RHETORIC

October 4, 2004

My Brothers,

It has been said, 'Masonry is a way of life.' Technically, that's a homily. A homily is an inspirational catchphrase that is less than a proverb and not as obvious as a slogan. 'Making good men, better men.', is a slogan. 'A bird in hand is worth two in the bush', is a proverb. Proverbs express universally accepted wisdom; slogans capture ideas; homilies are 'feel good' statements. A homily makes us feel good inside because we believe it says something about us; it is inspirational. Our homily says to us, "Masonry is a way of life. We are Masons. We live a Masonic way of life.”

Whether we realize it or not, we just reached that conclusion by means of Rhetoric, the second of the Masonic Liberal Arts. Rhetoric teaches the art of critical thinking to arrive at sound foundations in thinking and expressing our thoughts. Having a sound foundation in how we think may be even more important than what we think about. Critical thinking allows us to negotiate our way among slogans and homilies and other ideas to arrive at deeper truths about ourselves and life; and that destination is called wisdom.

In the art of Rhetoric, our thought about living a Masonic way of life is called a syllogism. That means a particular way of combining ideas which leads to a conclusion. In this instance, the formula is (A plus B derives C); where (A) Masonry is a way of life; plus (B) we are Masons; this derives, (C) we Masons live a Masonic way of life.

That seems to be an obvious conclusion for us (it feels good, anyway), but rhetoric teaches us to challenge the formula to arrive at deeper understandings and truths about things. Does A+B derive C under all conditions? Do all Masons live a Masonic way of life? Can one be a Mason and not live a Masonic way of life? Can one live a Masonic way of life without being a Mason? These are examples of rhetorical questions generated by the logic of critical thinking; their answers test the logical truths of our original thought.

Rhetoric also teaches us to ask questions about the parts of the formula, the basic ideas themselves, in order to understand what they mean. The first part of our syllogism is an idea that states, 'Masonry is a way of life'. Rhetoric asks, what is a way of life? What does it mean to have or be a way of life? What are the rules, boundaries, qualities, and expectations that, when met, constitute a way of life? Rhetoric also asks, 'What is Masonry'. In the second part of the formula Rhetoric asks, 'What is a Mason?'; what does it mean to be a Mason? Etc., etc.

So, to answer our rhetorical question, 'Can one live a Masonic way of life without being a Mason?', we would try to understand the fundamental ideas in it parts. We would look for the attributes of Masonry and the Masonic way of life and then compare them to any uniqueness in being or not being a Mason. For example, logic says that to enjoy the Masonic way of life one must be a Mason. But there are three degrees of Masonry; can all degrees enjoy the same Masonic way of life, or is full enjoyment dependent upon being a Master Mason? Can a lesser degree enjoy a lesser Masonic way of life, and is there such a thing? More questions!, and we still haven't even determined if a Masonic way of life is unique only to Masons.

By now, we may all have the beginnings of a headache - I do! This rhetoric stuff can give migraines a new definition! But this rhetoric stuff is important because words and ideas are sneaky; they shift and change their meanings depending on how they are put together. And rhetoric is a two-way street. Clever people in business, in advertising, and in politics, use the art of rhetoric to influence us every day. When we accept their slogans and inspirational catchphrases without thinking, without critical understanding of their underlying foundations and meanings, we are in danger. They can be used to sway us and set us off on paths we never intended to take, and that is how individuals and nations can be manipulated against their better judgment for profits or objectives in which they don't really believe. Without practicing the art of critical thinking, how will we detect the underlying truth of things? Without understanding how rhetoric can be used to come at us, how will we protect ourselves against being led down the wrong paths by clever words?

Masonry's answer points us to the toolset of the Liberal Arts and Sciences as a means to become better men. Among them, Rhetoric is a Mason's working tool which teaches us to think, to critically examine and test assumptions about ourselves and life. It helps us choose a 'way of life' among the many paths before us, and helps guard us against taking wrong paths. Ultimately, Rhetoric is a tool that helps point the way toward wisdom. But, we have to reach in and work the tool to benefit from it; wisdom does not come without work.

Masonry is a way of life, and that's no homily.

Think about it.

Br. Stephen C. Harrington