THE FRAMEWORK OF PIETY

October 6, 2003

My Brothers,

The subject of our Masonic education tonight is the Framework of Piety. What is it? Piety is something I usually associate with Monks and brown robes and Gregorian chants. Is there more to piety than monks? Do you have to be a monk to be pious? Is piety applicable to Masons? What is a Framework of Piety? I have SO many questions…

At first glance, Masonry does not seem to make a big deal of piety; there’s nothing said, explicitly, about it other than kneeling at the altar and bowing at the mention of the GAOTU. That would seem to mean one of three things: either Masonry does not emphasize piety, or piety is an instinctive part of Masonic practice, or my ideas about piety are wrong.

Last month, while preparing the education session on the Framework of Philosophy, I remembered two historical events in ancient Greece that dealt with piety and the consequences of impiety. The first event brought an end to what we call the “Golden Age of Greece”. It caused the loss of a war, the capture of Athens, and much death. The second event cost the world a great philosopher and set back independent thinking for centuries. It would seem that piety was serious business back then. Let’s look at these events and see if we can figure out what piety meant to the Greeks.

2400 years ago, the top Athenian military commander, Alcibiades, was George C. Patton, Chester Nimitz, and Benedict Arnold all rolled into one. He was an aristocrat, the hero of countless battles, and quite a lady’s man - but he was short in the Cardinal virtues, namely Temperance and Prudence. In 415 BC, on the night before his fleet set sail to war with Syracuse, Alcibiades got drunk with some buddies and performed a drunken parody of the Initiation rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries. As an Initiate of the Mysteries, he violated its secret rites by divulging secret Words and ritual in front of non-Initiates. It was all very funny to them and all very impious. On the same evening, gangs of his political opponents ranged through Athens destroying religious statues. (The statues were small figurines of the fertility gods found at the gates of houses. Being fertility symbols, they were notable for their large, erect phalluses. The gangs broke the phalluses off.) This defilement, a matter of great impiety, was falsely blamed on Alcibiades and his followers and created a major uproar. But, it was the news of his drunken violation of the Mysteries that stopped everything in Athens. He had sailed to war that morning only to be recalled to Athens to stand charges of impiety - the penalty for which was banishment or death. (Banishment meant expulsion from the protection of your city-state and was as good as death. The Greeks did NOT mess around with piety.)

He came back to stand trial - and the Fleet, without his leadership, sailed on to defeat and total loss. Alcibiades was found guilty of impiety and banished. He fled to Athens’s arch-enemy, the Spartans, who knew a good thing when they saw it. He was given a command - and orders to capture Athens. With no Fleet with which to supply itself, Athens was helpless. The Spartans, with Alcibiades, strangled Athens by land siege. In eight months, Athens lost 2/3 of its population to starvation and plague.

What is ironic is that under Spartan rule, Athens forgave Alcibiades his Benedict Arnold-like treason in a general amnesty - but he was still banished for impiety. It took years for him to be forgiven, and only after he donated a tremendous sum to lead the annual Procession from Athens to celebrate the Eleusinian Mysteries - the same Mysteries he had defiled. Net cost of his impiety - loss of the Fleet, loss of Athens, loss of 50,000 lives.

The second matter of impiety in Athens was the Trial of Socrates a few years later. We all know he lost and had to take poison Hemlock (again, it was death or banishment - and Athens wanted him dead). The two impiety charges against him were corrupting youth (by encouraging them to question authority and the Gods) and the second was claiming to have a personal Deity speaking to him alone - which he called his Daemon. Now that was impious! Scratch one bothersome philosopher.

The last thing Socrates said was “I owe a cock to Asclepius; do not forget to pay it.” OK, he owed a chicken to someone, right? No - Asclepius was the God of Medicine and Healing and Socrates was asking that a cock be sacrificed to the God for him after he was dead. It is ironic that his last thought was of an act of piety while being executed for impiety.

The point of these stories is to cast ‘light’ on the meaning of piety. To the Greeks, piety meant JUSTICE TO THE GODS. Justice to the Gods meant appropriate sacrifice and attention to ritual, appropriate behavior, and appropriate thinking towards the Gods.

So what does this mean to us, today? It is no accident that our system of Masonry was constructed, in part, with materials originally crafted by the ancient Greeks. To them, piety was an understood and essential building block for proper living. This same building block is an essential foundation in Masonry. In Lodge, piety is Just behavior toward the Supreme Architect of the Universe. We exhibit this just behavior at the altar on opening and closing, in the ritual prayers, and when we bow at the mention of the GAOTU. Each of these actions is approached with due reverence, instinctively, because we sense that each is an act of Piety, an act of Justice, toward the Divine.

Ironically, we Master Masons have our own moments of impiety. Our instincts fail us during our most profound Masonic work - the telling of the Legend of the Third Degree. If we think about its powerful message, how can Master Masons approach it in its entirety with anything short of reverent and pious behavior? No parts of it are trivial or intended as comedy; each piece of it has been hand-crafted by our Masonic Forefathers with the deepest symbolic meaning. Each piece builds to an ultimate truth; and to Master Masons, there is no greater affirmation of the Divine. If we bow at the mention of the GAOTU, are we to be less pious in the telling of the Legend, less just toward the Supreme Architect of the Universe?

As a final thought about the Framework of Piety and Masonry, let us confirm that piety becomes, for us, the cornerstone of the fourth Cardinal Virtue - Justice. We are told that Justice, in a very great measure, constitutes the really good man and we are told that Justice should be applied to all men, without distinction.

What we are not told, but should know instinctively, is that piety is also the justness of appropriate thinking and behavior toward our Brothers and fellow man. You see, in the sense that each of us, Brothers, is a part of the Divine, we are acting with piety toward the Divine when we render unto every man his just due. The ancient Greeks and our Masonic Forefathers understood.

There is a Framework of Piety for Masons - and Brothers, we don’t have to be a monk to be pious.

Br. Stephen C. Harrington