

The Biretta

by **Sir Knight and Reverend Arthur F. Hebbeler III**, STS
Grand Prelate, Grand Commandery of Maryland

Recently, I was installed as the Grand Prelate of the Grand Commandery of Maryland. As one who has been called "high church" most of my career, I was familiar with the vestments of the Prelate in Knights Templar. However, I quickly learned that many - even some very seasoned Sir Knights - were not as familiar with the vestments and the headwear especially, of the Prelate. More than once, I was given instructions regarding the wear of my "mitre," including being informed that "even the Pope wears his all the time." In the interest of furthering our collective historical understanding, a brief article seems to be appropriate for the edification of all. The biretta, a cap with three or four ridges (peaks) and sometimes a tuft or pom, has been in use by academics and clerics since at least the early tenth century A.D. The threeridged version has traditionally been used by the clergy and the four-ridged version by academics (a predecessor to the mortar board). In its academic use, the biretta has often been adorned with piping identifying the area of study in which the wearer's degree has been awarded in a pontifical degree (dark red for theology, for example). In many European academic communities, the cap worn by holders of doctoral degrees is often called a "biretta" even if it doesn't look like one.

The biretta is to the clergy (mostly Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, and a small number of Lutherans) what a fedora or bowler or top hat is for the layman—headgear for outdoor wear. With a few exceptions, it is worn outdoors by vested clergy (except for the pope, who never wears a biretta), and removed when entering a building, just as one removes one's hat elsewhere. When it is worn indoors for liturgical purposes, it is always removed and held about breast-high during prayer, at the name of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the patron saint(s) of the particular church or order. In the asylum, all are covered as part of the uniform of the order. Taking a cue from our armed forces today, this also makes sense, because Templars are armed with their sword, and it is proper for a military person under arms to remain covered inside as well. Once again, our actions are governed by certain rules and customs which have existed for some time, even when we don't necessarily make such an association.

In our asylums, and elsewhere, the Knights are ordered to uncover for the benefit of prayer, vows, and other solemn times. Yet, in many asylums, the Prelate remains covered while praying. We are in error in this action, strictly speaking, from a Christian context. While our Jewish and Muslim brothers generally pray with their heads covered, we Christians have historically prayed with bare heads. Why, then, would we ever expect our own Prelates to pray while wearing a biretta while all others are uncovered? It seems to be contrary to logic and good order to do so.

Much of what we do as Freemasons comes handed to us through the centuries as custom, and oftentimes, the reasons and background have been lost, and being lost, custom becomes "regulation" or "because that is the way it is done." This is right and good, but as a public Christian order using symbols common to our Christian heritage, we should

take care to use them wisely, lest we find ourselves offending others because of our "inappropriate" behavior, when we mean no offense at all.

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