published in the *L'Osservatore romano* reiterating the position of the Catholic Church. The CDF Prefect insisted that the Church's official position still stood and that it was not within the competence of the Episcopal Conference to decide on a matter the Holy See has already passed judgment on. Besides, the CBCP Primer published in 2003 ought to have required strict compliance from the Bishops of the Philippines, this document having been granted recognition by the Holy See.

In summary, the Philippine Hierarchy has always maintained and defended the official Catholic (magisterial) position on the unacceptability of Masonry, given its serious errors both in doctrine (philosophical tenets) and practices. It has also sought to implement the provisions of Canon Law on penalties that Catholics incur by joining Masonry. Yet, given the *sensitivity* and *delicateness* of the issue in the Philippine setting, it has also shown "*openness*", in the exercise of pastoral circumspection, towards Catholics who may have unwittingly *in good faith* sought membership in Masonic associations with the best of intentions.

### **A Fresh Look at the Philippine Context**

Already after Vatican II, as the Church started reevaluating its understanding of Masonry, bishops in some parts of the world have realized that various *ways* and *situations* have actually obtained in the reception and application of the Masonic philosophy. This somehow suggested that *diverse* situations called for an approach that gave attention to the peculiarities of each of these situations.<sup>7</sup> It might be helpful then to sketch these peculiarities – if indeed they are – in the current Philippine context to see if the situation indeed requires a pastoral approach that is proper to it. Several points that were raised during the CBCP July 2019 Plenary Assembly seem to paint a picture of what this context might be all about.<sup>8</sup>

It is a fact that some, if not many, Catholics who join Masonic associations remain active in the life of the parish and that of the Church. They are even involved in the Church apostolate, actively participating in the mission of evangelization. Many of them are benefactors of Church projects, for instance, in the construction of parish churches and of diocesan infrastructures such as parish rectories and pastoral centers. There are even those who support the education and formation of seminarians preparing for the priesthood, a manifestation of their support for bishops and priests.

Moreover, some of them are partners and are supportive of the Religious in administering Catholics schools, orphanages, hospitals, and the like. They are visible in charitable works (both

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<sup>7</sup> During the *ad limina* visit of the Filipino bishops in Rome in 2003, when the issue of masonry in the Philippines was brought to the attention of the CDF, its Prefect, then *Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger*, cited the CBCP Primer of 2003 as guide but acknowledged that circumstances in each country were *diverse*, something that should remind bishops to be more discerning among themselves. See *Minutes*, CBCP Plenary Assembly, July 2019, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> See *Minutes*, CBCP Plenary Assembly, July 2019, p. 32-36.

civic and Church-sponsored) and in the projects of charitable organizations whether this be sectarian or non-sectarian.

More importantly, these Catholics join Masonic associations *with no idea about issues on masonic philosophy and doctrine*. Many of these Catholics view such associations simply as social clubs or as fraternities,<sup>9</sup> more concerned only about the spirit of brotherhood that they seek in social life. One way of ascertaining this is that when asked, such Catholics could not even adequately explain nor understand what Masonic principles are and what they in practice entail (e.g., *deism, naturalism* and *relativism*), perhaps in the same way that they could not sufficiently elaborate on, much less defend, their Catholic faith. Others would even go as far as saying that they were completely unaware of these doctrinal tendencies in Masonry. On the contrary, they see the good side of Masonry as they are encouraged to be good Catholics and responsible (disciplined) citizens of the country.

Dialogues which have been initiated by local Ordinaries in various places with “*Catholic masons*”<sup>10</sup>—if they could ever be called such—have revealed that these Catholics, by joining masonry are simply concerned with social status that gives them the necessary connections and wherewithal to further their business and professional interests. For instance, many in the military service join masonry for the sake of promotion among their ranks and augmentation in their professional income and retirement benefits.

In most cases, these Catholics would also point out that the masonic associations to which they belong would, in fact, desist from rejecting an applicant who is an atheist or who belongs to any other religion (e.g., Islam, Buddhism or Christianity, etc.). On the other hand, they are only all too ready to dismiss a member, who is known to be guilty of blasphemy or who acts in a way that attacks the honor of God. These Catholics, of course, do not realize that such a practice in fact makes them vulnerable to the errors of either *syncretism* or *relativism*.

