

Regular Lodges

By

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I'm sure that most of you are familiar with the book which I have in my hand. This book is the "List of Lodges, Masonic" published each year by the Pantagraph Publishing Company. It contains the names of most of the Grand Lodges in the world today and under each Grand Lodge heading is a list of the subordinate lodges working under charter of that Grand Lodge. You, no doubt, have seen the tiler look up the lodge of an unknown visitor to the lodge to see if his lodge is a regular lodge prior to asking for a committee to examine him.

Have you ever wondered why, in a fraternity such as ours that this procedure is even necessary? Most masons have a vague idea that not all lodges which claim to be Masonic are the same and the members of some of these lodges are described as "irregular", "unrecognized", or "clandestine", or by some other negative designation. A mason who travels outside the United States and decides to visit a Masonic lodge, soon learns that some lodges are improper for him to visit.

Questions naturally come to mind as one asks himself "why should such a situation exist?" And "how did this come about?" And "how is this matter of regularity determined?" An easy way to explain this situation is to draw an analogy with the relationship of nations toward one another. A nation may exist as a matter of fact, but if diplomatic relations have not been established between them, there can be no official correspondence or regular dealing between them or their citizens.

Generally speaking, this matter of regularity exists because each Grand Lodge is independent and has no direct legal relationship with any other Grand Lodge except to the extent that it

desires to engage in such a relationship. The regularity of a Grand Lodge is established when steps are taken which result in what is described as "granting recognition to another Grand Lodge." Each Grand Lodge individually decides which Grand Lodge it will recognize as being regular. This is usually done by the application of generally accepted standards established over the years.

There is always the possibility that if these standards are applied with too much laxity, or if a Grand Lodge is recognized which clearly is not entitled to be recognized, that other Grand Lodges may withdraw their recognition of the offending Grand Lodge. This will be done to prevent the members of the constituent Grand Lodge running the risk of engaging in Masonic association with irregular persons.

Since no regular Grand Lodge wants to lose its status with the other regular Grand Lodges and thereby place its members in an embarrassing position, this desire acts as a strong inducement to be careful in extending recognition to those Grand Lodges that are not entitled to be recognized.

The procedural steps taken by a Grand Lodge to be recognized is of practical importance because this action establishes the regularity of the group as well as its constituent lodges. Usually the Grand Lodge that desires to be classified as being regular will take the first step and ask to be recognized. When this is done, it will supply certain basic information about itself. An investigation usually follows, and sometimes specific questions are asked to determine whether the group meets established norms expected of a regular masonic group.

The matter of determining whether a Grand Lodge shall be recognized, and thereby establishing its regularity, did not emerge all at once, but was a gradual development over many years. Early in our history, before the establishment of Grand Lodges and the development of our present system of creating new lodges by securing a charter from a Grand Lodge, there existed lodges that are now described as "time immemorial lodges" that were started informally and, after working for a number of years, were considered regular as a matter of custom.

But once the system of securing charters was established, these "time immemorial lodges" took steps to secure charters from a Grand Lodge and thus formally establishing their regularity.

Early in our history, differences began to appear in various lodges and Grand Lodges. When one considers that much of freemasonry is transmitted from person to person and from country to country orally, it will be realized that variations are bound to take place.

Since innovations and variations are frowned upon within the craft, questions are bound to arise when a group appears which does not have the same ceremonies, practices, and rules as those groups with which we are familiar. Because of these differences, the question immediately arises: "is this new group really Masonic?" Or the question may be asked in a different way: "are these differences so serious that we cannot countenance them and accept the new group as being a Masonic one?" Therefore, the need exists for certain basic tests to determine the matter of regularity of Masonic groups.

Sometimes after a Grand Lodge has been recognized, it acts improperly or it countenances improper acts by its constituent lodges; then

recognition is withdrawn, and it becomes irregular.

A good illustration of the confusion that can arise on this subject when a Grand Lodge deviates from normal activities and, thereby, loses its regularity, is the situation in France. The Grand Orient of France engaged in a variety of activities which created problems with other Grand Lodges. Chief among these activities were its expansion in territories already occupied by regular Grand Lodges, thereby disregarding customary rules and courtesies; its liberal attitude towards appendant bodies and no regard for their regularity; and its revolutionary acts, starting in 1877, which resulted in their rule that the use of the Holy Bible in their lodges was optional. Over a period of just a few years, as these acts came to light, recognition was withdrawn by most of the regular Grand Lodges and has continued to the present time.

Another illustration is when some of the lodges in Mexico, many years ago, accepted women as members and, thereby, violated one of the basic laws of Freemasonry that only men can become members. Recognition was withdrawn, but with the ending of this practice, recognition was restored to most of these Grand Lodges in Mexico.

In the past, in some countries, problems of regularity arose when appendant bodies were formed and conferred their own first three degrees of the craft. This problem was easily solved in the United States by the appendant bodies not conferring these degrees and by taking the position that these degrees must be conferred by a regular lodge before the candidate can receive the further degrees of that body.

