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Grand Lodge of Indiana

It is too early to evaluate the Vatican announcements of March 11 and March 17, 1968—the first stating that members of the Roman Catholic Church are now free to petition lodges of Freemasons and receive the degrees without threat of excommunication, the second denying the first.

The easy course for a Masonic editor to pursue at this time would be to say nothing at all, or to repeat sugar-coated platitudes which would be the equivalent of nothing. But the turn of events in ecumenical relationships will pose some problems for Freemasons and Catholics alike. Those problems will not go away. A Masonic editor is not worth his salt unless he faces those problems—not with idealism alone, but with idealism tempered with realism.

While all Masons of goodwill are gratified at the new spirit of toleration, understanding and friendship, many have looked upon the rapprochement with misgivings. Here and there thoughtful Masonic leaders have issued words of caution. That is as it should be. For anyone familiar with history is aware of the dangers inherent in the American tendency to move from one extreme to another.

It is equally important that both Masons and Catholics know — and remember—that members of the Catholic faith never have been debarred from petitioning for the degrees of Freemasonry. The ban has come from without, and not from within the Masonic Fraternity.

Eventually, Roman Catholics will be petitioning lodges for the degrees. There will be misunderstanding and

heartaches, perhaps divisions within lodges and controversies between members of the Craft. We may find that no old problems have been solved, but that many new ones have been created.

It is a time to stand steady—a time for calmness and mature thinking. To make haste slowly, in this instance, is the part of wisdom.

It also behooves every Mason to practice the virtues of silence and circumspection. Sacraments made by some of our Brethren without thinking, and quoted in the public press, have been shocking in their inaccuracy and irresponsibility.

For the present, it would seem to me that our Masonic leadership on lodge level and Grand Lodge level alike, and every individual Freemason, should keep in mind certain fundamentals:

*Every petition for the degrees of Freemasonry must stand on its own merits. Every Master Mason has the undisputed right to cast a vote for election or rejection as he, in his conscience, deems for the best interests of the Craft. Whether unwarranted discrimination is reflected in the vote of a Master Mason is not for the rest of us to say. We have no right to sit in judgment on the decision of any Mason at the ballot box. I would hope that every petition from a Roman Catholic might be treated as all other petitions, with neither discrimination nor undue preference by reason of religious belief alone. That is the way it *should* be, but many years may pass before the denunciations of more than two centuries are forgotten. Our Catholic friends must keep these facts in mind.

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* Harmony is the strength and support of all societies, more especially of ours. For this reason, and for other reasons equally sound, we must ever guard against the danger of driving the wedge of dissension into Freemasonry. Our Catholic friends must understand that also.

* We must remember always—and our Catholic friends should be so advised—that Freemasonry does not become involved in politics, does not exert pressure on legislative bodies, public officials or the courts, does not make official pronouncements on matters of public drives or campaigns. Policies unite men; programs divide them.

* We must remember always—and our Catholic friends should be so advised—that there never has been any question as to the position of American Freemasonry on complete separation of church and state. From the day the Constitution of the United States was ratified, the Fraternity has been firm and unwavering on that point. American Masons must not be expected to abandon their position or do anything to weaken that basic constitutional guarantee.

We must remember always—and our Catholic friends should be so advised—that American Freemasonry has a long and distinguished record of loyalty to the American public school system. Support of the public school is entirely consistent with the basic purposes of Freemasonry, and the Craft must not be expected to abandon that position.

* We must remember always—and our Catholic friends should be so advised—that there is one body and only one that can speak for Freemasonry. That is the Grand Lodge of Masons in a given Jurisdiction. Any move to by-pass the sovereign Masonic authority, directly or indi-

rectly, does a disservice to all Freemasonry. Our Catholic friends can not be blamed for their unfamiliarity with our official structure, but they should endeavor to become familiar with certain fundamentals as soon as possible. Our own obligation is to endeavor to make *Masons* familiar with the same fundamentals.

In the meantime, as one who has participated unofficially in many pleasant and heart-warming conversations with our Catholic friends over the last two years, I express the sincere hope that an atmosphere of increasing trust, respect and good will may be firmly established. Let us be forthright at the outset, and strive for a spirit of mutual understanding. Above all, let us do nothing in haste that could set back the gains of recent years or shatter the dreams of such great souls as Pope John XXIII and our own Ambassador of Good Will, Father John A. O'Brien. △

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