

The Pope and The Pornographer - Leo Taxil's Hoax

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The long quarrel between Freemasonry and Catholicism By: Brian Riggs, formerly a Franciscan brother, is the son of a Past Master Councillor, grandson of a Master Mason, and nephew of a Grand Master. How the longstanding grievances between these two great movements came to a head with the antics of a French publisher of smutty books. When Pope Leo XIII, in his 1884 encyclical *Humanum Genus*, admonished the Roman Catholic faithful to expose Masonic subversions wherever found, fervent response came from the least likely of quarters.

Leo Taxil—the pen name of one-time Mason, longtime pornographer, and anti-Catholic polemicist Gabriel Jorgand-Pages, became an outspoken leader in the pontiff's anti-Masonic crusade. Voicing contrition for the considerable ink he had spilt defaming both clergy and Church in his native France, Taxil sought a remission of the several excommunications weighing against his soul. After authoring several pious tracts and performing a lengthy penance, he was ultimately absolved. He then devoted his considerable literary energy not only to extolling the Roman faith but to asserting Freemasonry's impious roots. The books were very well received, and in 1887 the publisher who confirmed Catholic suspicions about Masonic diabolism was granted a private audience with the Holy Father.

For centuries before this unlikely team of pontiff and pornographer, the Roman Catholic Church was alternately Masonry's benefactor and nemesis. The operative guilds that raised the greatest of medieval cathedrals were devoted and financially bound to the Church of Rome. Master masons, schooled in the arts of architecture and geometry, often received lifelong employment and acquired a social standing that put them nearly on par with priests and nobility.

During this heyday of operative masonry, the Craft enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Catholicism. Medieval masons even included fealty to the Church in their code of ethics: "Those who would be Masons and practice the Masonic art are required to love God and his Holy Church, the Master for whom they labour and their Masonic brethren, for this is the true spirit of Masonry." This connection to the Church continued as late as the seventeenth century, when a later code invited Masons to "be true man to god & the holy church & that ye use neither erour nor heresie according to your own understanding or discreet and wise mens teachings."

Medieval masons' intimate and jealously guarded knowledge of geometry formed the foundation of an esotericism that was built into the Gothic cathedrals of France and Germany. Church fathers had long taught that "the mason looks at the archetypes, grasps the divine model, and makes an impression of it in real material." For the esoterically grounded mason, the physical universe was "not real in itself, but was the image of the ultimate reality behind the senses. [Masons] sought this through those abstractions of geometry and number which were most clearly seen to express the nature of the infinite."

To erect cathedrals of such perfect proportions, masons were certainly schooled in the sacred geometry of the age. Applying a hybrid of Pythagorean mathematics, Christian theology, and Platonic cosmology popular among the Catholic mystics and intelligentsia of the day, master masons erected cathedrals that were microcosms of the universe as it was conceived by the medieval mind. Entering through a cathedral's western portal, Christians journey to-ward the rising sun, the resurrected Christ whose redemptive sacrifice is reenacted at the altar. Vaulted arches and thin walls punctuate the buildings' otherworldly qualities. And at the centre of the church, nave and transept are pierced vertically by dome and altar, forming the axis mundi that joins heaven to earth, the divine to the mundane. The geometry and numerology that the master masons built into their Gothic constructions seem to have formed sacred texts that can be read by trained observers. By transcribing the length, breadth, and other dimensions of the cathedrals into their corresponding letters, modern numerologists have discovered hidden messages that relate to each building's patron saint.' On the other hand, written records provide little indication that the operative masons' secrets were of a mystical or even a philosophic nature. Throughout the Middle Ages, hidden Masonic knowledge related largely to trade secrets kept for no more mystical a purpose than job security. They enabled the medieval craftsmen to monopolize large-scale construction projects in much the same way that Catholicism monopolized religion. An operative lodge of masons, for example, was offered lifelong employment to maintain the church of St. Mary's and other local edifices in Dundee, Scotland.