But in Latin American countries, it has been more difficult to solve this problem because in many places the appendant bodies appeared first and started to confer the so-called symbolic

lodge degrees established by their own group. When the regular symbolic lodge appeared in those areas, it created a conflict, especially when established groups refused to make any changes because of the new situation. The colorful and dramatic ceremonies of the appendant bodies apparently were a serious competition for the traditional lodges formed later.

This subject was further complicated in the United States by the doctrine of exclusive jurisdiction that was developed over a period of years, beginning around the time of the war for independence and the formation of the Grand Lodges in each of the new states. Under this doctrine only one Grand Lodge can exist legitimately in a geographical area. Although sometimes labeled as an innovation and described in an uncomplimentary manner as an "American doctrine", this rule has worked well in the United States over the years and has made for stability and order within the craft.

This will be understood when one considers the many problems that arose many years ago when foreign Grand Lodges and appendant bodies issued charters to lodges in the United States and caused considerable confusion which took years to correct.

In other countries occasionally it has been a matter of negotiation and agreement to have more than one Grand Lodge exist in the same area at the same time as was the situation in Czechoslovakia before 1940.

The surprising thing that has happened lately is the number of Grand Lodges in the United States that have recognized the Prince Hall Grand Lodges within their states as regular. We have confirmed eight that have done this and I've read of several more which have resolutions laying over.

There have been instances where opportunists have formed Masonic lodges and fraudulently

conferred what were claimed to be "Masonic" degrees on unsuspecting candidates. The best illustration of this kind of activity is the formation of the "American Masonic Federation" by one Matthew McBlain Thomson, who had received Masonic degrees in Scotland, and, later settled in the United States. Using a fabricated charter, he proceeded to sell degrees from the first to the thirty-first degrees through a highly organized group of salesmen working on a commission basis. But selling these degrees with the use of the United States mail resulted in a prosecution by the government, a finding of guilty, and the imposition of fines and prison terms for the prime promoters.

With the passage of time, certain basic tests have been developed to determine what Grand Lodges are legitimate and entitled to recognition and, thereby, to be classified as regular and legitimate.

Three basic tests are usually considered:

- 1) The legitimacy of origin, meaning that the Grand Lodge has been formed by at least three regular Grand Lodges and has been working for a number of years demonstrating its adherence to the high standards of the craft.
- 2) That it is an independent and self-governing organization having authority over an established governmental territory, and
- 3) That the organization subscribes to the Masonic landmarks, usage's, and established rituals of the craft.

In 1951 a "Commission of Information for Recognition" was appointed by the Grand Master's Conference. In 1956 there was published under the auspices of this commission a book entitled "Grand Lodge Recognition." The purpose of this commission is to serve as a guide to determine which Grand Lodges to recognize, to serve as a clearing house for information, and to establish some uniformity in

the tests to be used to determine regularity and legitimacy.

Recognition may come in a variety of ways. It might be informal by an exchange of letters. But in the case of a newly formed Grand Lodge, it is usually on a formal basis by applying for recognition and giving the needed information to have a determination made. This may be followed by extensive correspondence or an investigation.

Here are some illustrations of how serious problems regarding recognition can arise. World war two and the spread of Nazism throughout the greater part of Europe brought about the destruction of Freemasonry in many areas. With the end of the war in some countries, competing Grand Lodges were formed by former members of the craft who had survived the war, with each claiming legitimacy and seeking recognition. It took years to make determinations regarding which groups were to be recognized. In some instances efforts were made to have the various groups in a country meet to settle the matter.

When Castro took over the government of Cuba, many of the residents fled the country; some of them were masons, and the Grand Lodge officers who fled to the United States continued to function as the "Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile." Those who remained in Cuba continued to function as Castro apparently did not interfere with the operation of the craft, although specific information is lacking on this subject. "The Grand Lodge of Cuba" in Havana is the only recognized Grand Lodge today. "The Grand Lodge of Cuba in Exile" has not been recognized by any United States Grand lodges.

A similar situation exists with the Grand Lodge of Iran. When masonry was closed down in Iran many Iranian masons relocated to the United States and ultimately formed the "Grand Lodge of Iran in Exile" which is now recognized by 36 Grand Lodges in the United States.

With the passing of Franco in Spain, and the liberalization of the laws there, the Grand Lodge of Spain was re-established in 1981 and is recognized by 49 Grand Lodges in the U.S.

Just recently we have seen the re-formation of the Grand Lodges of Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland and Portugal. Many United States Grand Lodges have recognized these Grand Lodges and I'm sure many more will this year.

I would like to take just a moment to read to you a letter I received in 1987 while I was Grand Master from a mason in Mexico asking why his Grand Lodge was not recognized by the Grand Lodge of Virginia and also my reply to his letter.

He says:

"Dear Brother Robey,

According to the book "List of Lodges" and the chart "Foreign Recognition" of the Masonic Service Association of the United States, the Grand Lodge of your state does not recognize the Grand Lodge del Valle de Mexico. I am doing a research why some Grand Lodges of the United States do recognize and why others do not recognize it.

