

INITIATION, - Once, Only Once, and forever.

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(Slightly edited by the Grand Lecturer)

When, late in life, Cardinal Newman was asked by an interviewer what was the most important day in his life, he did not reply 'the day I became Cardinal' as was doubtless the expected reply, but rather the day 'the day I was baptised'. In other words, the day he became a Christian. One would hope if asked a similar question, high ranking Freemasons would not reply, 'the day I received my Grand Lodge apron' but rather 'the day I was initiated into Freemasonry'. Freemasonry is an initiatory society and what that means is the subject of this short paper.

If you walk along the corridor on the first floor of Tapton Masonic Hall in Sheffield, you will see on the wall a poster dated from 1797. That poster celebrate the opening of Sheffield General Hospital and if you look closely, you will see that apart from the Freemasons, there were representatives of thirty-six other fraternal organisations and yet, today, of all those societies, the only one that still exists is Freemasonry. Why is that?

The simple answer is that the primary function the other fraternal bodies performed was financial: they provided relief to their members when they were taken ill or could not work for any reason, and gave a grant to their families to help with funeral expenses. Once the state took over these social functions about a hundred years ago, all these organisations gradually faded away. But the Freemasons did not. Why is that?

The answer to that question, I would suggest, is that Freemasonry is an initiatory society and the others were not. History suggests that societies that have initiation ceremonies tend to last and those that do not have tended to fade away. In short the essence of Freemasonry is not its social functions and its charitable donations, but something much deeper.

Like all initiatory rituals, Masonic Initiation is a single, irreversible process; one cannot be un-initiated, nor can one be initiated twice. Even if one resigns from a lodge and from the Craft one does not cease to be a Freemason, any more than a Priest who ends up in prison for un-mentionable offences, ceases to be a Priest. He cannot exercise his priestly function because his licence will have been withdrawn, but he still a Priest. Ordination is another one off rite of passage that cannot be repeated or reversed. Likewise a Freemason for life. For the Jewish boy, his circumcision is not a small medical procedure but a rite of passage and the moment he becomes a Jew. It is yet another initiatory rite. I need hardly say, that ceremony cannot be repeated.

A major aspect of all initiations is that to be valid, certain specific things have to occur. Let me give you an example of Christian baptism since it is probably the initiatory rite other than Masonic initiation with which most Freemasons are familiar. You may be surprised to know that you do not need to be a Priest nor even a Christian to perform a perfectly valid Christian baptism. Anyone can do it and it would be perfectly valid, provided five essential boxes are ticked. First, you have to *intend* to baptize the child – intention is important in making a Mason too – secondly you have to use the word '*baptize*' as in 'I baptize you...' for instance 'I christen you ...' will not do. Again, in Freemasonry we are very careful to repeat the words correctly. Thirdly, you have to name the child because you are giving the child his or her Christian name.

Fourthly, you have to do it in the name of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And lastly, you have to pour water three times over the head of the child – not for instance – dip your

finger in the water and mark the boy's forehead with the sign of a cross. If you do that the baptism would not be valid. And that's it – job done. And it cannot be repeated or undone. If for instance, years later the person concerned wishes to marry in church and the priest asks if he or she is baptised and they cannot provide evidence that they were baptized as a baby, the priest cannot just go ahead and baptize them again. He has to perform what is called a 'conditional baptism' which just means adding the words 'If you have not already been baptised then I baptise you....etc.'

You will all be aware that a Lodge Secretary has to make a number of enquiries about any potential candidate. These are not just to ensure that the person is of good repute, but also to make sure he has never been initiated before. Initiation is once, only once and forever.

Now let me now compare that rite of Christian initiation to the Masonic First Degree ceremony. You will recall that there are certain things in the ritual that have to be done for the initiation to be valid. There have to be at least seven Freemasons present and they have to intend to make the candidate a Mason. Also the candidate must be divested of all metals. You will recall later in the ceremony, in the passage delivered in the North- East corner, that the candidate is asked to put something into the Junior deacons apron 'the smallest coin of the realm even' One reason given is to prove that he does not have any metallic substance on him. You will also recall the next phrase '.....or else the ceremony thus far would have had to be repeated'. In other words, it would not have been valid because one of the conditions would not have been met.