Trade secrets are documented in thirteenth-century France, where Etienne Boileau, provost of merchants, decreed that "masons, mortar-makers, and plasterers may have as many assistants and valets as they please to help them in their work, provided they teach them nothing about their trade." And in a manuscript dated to about 1430, the operative mason in Britain was advised to "keep secret the counsels of his fellows, whether given in the lodge, in the chamber, or any other place where masons be."

In 1486 German architect Wenzel Roriczer shocked contemporary Steinmetzen by publishing a volume that detailed how to calculate a pinnacle's elevation from two-dimensional diagrams. German master stonemasons had been expressly forbidden to reveal such knowledge: "No work-man, no master, no journeyman will tell anyone who is not of the craft and who has never been a mason how to take an elevation from a plan," says one decree dated to 1459. Secret means of identification seem to have a Scottish origin. In 1707 masons of Mother Kilwinning Lodge were advised not to hire tradesmen professing to be masons who were unable to provide the "password."

By 1600, the great age of cathedral construction was for masons little more than a pleasant memory of steady income. On the Continent the guilds died out, while in Britain they seem to have bolstered their numbers by accepting into their lodges other tradesmen and even local nobility as honorary members. (This system is echoed by modern universities which bestow honorary degrees on dignitaries.) By the 1700s, nontechnical members apparently out-numbered the operatives and the absence of a trade made trade secrets anachronistic. The philosophic Secret was then born in the form of social morality clothed in working-class allegory. The practical mathematics of construction were transmuted into Geometry, a system of knowledge that was often seen as mirroring or even rivalling the Christian Godhead. Speculative Freemasons also opened the operative tool-box and in it discovered an abundance of metaphorical wealth. The plumb symbolized rectitude, the level equality, the square morality, and the compass proper deportment. Upon spreading into France, Spain, and Italy, this speculative Freemasonry soon became a sort of counter-Church for freethinkers. In Britain it attracted members from the budding philosophy of Deism, and Freemasons who dabbled in secret Kabbalistic studies sometimes identified the mystical letter "G" with gnosis rather than geometry or God.

To the Church of Rome, an international organization espousing secrecy and potentially heterodox spirituality was little less than diabolical. And diabolism is what Taxil provided. Revelations completes surla franc-maçonnerie was released in 1886. In it Taxil offered a horrific glimpse into the Palladium, an ultrasecret order of Freemasons steeped in licentiousness and satanic ritual. Members were initiated into demonic degrees whose ceremonies required blasphemy and sacrilege against the Christian God as well as "public fornication . . . to show that the sacred act of physical generation is key to the mystery of being." If Palladian Masons, Taxil revealed, believed in dual gods, good and evil, and were involved in all sorts of mischief including Black Masses, profanation of the Eucharist, and seances capable of summoning Lucifer, Asmodeus, and no less fiendish to nineteenth-century Catholics Martin Luther and Voltaire. The Palladium had organizational centers in Germany, Italy, India, and the United States. One centre of this insidious web was Charleston, South Carolina, from which General Albert Pike, identified by Taxil as the "Sovereign Pontiff of Universal Freemasonry," commanded this devilish brotherhood. Taxil's exposes continued for more than a decade in books that were widely distributed throughout the Catholic world. In 1895, he was joined by Diana Vaughan, a former Palladian Grand Priestess who claimed lineage from the seventeenth-century Rosicrucian and alchemist Thomas Vaughan. Diana had recently converted to Catholicism and was now in hiding in France, fearing mortal consequences should the Craft ever discover her whereabouts. Over a period of two years Vaughan, in volumes entitled *Memoires d'une ex-Palladiste* that were published by Taxil, documented female Freemasons' role in the Palladium. She described ceremonies in which serpents seductively slithered across the bare breasts of Mistresses Templar. Moreover she disclosed the sordid details of the Palladium's recent history. Upon Pike's death, Master Mason Adriano Lemmi in Rome gained control of the organization. Vaughan, unhappy with the transfer of power, established a reform branch of the Palladium, which she had commanded until a vision of Joan Vaughan "of Arc prompted her conversion to Catholicism.