In evaluating masonic beliefs and practices, however, the testimonies of ex-masons (masonic apostates) could be enlightening.<sup>11</sup> Ex-masons point out that hard core (diehard) masons are *extremely occultic* and therefore could not necessarily be trusted as dialogue partners. They may tend to tell their dialogue partners about the positive qualities of masonry (the good things that they do) but they may never tell what they know the Church would always reject as doctrinally or morally erroneous (if not destructive) and therefore unacceptable among their beliefs and practices. This could also be the reason why initiates, and for as long as they are not yet considered full-pledged members, see only the good things about masonry but are yet kept in the dark as regards its errors and atrocious practices, that is, until such time that they become staunch and fully committed masons. That is also the reason why many of them still remain active in

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<sup>9</sup> This was how it was also seen in other countries, particularly in Germany, where the problem *seems* to have been settled once and for all based on this consideration. See *Minutes*, CBCP Plenary Assembly, July 2019, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> This certainly sounds oxymoronic since according to Magisterial teaching, Catholic doctrine and Masonic principles are inherently incompatible if not completely contradictory.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aX6pm9G5fsI>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rrRMH9P8y0>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADa3kaqbQ4Q>;  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDDURPXgVUY>.

Church life. Yet, for all the good that they do, there is always something purposely hidden from the public eye that would shield masons from the usual criticism levelled against them.

It is therefore not surprising to see that notwithstanding the negative implications of their membership in masonic associations, there are *Catholic masons* who continue to raise their families according to Catholic traditions, join and accompany their families attend mass at least every Sunday, have their children baptized in the Catholic Church, send them to Catholic schools, and wish (*especially if inadvertently allowed!*) to avail of the sacraments themselves. In other words, they are *de facto* everything that is Catholic except that they are members of Masonic associations!

Should this sort of Catholics be considered *in principle* as deeply committed masons, then their Catholic lifestyle belie (betray) such commitment, or should they be considered on the other hand as faithful Catholics, then as Masons they would seem to ideologically separate themselves from their faith—there is simply a profound “ideological” disconnect between being Catholic and being Masonic. Might this sort of persons then be labeled “*nominal Masons*” or “*nominal Catholics*” — putting them in such a gray area?

Such is the peculiarity that would seem to suggest that Catholics that fit into this description (category) require a pastoral approach that is sensitive to their particular situation.

### **Conclusion: Observations and Recommendations**

In dealing with this extremely difficult issue of Catholics’ affiliation and membership in Masonic associations, and bearing in mind the above discussions, it is obvious that any pastoral approach towards the issue must not be oblivious of the constant teaching of the Church regarding the dangers and evils of Masonry. The sheer *consistency* of this teaching is indicative enough that it requires strict adherence. In fact, the instantaneous reaction of bishops and clerics must be to comply with the Magisterial position, to reiterate: *a*) Catholics are forbidden from joining masonic associations; *b*) the penalty incurred by a Catholic who joins a masonic association is *latae sententiae* excommunication; *c*) a Catholic who becomes a member of a masonic association is in the *state of grave sin* and may therefore not receive Holy Communion.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, any Catholic who is publicly known to be a member of any Masonic Association and actively participates in its program and activities, or promotes its views, or holds any office therein, and refuses to renounce such membership despite at least one warning (cf. Canon 1347) is to be punished with an *interdict* (cf. Canon 1374), that is: *a*) he is not to be admitted to Holy Communion and other sacraments (Cf. Canon 1332); *b*) he is prohibited to act as sponsor in Baptism and Confirmation; *c*) he is not to be admitted as member of parish or diocesan structures; *d*) he is to be denied funeral rites, unless some signs of repentance before death have been shown (cf. Canon 1184, §1, no. 3); *e*) where Church funeral rites are *allowed* by the bishop, no Masonic

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<sup>12</sup> See *supra*. Cfr. SACRA CONGREGATIO PRO DOCTRINA FIDELI, *Declaratio de canonica disciplina quae sub poena excommunicationis vetat ne catholici nomen dent sectae massonicae aliisque eiusdem generis associationibus*, Vatican, February 17, 1981; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration on Masonic Associations*, Vatican, November 26, 1983.

services shall be allowed in the Church or cemetery immediately before or after the Church rites in order to avoid public scandal (Cf. Canon 1184, §1, no. 3, and Canon 1374).

Additionally, any Catholic who is a convinced member of Freemasonry, notoriously adhering to the Masonic vision, is already considered excommunicated *latae sententiae* (Cf. Canon 1364). As such he is forbidden: *a)* to have any ministerial participation in celebrating the Eucharistic Sacrifice or in any other ceremonies whatsoever of public worship; *b)* to celebrate the sacraments and sacramentals and to receive the sacraments; *c)* to discharge any ecclesiastical offices, ministries, or functions whatsoever, or to place acts of governance.

Or in cases where the excommunication has been imposed or declared, the guilty party: *a)* wishing to act against the prescription of §1 is to be prevented from doing so or the liturgical action is to stop unless a serious cause intervenes; *b)* invalidly places acts of governance which are only illicit in accord with the norms of §1 no. 3; *c)* is forbidden to enjoy privileges formerly granted; *d)* cannot validly acquire a dignity, office or other functions in the Church; *e)* cannot appropriate the revenues from any dignity, office, function or pension in the Church.

