

What do Freemasons work on?

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What do Freemasons work on? To transmit. But what of this initiatory transmission in the 21st century? At the end of the 20th century, the exhaustion of a certain form of Freemasonry became evident. This was notably the case for the Freemasonry of sociability and notability that had irrigated social life in American cities. Some did not hesitate to predict the pure and simple disappearance of Freemasonry in the United States. Today, membership numbers have certainly shrunk, but American Masonic leaders report a resurgence of a new, more spiritual and demanding practice, with foundations closer to what we experience in Europe.

In France too, we observe a shifting of Masonic tectonic plates. Quietly, the traditional spiritual current is growing faster in membership numbers than the so-called societal or liberal obediences. The role of Freemasonry as a laboratory of ideas for the Republic is fading, and its image is dimming. Positivist humanism is often seen retrospectively as a form of political anthropocentrism of influence. The collapse of great ideologies, the wrong paths taken by enlightened minds steeped in humanism, have led to great humility. No one would dare affirm today, as Marcelin Berthelot did in 1887, that "the universe henceforth holds no mystery."

I quote Pierre Chevallier: "To want Masons who belong to this century to cease being of it when they are in their temples, or to wish that the Order recover its medieval ideal — it's a fine intention, but is it truly possible?"

How can we dare speak of tradition when we are currently the products of a modern society that has undergone a civilizational shift over the past few decades? We must dare speak of it precisely because the essential questions remain, and the prevailing hedonism of solitary crowds opens an abyss to our permanent anxieties that a vague nostalgia cannot fill. This is the sad observation Antoine de Saint-Exupéry expressed in a famous letter written in 1943: "There is only one problem, one alone in the whole world. To restore to men a spiritual meaning, spiritual concerns (...). One cannot live on refrigerators, politics, balance sheets, and crossword puzzles, you see! One no longer can. One can no longer live without poetry, colour, or love. (...) We must absolutely speak to mankind."

We were not born into one of those traditional societies described by ethnologists.

Our worldview, the knowledge acquired from primary school to university, even our religious or spiritual upbringing, remain unaware of traditional processes until our encounter with Freemasonry — if it is capable of transmitting teaching on the essential and the ultimate, and if the newly initiated is capable of receiving it.

What do Freemasons work on? To transmit. Twenty-first-century man lives in an information society that confuses information, knowledge, and understanding. Understanding belongs to the order of intimate and profound experience. It encompasses every dimension of man — sensory, rational, and spiritual. Unlike fashionable personal development, the collective dimension lies at the heart of the Masonic experience; it is a fraternity of shared pilgrimage. In Freemasonry, there is no guru — it is the group, the lodge, that is "initiating." The ideal of brotherhood is knowing that understanding cannot exist without love. The only fraternity worth pursuing for Freemasons is to work as brothers in service of universal brotherhood. A fraternity limited to Masons alone would be a fraternity of sect, of tribe — a total contradiction of the Masonic ideal, one that disfigures it and has done great harm to the moral reputation of Freemasonry.

Our relationship to silence, time, and death

References are changing, and certain aspects of the initiatory experience are taking on new importance. We have questioned the importance of silence in the Masonic experience, echoing what our contemporaries experience in a relationship to noise unknown to previous generations: a permanent sound environment with recorded, portable music, continuous information on television channels, elevator music that seeks to turn us into robots, to prevent us from hearing and seeing — a cover for the ugliness of a desecrated world, steeped in permanent excitement. As if, in this profane noise, there were nothing left to hear. Modern man believes he knows everything, and he knows nothing. Our age believes it can expel silence just as it believed it could expel death.

Lost speech, or lost silence? To rediscover speech, twenty-first-century man must first rediscover silence. There is no other path. Silence is distressing for those who do not know it. The learning of silence belongs to the order of knowledge, of experience, of a discipline that allows for its conquest. Then the synonym for silence is no longer emptiness or nothingness, but becomes fullness, calm, and serenity.

This is indeed the strength of the Masonic method, of this pedagogy through the group, through the brothers gathered in lodge, to ask the new apprentice to keep silent — not merely to deprive him of speech. Hearing, the only active sense in the first part of the initiation, is sister to silence. Silence has become a constitutive element of the spiritual dimension of our approach and of the rhythm of ritual.

The richness of Freemasonry lies in this dual characteristic: fidelity to tradition, and a work of emancipation. The former is not a passive fidelity, an archaism of primitive religion that would crush its followers; it is a tool for understanding the world that reconciles us with the idea of transcendence. The latter is constitutive of man's

responsibility, where knowledge surpasses belief. How can one internalise this dual dimension of cyclical time and the time of construction, of the project?

How can one live tradition within modern technical society, so prosaic, where everything is wanted immediately, where one believes one has understood everything because one has read something online or seen on television a presentation of a subject that claims to explain everything about everything? Transmission is a slow infusion, where knowledge is only authentic if it is internalised through lived experience. Freemasonry is a school of patience and humility.

What do Freemasons work on? To transmit. As in a journey, what matters most is not the destination but the path. And the path is nothing without the walker, the walkers. One might say that in Masonic transmission, what matters most is the expression of transmission through ritual, which is the breath of Masonic life. The whole of Masonic gesture is not an artefact — it lies at the heart of the Freemason's experience. Those who share in the work of their Masonic brothers of the Emulation or Scottish Standard rites understand the meaning of this transmission without ego. The words of their ritual are like an inner silence, for they do not belong to them. To expand sacred space and time in order to sanctify life, to learn to contemplate: repetition is part of transmission — indeed, it is the very nature of ritual.

Whatever the generations, whatever the eras, the fundamental questions that man asks himself remain the same — eternal and infinite.

What do Freemasons work on? To transmit. By trying to be worthy of the promise of the path to be travelled in fraternity. By striving to live up to the expectations of younger generations, in an emancipatory fidelity.

So mote it be.