Is it possible to obtain information to that respect and if there is any way it can be corrected.

Fraternally, Dr. Abraham Bromberg."

My answer to him is as follows:

"Dear Dr. Bromberg,

This is to acknowledge receipt of your inquiry concerning recognition of the Gran Logia del Valle de México by the Grand Lodge of Virginia, A.F. & A.M.

Our Grand Lodge adopted a standing resolution on February 13, 1935 which states:

"Application for fraternal recognition by a foreign Grand Lodge shall be referred to the standing committee on foreign correspondence which shall make a through investigation of the application and make recommendation to the Grand Lodge. The Grand Lodge may extend recognition if it appears to its satisfaction:

That the Grand Lodge in question represents a substantial unity of the freemasons of the territory over which it assumes jurisdiction: i.e., the country, province or state, or else shares such territorial jurisdiction with another Grand Lodge by mutual consent.

That it has been lawfully organized by three or more regular lodges or that it has been legalized by a Grand Lodge recognized by this Grand Lodge.

That it is an independent, self-governing organization, having sovereign Masonic authority within its jurisdiction.

That its ritual is fundamentally in accord with the ancient landmarks, customs, and usage's of the craft. This involves:

- a) monotheism;
- b) the volume of the sacred law, a part of the furniture of the lodge;
- c) secrecy;
- d) the symbolism of the operative art;
- e) the division of symbolic masonry into the three degrees of entered apprentice, fellow craft, and master mason;
- f) the legend of the third degree.

That it makes masons of men only.

That it is non-sectarian and non-political: i.e., that its dominant purposes are charitable, benevolent, educational, and religious."

If the Gran Logia del Valle de México meets all of the requirements of the above resolution, which I feel sure it does or it would not be recognized by so many Grand Lodges in the world, it would take a request from that Grand Lodge, through its grand secretary, to make a request for fraternal recognition to the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Upon receipt of the request, our Grand Secretary would begin the process of establishing recognition by notifying the "Commission on Information for Recognition of the Conference of Grand Masters of Masons in North America" that it had received such a request, which would notify our Grand Secretary of the status of your Grand Lodge for recognition. If the report of the commission is favorable, our Grand Secretary, who is the chairman of our foreign relations committee, would make a motion at the next Grand Annual Communication that recognition be granted. If the Grand Master accepted the motion and the delegates approved the motion, recognition between the two Grand Lodges would begin immediately, with grand representatives being appointed as soon as possible to represent each other near their respective Grand Lodges.

We recently completed our Grand Annual Communication in Virginia and through the above process we began fraternal relations with the Grand Lodge of Minas Gerais in Brazil.

I hope this is the information you needed to determine the procedure to establish recognitions between our two Grand Lodges. The problem seems to be that Grand

Lodges, such as yours have not requested recognition by the other Grand Lodges in the MSA chart which indicate no recognition of your Grand Lodge. It would be an unusual situation for a Grand Lodge in the USA to request recognition by a foreign Grand Lodge. The procedure is always done the other way, as we have little information on many of the Grand Lodges listed in the "List of Lodges publication" or the "MSA chart."

I would be interested in receiving some information on your Grand Lodge for my own records. I have been studying fraternal relations between Grand Lodges for many years, and have built up quite a file on Grand Lodges outside of the USA.

I have sent a copy of your letter of inquiry to our Grand Secretary for his information.

With kindest personal regards, I remain

Sincerely
Donald M. Robey,
Grand Master"

Thus began the recognition procedure between the Grand Lodge of Virginia and the Grand Lodge Valle de Mexico. By vote of the delegates at the Grand Annual Communication of Virginia in February 1991, recognition was established.

The Masonic Service Association of the United States issues a chart which displays the various Grand Lodges in existence throughout the world and which of them recognize specific other Grand Lodges.

The chart was out of publication from 1986 until 1991 due to some budgetary problems within MSA. In 1990 MSA requested the A. Douglas Smith Lodge of Research No. 1949 in Virginia

to assist them in researching the information necessary to re-publish the chart.

I was chairman of the committee appointed to perform this service for MSA. Surveys were sent to all of the Grand Secretaries in the United States to obtain the latest information on who they recognized. By January 1991 the updated charts were completed and circulated to the Grand Lodges. Surveys were done again in 1991 and a revised chart was issued for 1992 and again in 1993. I have just completed mailing a revised master copy of the 1994 chart to MSA to be copied and sent to each Grand Secretary for updating based on their latest recognitions.

I once served as the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Correspondence for the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Every year we usually have several requests for recognition to act upon at our Grand Session in November. We also have seen several withdrawals of recognition over the years due to some situations that have arisen in Greece, Italy, India and other Grand Lodges. Our committee is looking at each of these situations to make a recommendation to the delegates in November if they wish to take any action.

Clearly the subject of Masonic regularity is very complicated, but it is also very important.