Another condition is that the candidate must be hoodwinked because he is on a journey from darkness to light. Some of you will recall the explanation for the hoodwink in another degree. 'Let that want of light remind you that man is by nature a child of ignorance and error and as such would ever have remained under the darkness of the shadow of death had it not pleased the Almighty to raise him to life and immortality by the revelation of His most Holy Will and Word' which, of course we find in the VSL to which the candidate's attention is drawn immediately after he has taken his obligation and first sees the light.

The candidate is slipshod because he is on holy ground. You will recall the phrase from the VSL from God to Moses. 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet for the place upon which thou standest is holy ground'. And as with other initiatory rites, the candidate has to consent to being initiated freely. '...of his own free will and accord'.

I could go on, but you know for yourselves the various other conditions that have to be met for a Masonic initiation to be valid. As with other initiatory rituals certain things have to be done for the process to be valid. But once initiation has been performed correctly then it is forever. Another Mason has been 'made' and he cannot be re-made on un-made.

It is interesting to note that history suggests that only initiatory societies stand the test of time; Freemasonry for around 600 years so far. Christianity for just over 2000 years, Judaism for more than 3000 years. I wonder how much longer Round Table and Rotary International will be around. Will they prove history wrong, or will they go the way of the sixty-plus fraternal organisations that processed through the street of Sheffield in 1797 and have since disappeared?

In an article by the late, Michael Baigent in 'Initiation and Freemasonry' he said that 'Masonic Initiation was a journey' This is incorrect. The Masonic journey or pilgrimage begins *after* initiation which, like all initiatory rites, involves an ontological change (This is just a philosophical term meaning an absolute change of being or state) After his initiation, the person is changed fundamentally. If we think for a moment of tribal initiations in Africa we know that boys enter the ceremony as boys and emerge from it as men. There is no gradual evolution from boyhood to manhood as in the West. Similar ceremonies exist for girls. In

Maori tribe for instance. As with Masonic Initiation the change happens immediately and is permanent.

Baigent talked of the candidate being involved: 'initiatory ritual demands our involvement'. That's wrong too. You are *made* a Mason by others, you are not involved in the process yourself except by giving your consent 'freely and voluntarily' to it being done to you. Likewise, on behalf of the infant, his Christian or Jewish parents give their consent to those initiation ceremonies to take place 'freely and voluntarily'. Initiation is something that is done *to* you not *by* you.

This only goes to show brethren that there is nothing more important in Freemasonry than the ceremony of Initiation, because it is the foundation stone upon which our society rests. I would therefore urge you to try and attend as many as possible, not only to support the candidate and the future of our Order, but as a constant reminder of its importance in our own lives and what it means to be 'made a Mason'.

I've just asserted that after an initiation the person concerned is fundamentally different – changed for life. Do you think what I have said is true? In the words of John Betjeman's famous poem on Christmas. 'And is it true, and is it true?'

You will, I am sure, have heard many elderly Freemasons say that one doesn't understand what Freemasonry is about until one has been a Freemason for at least 20 years. I puzzled about this for a long time because it seemed to me as a bald statement to be obvious nonsense. Then it occurred to me that perhaps those that were saying it were not expressing themselves accurately, that they were not saying precisely what they meant to say.

I think that what they are trying to say is that once one has been a Freemason for 20+ years and one looks back over one's life for that period of time or longer, one begins to realise what an enormously important part Freemasonry has played in it and therefore, what a life changing act being made a Mason is. In other words, after several decades one can then see clearly the deeper import of a society such as ours that is Initiatory and the true significance and effect upon our lives of being made a Mason.

But what of the man who is made a Mason, but who resigns after a short time? Again, I would answer that question with another story. If a seed falls on stony ground it does not grow. For it to grow it needs to be planted in fertile soil and to be watered regularly. But even if the seed lies on stony ground, it is still there. It still exists. If it did not exist, then it would not grow and blossom in those men where it is well planted and watered regularly by regular attendance at Lodge.

That seed is planted at our Initiation – once, only once and forever.