

God's Word and Work

The Importance of the Masonic Chaplain

by Sir Knight Rev. James M. Keane

Before I began this article, I presented to my Brethren the following inquiry: There are nine duties of a Chaplain, and in order of descending importance, number seven is the prayers at opening and closing, number eight is work in the degrees, while number nine is prayers at dinners and special events. Can you name the top six? Unsurprisingly, I received no suggestions.

In my view, the Chaplain holds the greatest and most fulfilling office in Freemasonry for more reasons than the potential length of service that he may enjoy. Together with the Master and Secretary, his value to his brethren extends far beyond the open Lodge. The Chaplain is the bridge between the mundane and the divine, and a Brother faithful in his service is worthy of the esteem of his Brethren.

Think of the first sentence a candidate hears when he crosses the threshold of the inner door. The first person to lay hands upon him appeals directly to the Father on his behalf. The Chaplain is the one who proclaims from the altar the first words of Holy Scripture our Brother hears in his new Masonic life. In some Lodges, immediately after this new Brother has taken his obligation, the Chaplain steps to the altar and explains the vital importance to Freemasons of the written Word of God. He is often the one who later places that revealed Word into the hands of our new Brother. Yet all of these, compelling as they are, are actually among the least significant of his duties.

The Masonic Chaplain has existed since the earliest days of Freemasonry, operative Masons building the cathedrals and castles turned to ordained clergy in their devotions to God. Today it is a rare Lodge that enjoys the services of a religious professional, whatever his faith or expertise. The average Lodge Chaplain is the Junior Past Master, selected to sit at the Master's left to whisper wise counsel on administrative complexities that arise in the course of a communication. While there's nothing fundamentally wrong with this practice, it means that this Brother has a year to learn the rudiments of his office before he is succeeded. The man who is fortunate to serve for several years is the exception rather than the rule. This is unfortunate, for the opportunities to serve are vast and varied. I was appointed as a Chaplain of my Lodge in 1984, and in various Lodges and York Rite bodies, I have enjoyed the privilege ever since.

In the Installation Ceremony we read that the Chaplain's duty is "to perform those solemn services which we should constantly render to our infinite Creator and which, when offered by one whose profession is 'to point to Heaven and lead the way' may, by refining our souls, strengthening our virtues, and purifying our minds, prepare us for admission into the society of those above, with whom our happiness will be endless and perfect."

Thus, the primary duty of the Chaplain is to bring God's Word to His children and to bring his Brothers to a deep relationship with Him. This is implicit in God's command and commission recounted in the Gospel of Matthew 28:19-20: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...." It is therefore important that the Brother have a working familiarity with the Book of Faith.

For most Freemasons that means the Holy Bible, but the phrase refers to the Book of Faith of the Brethren of the Lodge, be that the Torah, the Bhagavad Gita, the Vedas, the Qur'an, the Zhuangzi, or another. I knew a Lodge so eclectic that they opened three books upon their altar. This is not to say that the Brother must memorize one or more books, but a working familiarity is important if he is to bring forth the Word of God as it is understood by the Brethren of the Lodge. At the very least, he should be able to find the passage he needs.

His position in the Lodge, front and center, emphasizes his availability. He is in the midst of his brethren so they may approach him when they need him. While a Chaplain may encounter those whose religious views do not match and may even be diametrically opposed to his own, he has the advantage of the common ground of Freemasonry which stretches across and sweeps aside all divisions.

His second opportunity to serve his brethren is when he visits the sick. Coordinating with the Master and Secretary, he should know who is named in "sickness and distress" and obtain contact information for them. Not only does he pray for them at the communication, but he is a valuable leader in Masonic outreach. By virtue of his office he should be part of the Visitation Committee. He is therefore in a position to see that no Brother is left unattended in time of need. He should make direct contact with the sick. At such distances where personal presence is impractical, he can reach out by telephone and see that they know that not only is God with them in their trials but that their brethren stand with them as well, ready to assist as needed. When brethren are distant, the Chaplain and the Secretary can see that visits are arranged by the local Lodge and a report returned.