Taxil's and Vaughan's testimonies confirmed the Church wildest speculations. Catholic scholars pounced on this miraculous wealth of firsthand material. Bishop Fava of Grenoble published a booklet exposing "women's lodges" as harems and brothels for Freemasons. Leon Meurin, the bishop of Port Louis (now Mauritius), compared notes with Taxil, which Meurin later published in his treatise *La franc-maçonnerie, synagogue de Satan*. Fava and Meurin's polemics expanded on a long-established line of Catholic anti-Masonic writing.

In 1738, about twenty years after the public debut of the first speculative lodge, the blind and all-but-bedridden Pope Clement XII condemned, not only any particular Masonic secret, but Freemasonry's secrecy in general. "For if they were not doing evil," he reasoned in his bull *In eminenti*, "they would not have so great a hatred of the light." Clement's bull also vaguely mentioned "other just and reasonable motives" for placing Freemasonry under edict. This was apparently an allusion to a series of political scandals involving a Florentine lodge which in the early eighteenth century served as a front for anti-Catholic British operatives

Clement's document had its most intense response in Portugal, where at least one British Mason was tried by the Inquisition, tortured, and imprisoned in the galleys before being rescued through British diplomatic channels. Catholic prelates' obsession for sniffing out Masonic plots has been rivaled only by Freemasons' perennial fear of papal world domination. Though typically espousing religious neutrality, Masonic lodges have often been steeped in an anti-Catholic sentiment popular among their various

Protestant, Freethinker, Deist, and rationalist members. In France, Italy and Spain, lodges often became dens of anticlerical and revolutionary forces, which found Masonic secrecy an opportune veil to pull over prying papal and governmental eyes. In the United States, anti-Catholic Masonry has ranged from a general loathing of the papacy as “the torturer and curse of humanity” to a sort of rationalized discrimination on an individual level: “We do not receive them [Catholics]; we contend that a man owes his allegiance to where his faith is given; if a Catholic applies to us, knowing that his Church forbids it, it is evidence that he is ready to disobey where he has promised obedience. Therefore, we do not want him.”

Masonic anti-Catholicism has often been a popular but not officially sanctioned sentiment. Just the opposite is true of the Catholic Church, in which anti-Masonry was propagated at the highest levels of the hierarchy but has not been universally espoused by all faithful. For example, Clement’s seminal bull was not recognized by the French parliament and did little to check the spread of Freemasonry in France. In 1789, Catholic priests still presided over 26 of France’s more than 600 lodges. Some lodges were even housed in buildings owned by the Church. In Britain, Catholic Grand Masters included dukes, viscounts, and Robert Edward, ninth Lord of Petre, who was considered leader of Britain’s Catholic minority in the late 1700s. In America, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, whose brother was a Freemason, chose not to promulgate papal edicts against the Craft.” I do not pretend that these decrees are received generally by the Church, or have full authority in this diocese,” he wrote in a letter dated 1794.’ The skeptical Bishop Carroll had like-minded counterparts in nineteenth-century France. By 1896 Taxil’s anti-Masonic crusade was about to screech to an abrupt and dramatic halt.

Despite Vaughan’s popularity in Catholic circles, suspicious scholars and prelates had begun to demand that she either make a public appearance or present herself to a high-ranking cleric who could verify her background. Her integrity was called into question on numerous fronts, for example by the Catholic bishop of Charleston, who in the summer of 1896 visited Rome to defend the integrity of his diocese. Vaughan had recently described South Carolina’s satanic subculture in considerable detail, and the bishop took it upon himself to tell the pope in person that local Freemasons, though Protestants, were peaceable, honest, and given to works of charity. This testimony did not seem to shake Pope Leo’s belief in Vaughan. The pontiff himself sent her a letter in which he offered her protection and a private audience. However she might present herself, it was clear that Vaughan’s celebrity rendered her seclusion in an anonymous French convent unallowable. Taxil reluctantly organized a conference in Paris at which Vaughan promised to publicly address the world for the first time. When the day came, in the spring of 1897, Taxil mounted the stage alone. He proceeded to announce to the assembled press, clergy, and disgruntled Freemasons that for the past twelve years he had duped them all. Diana Vaughan was no more than an employee of an American type-writer company who once worked for Taxil as a stenographer. As mischievous as her employer, she had agreed to lend her name and face to Taxil’s hoax.

