

The Strength of our Obligations from Yesterday To Today

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Prior to the early modern period, Masons suffered persecutions in many countries by kings, queens, and the Roman Catholic Church. These tortures included burning at the stake, being wrapped in an iron chain and then having that chain pulled in such a manner as to rend the flesh from your body. Sometimes they would . . . after you would not confess the secrets of Freemasonry . . . place your feet bottoms close to a fire . . . after rubbing your feet bottoms with fat. They did this in such a manner and then they regulated the heat with screens so that the torture was made more exquisite and unendurable, but in the end the flesh would be burned from your heels and your bones would be showing. A real interesting way of burning others other than at the stake was to soak their clothes in wax then tying them to a tree where they used them as torch lights to lighten their courtyards.

These were harsh penalties, but even into the 20th century, Master Masons have suffered and the penalties were instituted. One prime example was in Nazi Germany and many more countries. Even today there are some churches that ban men and women from joining Freemasonry under the persecution of excommunication.

It was during the early modern period that the penalties evolved into their present form. They appear in all three degrees as well as in subsequent degrees and it is obvious that

The Strength of our Obligations from Yesterday To Today – Sebastian Di Pietro

in the first three degrees they relate specifically to the Hiramic story of the Third Degree. They are quite simply presented as the punishment Hiram's killers deserved for the crime committed.

It may be that the modern penalties, the ones created by Gentleman Masons can be explained as part of the symbolism of that cautionary tale.

But we must not predate the Hiramic Legend. At least it was based on something that existed long before Hiram Abif entered the picture.

Although written references do not appear until the 3rd century, it may have existed in Masonic lore much earlier. It may be a modern version of something that was kept secret by Masons of an earlier day. It was thought that these rituals were set in Biblical times, the nature of the penalties and their historic context suggest that they are either a holdover of actual medieval practices or a legend intended to remind the craft of its medieval origins.

At this point in time the Medieval Templars rise to tease us. The idea of a brotherhood killing its own who would reveal secrets using Biblical methods to do it comes straight out of the trial of the Templars. Their most likely method of dealing with treachery was precisely what the early ritual stipulated.

If we agree that the Templars used these methods, then we need to look no further. However, the stonemasons had their own ways of protecting their propriety secrets but the Templar's solutions were more dramatic and glamorous. We can be pretty confident that the operative masons imported only the ritual and not the actual practice. Once the

The Strength of our Obligations from Yesterday To Today – Sebastian Di Pietro

danger of the inquisition passed it is unlikely that they would have a need to kill their own members for any reason. (Note: The penalties do not appear in the Gothic Constitutions).

As early as 1929 a huge propaganda program had developed in Germany. It was spread in the public press, various assemblies and in special training courses. Freemasonry was being slandered . . . we were generally referred to as an international union of conspirators guilty of high treason. Leaders were assaulted in the press. Any attempt by Freemasons to defend themselves was refused. Because of this none dared to petition Masonic Lodges and many servants were forced to either sacrifice their position or take their demits. Anyone opposing the propaganda program was suspended and sent to concentration camps.

Those officials who had been Freemasons were excluded from promotion and or dismissed. Their property was ransacked, inventories taken and then destroyed because the property was taken to "Nazi Museums" founded in several large German cities. Note: German Lodges are among the few communities which remain practically unchanged for more than 271 years, interrupted only by the war. Their oldest Lodge being the Grand Lodge "Absalom" in Hamburg, dated 6 December 1737.

As you can see that during the 18th and 19th centuries the Craft had some soothing out happening . . . in any event let's get back to the penalties from medieval times that would not have survived to be used today.

The spirit of the penalties was retained by gentlemen who loved and respected tradition. Like the square and trowel as well as other tools used by operative stonemasons the penalties are now used only to fashion the symbolic building stone, on all initiates who come onto this ancient craft to gain fellowship and wisdom.

The Strength of our Obligations from Yesterday To Today – Sebastian Di Pietro

There is no doubt that incidents have occurred in the recent past that still influences the attitudes of non-Masons . . . and to this day Masonry labors under the lingering burden of its after effects. Examples: The Reverend Thomas Becket, Henry II of England, and Captain William Morgan.

Again, since the beginning of the 19th century many groups have been victims of outbursts of popular fury i.e.: Native Americans, Mormons, Freemasons, Anti-slavery Abolitionists and many more.

In the early 20th century immigrants from Ireland, Eastern Europe and Mexico became victims of those outbursts of popular fury. For many years the Federal Government and the Supreme Court of the United States did nothing to protect the rights of these persecuted minorities.

The Freemasons were victims of these outbursts in the 1820s and 30s and they suffered severely from them. In some states Freemasonry ceased to function, in all states Freemasonry's membership fell. It took 30 years before it began to revive.

Freemasons were able to become what Speculative Freemasons in England had intended in the early 18th century: an organization where men of conflicting opinions could meet in friendship despite their differences on the burning issues of the day.

I don't believe that in the 21st century that these extremes are necessary . . . However, today's Masonry requires a great deal from its brethren. Please consider some of the following:

The Strength of our Obligations from Yesterday To Today – Sebastian Di Pietro

1. Being a Mason today requires action not inaction.
2. Today's Mason needs to work actively and earnestly for the benefit of the Craft, his country and mankind.
3. He should be a patron of the oppressed and a comforter and consoler of the unfortunate.
4. He most certainly should be humble and modest before God.
5. As a Mason he should be satisfied that there is a real God infinitely wise.
6. He should treat his brother who goes astray with charity.
7. He would much rather pass his life hidden in the recesses of the deepest obscurity, doing good and noble deeds rather than to be placed on the most splendid throne in the universe.
8. A Mason should be able to look upon death and see its face with the same countenance with which he hears its story, endure all the labors of his life with soul supporting his body and equally despise riches when he has them and when he doesn't.
9. Masons do good...naturally and because he longs to.
10. A Mason is held by his promises to a purer life, to toleration, charity, and generosity.
11. And finally . . . Masons should at all times live to keep to their sworn obligations and to stretch their cable tow as necessary to fulfill them.

These are just some of the penalties we come under today.

There are many young men of vision, with much energy and enthusiasm that we need to lead into this great fraternity, both today and tomorrow. We must be aware that we are competing for their most valuable asset . . . their time and that of their families. Remember there are many other interests competing for the same. We know it's what is inside a man that determines how he thinks and acts every day of his life, and that's what

The Strength of our Obligations from Yesterday To Today – Sebastian Di Pietro

our tenets are about. We should never allow ourselves to forget that it is the Masonic Message, planted deep within a man that makes him a Mason.

It's not attending meetings, holding office, or having accolades piled upon him. We should be concerned about how as Masons live on Main Street USA.

I believe that if we remember what our brethren of yesterday had to endure to keep our secrets, and remember our obligations which we all took upon ourselves we will acquire these young men that we need because they will wish to join our fraternity. Thank you for giving me some of your most valuable asset and allowing me to express some of my many thoughts to you.

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