

A DISCUSSION ON MASONIC SYMBOLISM

Part Four, The Processional

PLEASE NOTE: In all of these essays, I am referring only to the Symbolism in the Ritual as used within the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York.

When last we left the Candidate, he had just made an alarm, consisting of three distinct knocks at the inner door to the Lodge. There were, in answer, three distinct knocks from the guardian of that door, the Senior Deacon. In due time, the door was opened unto him, he was received in a most unusual and symbolically important manner by the Senior Deacon* and, following a brief but obligatory pause for prayer**, ceremoniously escorted around the Lodge in a process called circumambulation.

A curious process, circumambulation, as old as memory, and long a very important, but often overlooked, symbolic journey that each Mason had taken in his quest for Masonic Light. Long before Masonic history, the rite of circumambulation was practiced in many initiatory and/or religious rites...a walk about the Altar, or other sacred or holy icon. As the right side of man, even of God, has ever been deemed the strong or preferred side, it was almost axiomatically that the side of the person or persons in the processional was toward the sacred item. No matter where the process started, in essence it would follow the path of the sun from rising to setting, from the East, past the zenith, to the west. And, according to Brother Albert Mackey, M.D., the Masonic significance of this is to symbolize that the Lodge represents the world under the direction of the three lesser lights of the Craft. And, within that representation, the three vital essences of us all which bind us into men – the body, the mind, and the spirit.

According to some Masonic scholars and historians, there is an even deeper and more symbolic attachment given to the circumambulation which can only be fully explained to those who have successfully completed the Three primary Degrees of Masonry. Suffice it to say – for now – that during the EA circumambulation, the Initiate passes the Worshipful Master *three* times before he is returned to the West and thence to the Altar where he seals his covenant with the Lodge.

Let's count...he is escorted past the Master (that's once) and to the South where he is 'inspected' for the correctness of his preparation. Then to the West. Then to the East (that's twice) and then back to the South for examination. Then, again, to the West for examination...and then to the East for further examination (That's thrice).

It might be that you are beginning to realize there is something symbolically important here...

Note, too, that during this process, which is also called perambulation, the Initiate is escorted to three officers for examination which, together, happen to represent the sun at its three most important positions, rising, at zenith, and setting.

From there, the Initiate is escorted to the Altar to seal his covenant with the Lodge and it is at this point we'll pick up the process in the next section.

*The symbolism of and the manner in which the Candidate is received by the Senior Deacon deserves a more lengthy discussion which, due to items which might best be kept closer to our breasts that is allowed on a web page with “public access.”

**I feel it is important to pause here and reflect upon the moment when the Candidate is caused to kneel for the benefit of prayer. There are several important symbolic gestures here that are often glossed over during the more ‘glamorous’ portions of the degree which are yet to come...but which, I feel, are important enough to be discussed a bit more fully before we move on.

- Note that the Candidate is not allowed to pass the western edge of the Altar during his procession until he has been caused to kneel in prayer. He has not yet met the qualifications which will allow him to enter further into the Lodge.
- Note that the Candidate is caused to kneel, facing the East – the source of light – and, in his darkness, finds that, while he has been ordered to kneel in prayer, someone else will pray for him, asking the GAOTU three things: That this Candidate will dedicate and devote his life to the Service of God, that he might become, in the fullness of time, a true and faithful Brother, and that he might receive Divine Wisdom to allow him to live in within the bounds of a lifestyle that will meet with the approbation God.
- Note that – finally – the Candidate is asked one question...one question from which must come the answer that will prove himself worthy to continue in his progress in Masonry. There is but one answer. There is but one answer which must come from his own heart. There is but one acceptable answer that will demonstrate to the Lodge that he is worthy and well qualified, duly and truly prepared – one answer that is so important that no man may answer for him – that no man can tell him how to answer or what to say. When all about him is darkness...when all about him is totally new and unknown...when he has no one upon whom to depend, to whom can he turn – in whom can he, at that moment and always, place his trust?

©Dave Upham, ERAC Lodge 163, F&AM