To relieve the distressed is a duty incumbent upon all men, particularly upon Masons, and the Chaplain is the visible personification of the Lodge's care for its brethren. This third aspect of service is also part of the Lodge's outreach.

Help for the distressed is Masonically enumerated in the Entered Apprentice degree, and this serves as a guide for the Chaplain. He should be alert for any opportunity to assist. It is helpful for the Chaplain, together with the Secretary, to know what sources of aid are available. This can range from the Brotherhood Fund to the telephone and on-line 311 systems. Again, expertise is not essential but a sense of where to turn for aid is. It is also important that the Chaplain be discreet as he thereby engages the trust of his Brethren. They must know that not only will he pray with them but that he will keep confidence with them.

The fourth opportunity for the Chaplain to help his brethren is to plan the memorial service of a deceased Brother and to be ready to officiate if necessary.

A Masonic funeral service is often the only time a non-Mason sees us as Brethren. Whether relative or friend, that person is grieving and has the right to expect that the obsequies will be presented with solemnity and proficiency, and there the Chaplain is invaluable. Anyone who has organized a memorial service knows there are a myriad of details to be addressed, from contacting the family, procuring information about the brother's Masonic history, scheduling the service, and spreading the word to assuring that the Lambskin, Acacia, and other essentials are where they need to be. No other Masonic activity occurs so unexpectedly and is so time sensitive. If word is given quickly, there might be as much as 48 hours available, most frequently considerably less, and the details usually fall upon the Master and Secretary.

The Master is usually the one who officiates, though he may delegate this duty to any Mason. If the Lodge is fortunate and local deaths are rare, that night may be the first time the Master has read the service, and he must rapidly absorb it while trying to coordinate the evening. Here is where an experienced and resourceful Chaplain can step in and save the evening.

The fifth opportunity is closely connected with this; it's how the Master, Secretary, and Chaplain, the three most visible officers that evening, interact with the family. Occasionally the brethren who line the Chapel walls are strangers to family and friends, but these three brothers are in the forefront in the capacities of their respective offices. They represent leadership, administration, and the spiritual.

The Secretary is often at the edge of his limit, and an alert and conscientious Chaplain can step in to make certain the widow's pin and card have been received, that the widow is remembered on holidays, and that contact is maintained as far as she may want. Some needs may end with the ceremony, some might be ongoing.

The sixth particularly important opportunity for the Chaplain to help is to counsel his Brothers. The Chaplain is the brother whose office potentially puts him in contact with every member of the Lodge. He is the bridge between brothers and the bringer of divine aid. A Chaplain may be approached by brethren who have many different concerns; family, loved ones, home or work hardship, a burden that plagues the heart, or other problems that can't be predicted. Sometimes a Chaplain can offer actual and immediate aid, sometimes all he can be is a good listener, but God provides the understanding and wisdom to help a Brother. One must listen for and pay attention to that still small voice. In addition to strict discretion, the Chaplain should cultivate a receptive, outreaching demeanor. A Brother should feel that the Chaplain is approachable and interested and sincerely wants to help. The Chaplain may therefore set the brother at ease, and he may, with God's guidance, find the way to provide help.

We now come to the seventh and most commonly seen service of the Chaplain, the invocation and benediction in the Lodge's opening and closing. It is here that the Chaplain most frequently speaks directly to God on behalf of his Brethren when he offers

the collect of their individual prayers. Each prayer in the opening and closing is three sentences long. Not only must these three sentences be memorized - (think of the Senior Deacon and his forty-two page Lecture), but the Chaplain speaks directly to God on his Brothers' behalf and should carry their hearts with their prayers. Each appeal is therefore made reverently. Every Brother should hear and be aware that God is present and listens. The prayer must never be presented in monotone or as though reading a pamphlet any more than it should be read. Diction and inflection are important, and he should pause at each comma and stop at each period. He emphasizes not for God's sake (any who pray already enjoy His full attention) but to carry the Brethren along with the prayer. He must make his Brethren aware that something important is being said to our God, and they should hear and think about it. If it takes nearly a minute, let it; God spent an entire lifetime on each of us.