Finally, in keeping with past CBCP decisions and in virtue of Canon 455 §4, Masons so described above are to be disallowed from being witnesses in Marriage, and as members of any associations of the faithful.

All of these still hold because it would do well for bishops to be reminded once again that “*it is not within the competence of local ecclesiastical authorities to give a judgment on the nature of Masonic associations which would imply a derogation from what has been canonically stipulated.*”

All this said, there can be no question of bishops and Episcopal Conferences engaging Masons on the *institutional level* as this is a settled question. One must, therefore, recognize that the issue is no longer with respect to the acceptability of Masonry (as an organization) and its teachings and practices. Rather, the issue is with respect to *individual Catholics* whose membership in Masonic associations poses a serious problem and difficulty for the Church in her pastoral practice. In other words, the problem is about finding a way to deal with such Catholics that would not contradict Church teaching but at the same time, one that is pastorally sensitive to their spiritual welfare in the particularity of their situation. This is what requires *openness*, but at the same time *prudence* and *circumspection*.

*First*, it is obvious that if one has fully embraced the Masonic philosophy and is perceived to be openly inimical to the Church, and nothing could be done to persuade him to retract and give up membership, he deserves the full force of the law, as outlined above. This should be discernible enough depending on the strain of Masonry (there seems to be two or three more of them now)<sup>13</sup> one has associated himself with. It appears, however, that dealing with a mason belonging to the most rigid strain of Masonry would seem to be less “pastorally” problematic. His commitment and strict adherence to Masonry would in itself dispose him to reject and be critical of Church

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<sup>13</sup> It is said that the freemasonry that had been introduced into the Philippines was of the Latin strain that was bitterly anti-clerical, less tolerant, more intransigent and more militant than its American counterpart, which would then represent another strain. (Cf. P.S. DE ACHUTEGUI, S.J. and M.A. BERNAD, S.J., *Religious Revolution in the Philippines*, Vol.1 1860-1940, Ateneo de Manila, 1960, p. 154.)

teaching and practice, thereby disposing him as well to stay away from seeking pastoral attention from the Church. No doubt, this sort of person for all practical purposes would cease and refuse to call himself Catholic.

*Second*, there are also those who are contemplating membership and about to join in masonic associations. *Dialogue* might just succeed in preventing them from doing so, especially if they were to be reminded and warned about the serious dangers they would expose themselves to, were they to forge ahead. The errors of Masonry should be taught to them exhaustively and they must be made aware of the (canonical) consequences of Masonic membership in accordance with Church discipline. These Catholics need to know that what they are made to suppose they would gain in joining Masonic associations are things that they could also obtain in other Church mandated or other civic-minded organizations.

While dialogue with *individual* Catholics is recommended here, one such dialogue with masons on the *corporate/institutional* level (*i.e.*, with high-ranking masons) seems futile and fruitless. As already noted above, this was already done in the past, but no positive result has ever been obtained from such an effort. For one thing, masonic occult practices, guaranteed by the pronouncement of oaths to keep them secret, prevent committed members from being open and honest about their beliefs and practices.

*Third*, there are those who already find themselves “trapped”, as it were, within the confines of Masonic fraternity, whether they had been initiated into it with little or no understanding at all of the errors of Masonry on their part, or whether they have just eventually come to love the positive things that Masonry has taught and brought upon them. It could also be that once inside, it may not be that easy for them to leave without the usual denunciations of fellow members and without losing the benefits of membership that they have already begun to reap and continue to enjoy. These Catholics are what were referred to earlier as “*nominal Masons*” (conversely, “*nominal Catholics*”) because they continue to *profess* and *live* their Catholic faith, and fulfill their Catholic obligations, though in an anomalous, contradictory manner.

It is to these Catholics that “openness” might be appropriate. It must be emphasized, however, that *openness* to them does not mean acceptance of Masonry, but rather a legitimate expression of the Church’s concern to reach out to the “*lost sheep*”, and one that reflects Pope Francis’ emphasis on *mercy* and *compassion* in his pontificate. In any case, dialogue with them that would demonstrate the incompatibility of Masonic tenets and practices with Catholic teaching, would still be the best strategy to persuade them to give up membership. But where dialogue proves ineffective, a more “personal” approach might prove helpful. Any decision or action to be taken against or in favor of any such individuals ought not be made unless effort is expended to know in a more profound way, the individual’s life and personal circumstances. It is based on this *personal knowledge* that it could be ascertained whether the individual deserves the pastoral “openness” that is desired.