The Palladium, for its part, was utter nonsense, as Freemasons and less naive Catholics had been saying for years. References to “real-life” Palladian Freemasons like Adriano Lemmi and Albert Pike were no more than elaborate libels a despicable but effective technique that Taxil had employed in his anticlerical years to cast Pope Leo XIII as a homicidal maniac and Pope Pius IX as a sex fiend. Pike, though steeped in anti-Catholicism and racial bigotry, had nothing to do with global conspiracies or satanic rituals. With a sneer, Taxil cynically thanked the Catholic press and prelates gathered at the conference. He had wanted only to expose their ignorance, and they had played along famously. The twelve-year charade also repaid a debt long owed to the Freemasons. In 1881 the Temple of Friends of French Honour, embarrassed by Entered Apprentice Taxil’s reputation for plagiarism and lewd fiction, had drummed him out of the Grand Orient. For a while there was an honest effort to locate Vaughan, whom an unconvinced public believed had been abandoned to the bloodthirsty Palladium. Some Italian Freemasons refused to believe that the Vaughan incident was truly a hoax and for years actively sought Palladium membership. But for the most part, Masonic reactions varied from general disgust to an anticlerical chuckle at the considerable amount of egg on the face of their Roman nemesis.

Following Taxil’s outrageous hoax, the Church did not condemn Freemasonry quite so loudly. Nonetheless Catholicism remains threatened by a perception that Freemasonry is a sort of counter-Church that strives for its overthrow. Because lodges and meetings display ostensibly religious elements—including temples, altars, prayers, a moral code, vestments, a hierarchy, and unique imitatory and burial rites—Catholicism perceives Freemasonry as “a rival to the religion of the Gospel.”

Freemasonry’s modern perception of itself as a philosophic society that “works for material and moral improvement, and for the intellectual and social perfection of humanity” is no less challenging. The Church seems averse to the idea that Catholics might seek moral and spiritual improvement without her guidance. Catholicism, after all has had centuries of experience imparting ethical and spiritual knowledge through symbolic media, and resents the implication that symbols and teachings separate from its own are necessary to ethical development. Moreover the Church is indignant that such an undertaking would be attempted

without reference to Christ's redemption, from which, it teaches, the quest for spiritual and ethical perfection must derive.

Catholicism remains at odds with Freemasonry, at least at an official level. In 1983, the Code of Canon Law forbade Catholics from membership in secret societies in general, but did not address Freemasonry specifically. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith soon clarified this in the following terms: "The church's negative position on Masonic associations . . . remains unaltered since their principles have always been regarded as irreconcilable with the church's doctrine," and added, "Catholics enrolled in Masonic associations are involved in serious sin and may not approach holy communion." In the spring of 1996 Fabian Bruskewitz, bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska, included Freemasonry in a list of organizations whose members are subject to excommunication in his diocese. Excommunication, the Church's version of the death penalty whose punishment does not terminate with mortal life, continues to weigh against the souls of Catholic Freemasons.

After 1897, and for the remaining ten years of his life, Taxil printed a smorgasbord of anti-Masonic, anticlerical, and pornographic tides. He republished some of his juicier vilifications, such as "The Secret Love Affairs of Pope Pius IX," and even tried to relive the glory days of his great hoax by writing a title supposedly authored by a parish priest who was tracking Diana Vaughan's whereabouts. But Taxil found the libel and fraud market considerably less lucrative this time around. His name was anathema in the Catholic popular press, and Freemasons resented having been the protagonists of his twelve-year-long Satanic fantasy. And perhaps this has been Taxil's lasting gift to both Catholicism and Freemasonry: despite their 250-year odyssey of mistrust and discord, disgust with the hoaxer Gabriel Jorgand-Pages—a.k.a. Leo Taxil—has been at least one sentiment both can share.

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