The same applies equally to prayers presented for "sickness and distress" and for death. There are many excellent prayers published in pocket-size booklet form, arranged by purpose for easy reference. These are the collect of the Brethren's prayers and should be communicated as such.

Now a rarely realized advantage of the Chaplain is that he, in communion with God, speaks directly as a beloved child to his Heavenly Father. The printed words are not sacrosanct, they are there as a non-denominational guide. If the text is misremembered or forgotten, any words spoken to God on behalf of His children are acceptable to Him. No director will ever yell "Cut!" should the Chaplain go off script.

The eighth opportunity has already been touched upon. This is the prayer for the new candidate in the West and the communication of the Holy Scripture in each degree while the new Brother stands in the South. These should be done in such manner as to impress upon him their importance. The wording of the Third Degree scripture is complex and frequently missed if not emphasized and well timed. A Chaplain may not want to be perceived as going over the top, but here he should at least reach the roof. The scriptural text should be familiar in order to guard against the three banes of a Chaplain; worn out pages, the passage obscured by the tools, or fairly rare but most disconcerting of all, when the first word falls on the lower right of the right page.

If he is fortunate enough to belong to a Lodge where the direction of attention after the First Degree obligation is deferred to him, he should make it as compelling and dynamic as befits the moment.

This goes equally to the presentation to the new Brother of his personal Bible. This work, to my mind, should always belong to the Chaplain. I once witnessed an exchange in a Lodge I visited when it came time to make the presentation, and the designated brother was absent. The Master and Wardens were going crazy, almost everyone had been approached, and no one knew this work. The Chaplain was standing by as tensions mounted. Finally, touching his badge of office in gentle reminder, he asked, "Why not ask the one who's most connected to the Bible?" Their response was "The Senior Deacon has had so much work to do tonight we don't want to burden him with any more." Twenty years later I still remember this Chaplain's expression.

The ninth opportunity for service, admittedly rarer than most, is the prayer at meals, commonly called "saying grace" or else prayers at special events. It is then that the aforementioned pocket books of prayers, published under various titles, can be extremely helpful, and all that I said about presentation carries over to this as well.

With such a diverse catalogue of opportunities the Chaplain may well feel daunted, but never fear, he has help: the Grand Chaplain. The Grand Chaplain is appointed not only to perform the aforementioned duties on the Grand Lodge level as well as to do whatever else the Grand Master may ask of him, but he is perfectly situated to train, back up, and counsel the Lodge Chaplains in his district. He should meet with them fairly regularly to assess their needs and assist them in performing their service, and he should also be ready to train them and shore them up as needed. There should never be less than one Grand Chaplain in each Masonic district to assure adequate service. This applies equally to the two branches of Freemasonry, the York and Scottish Rites.

If there are twenty Royal Arch districts, that requires twenty Companions, whether ordained or not, to serve. Ten Cryptic districts, geographically diverse, require ten additional Companions while twenty Knight Templar zones and twenty Scottish Rite Valleys each have their own needs. These men will support, uphold, and train their local counterparts spread over thousands of square miles.

It is reasonable in large jurisdictions to have some one to two hundred Grand Chaplains serving the needs of their Brethren in all portions of Freemasonry.

When next you see your Chaplain, tell him he's doing a good job, prayerfully support him, and offer to help. He has a lot to do.

The Reverend Sir Knight James M. Keane is an Eucharistic Minister and Eucharistic Visitor in the Episcopal Church of Christ Church Bay Ridge, Diocese of Long Island and a Past Commander of Columbian No. 1 and Bay Ridge No. 79, presently serving as Prelate of Columbian No. 1 and Trinity No. 68. He can be contacted at JimKeane758@Yahoo.Com or 7218 3rd Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11209.

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