The question is, in what should this “openness” consist? A cue in the form of another question might just provide an answer worth a pastor’s consideration. Namely, if one such “nominal Mason” approaches the Church to avail of the sacraments, whether for himself or for his family and children, would this not constitute an explicit manifestation of his faith in the Church and in her sacraments? Given his situation, his move might still appear anomalous (contradictory), yet

one that would seem to disqualify him from being considered a full pledged “apostate” who deserves excommunication and the interdict imposed by Canon 1374. The sacraments do not have a place, theoretically that is, in the life of a hard core Mason. Why would one who has completely lost faith in sacramental grace ask for it?

An analogical situation would seem to be that of the Filipino in Germany, who to avoid paying Church tax (*Kirchensteuer*) to the German government, publicly declares that he is no longer a Catholic (*ausgetreten der katholischen Kirche*), nor that he has embraced any other religion (*religionslos*), but who when coming home to the Philippines asks for the sacraments. This used to be a problem of many parish priests in the Philippines because they used to receive every now and then notices from their counterparts in Germany, insructing them to note in the baptismal register a “former” parishioner’s exit (*Austritt*) from the Church. The move, they were told, should prevent the individual concerned from receiving the sacraments. When the issue was brought by the Filipino Bishops to the CDF’s attention during their *ad limina* visit in 2011, they were told that this was a peculiar “policy” in Germany that may be ignored elsewhere. The reason provided was that such an “exit”, driven as it was simply by financial motives, did not constitute a “*formal renunciation*” of faith.

Might the same be said of the “nominal Mason” who asks for the sacraments? What seemed crucial from the CDF’s point of view was whether an act constituted a *formal renunciation of faith* and for as long as that could not be established, a “lapsed” Catholic may still be allowed to receive the sacraments, pending of course the fulfillment of other conditions that need to be imposed. Of course, there is no easy way one could tell whether or not that has taken place in the case of the deceased. Diligent investigation, however, can tell whether no such formal renunciation has been made in spite of masonic membership or at best whether the person concerned has repented or recanted (however confidentially) sometime in his life. Such may be reason enough to allow funeral services, provided again that certain conditions are met. For example, no Masonic services are to be allowed in the Church or cemetery immediately before or after the Church rites in order to avoid “public scandal”.<sup>14</sup>

The position taken here, of course, does not mean to imply that every such “lapsed” Catholic – such as a nominal mason – *ought* be given such pastoral consideration, for the safer course would always be to act in favor of the law. In other words, one can always choose to refuse the sacraments to such a “lapsed” Catholic if propriety dictates it, that is, should this still be the best move in order to protect the moral sensitivity of the faith community to which the person belongs.

Given the complexity of the issue and the particularities of every case, a fixed and “*one-size-fits-all*” template (formula) cannot be provided, one according to which every decision and judgment could be made. Prudence dictates that bishops and priests remain circumspect and attentive to the unique situation of every individual that seeks the Church’s embrace and pastoral attention. One must, however, *always* remember that in issues like this as in any other of such kind, the overriding principle is that of *salus animarum*. Such is the supreme law to which every other law is to be subordinated.

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<sup>14</sup> See 1990 CBCP *Guidelines on Membership in Freemasonry* (*supra*).



In conclusion, to combat masonry and any organization or association for that matter *which* (according to canon law) *plots against the Church*, the work of catechesis is absolutely necessary. Among the tasks catechesis seeks to achieve, *a)* deepening of the knowledge of the faith, *b)* liturgical education, *c)* formation in Christian community life, and *d)* moral formation, are particularly urgent. Through catechesis, Catholics should be equipped enough to recognize what truly militates against the Church, to pinpoint what is adverse to Catholic tradition, and to identify what is contrary and injurious to Catholic faith and morals. All these should prevent them from joining any such group whose (only goal) is the destruction of the Catholic Church and the perdition of every Catholic believer. Catechetical instruction need not be specific in pinpointing or naming any particular group, which is what Canon 1374 did. But if it succeeds in clearly distinguishing error from the truth in matters of faith and morals, that should be enough to dissuade every conscientious Catholic from being hooked into succumbing to heresy and occultism.

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Going through these recommendations, making sure they do not compromise Church teaching but at the same time reflect the Church's solicitude for souls, very well calls to mind what PCP II said many years ago: *"We have to deal firmly with problems that arise in connection with the membership of Catholics in Masonic lodges but we recognize the need for appropriate pastoral guidelines. Bishops and priests will exercise great pastoral prudence and charity in this regard so that with God's grace they may 'unite all in Christ.'"*<sup>15</sup>

✠ J. ROJAS

Chairman, CBCP ECDF

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<sup>15</sup> *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines*, 20 January – 17 February 1991, Manila (1992), n. 233, p. 84.