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“Freemasonry represented the practical expression of Enlightenment ideals—tolerance, sociability, and universal brotherhood. To the Catholic Church, these principles appeared dangerously indifferentist, undermining its exclusive claims to religious truth.”

— Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (1991)

“A Mason is oblig’d by his Tenure to obey the moral law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid atheist, nor an irreligious libertine. But though in ancient times Masons were charg’d in every country to be of the religion of that country... it is now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves.”

— *First Book of Constitutions*, London 1723

“If they were not doing evil, they would not have so great a hatred of the light... We have decreed and declared that such societies must be condemned and prohibited.”

— *Papal Bull*, 28 April 1738

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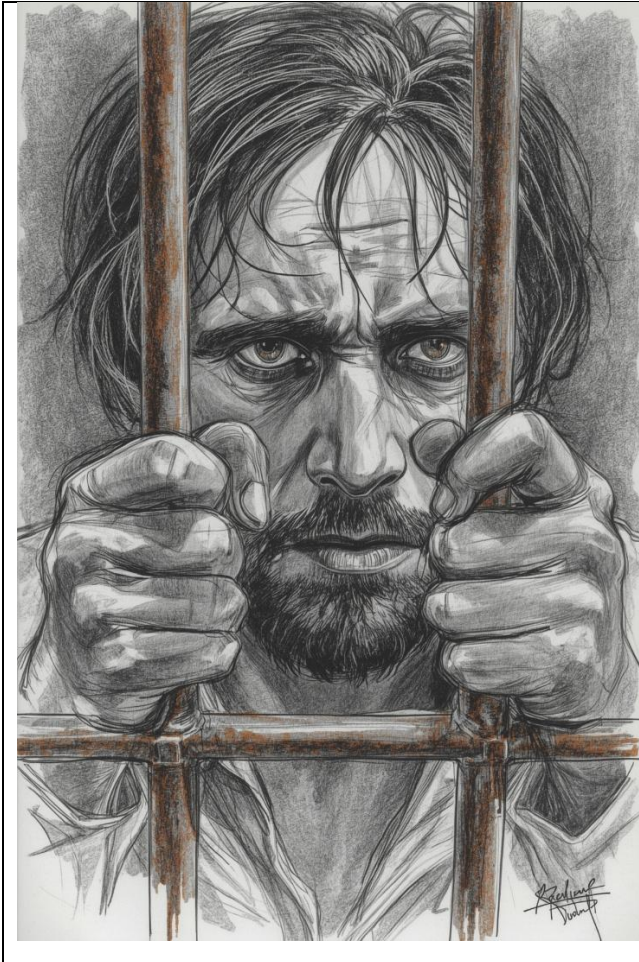
Introduction

For over 300 years, Freemasonry and the Roman Catholic Church have had a fraught relationship marked by mutual suspicion and official censure. Since 1738, at least eleven popes – beginning with Pope Clement XII – have formally condemned Freemasonry as incompatible with Catholicism. Historically, the Church has viewed Masonic lodges as secret societies fostering “naturalistic” philosophies and religious *indifferentism* (the idea that all religions are equally valid). In turn, many Freemasons have felt unjustly vilified, noting that Masonic principles of fraternity, liberty, and equality were misinterpreted as subversive. This decades-long clash has encompassed theological disputes, political power struggles, famous hoaxes, and conspiracy theories – evolving from the Enlightenment era to the present day. Despite some modern calls for dialogue, the Catholic hierarchy continues to ban Masonic membership, reaffirming as recently as 2023 that Catholics who join the Freemasons are in *grave sin* and may not receive Holy Communion.

In this review, we will explore the origins of the Church’s antagonism toward Freemasonry, key historical incidents, the Freemasons’ responses, and contemporary developments in this global conflict.

Origins of the Conflict: 18th Century Foundations

Case Study - 1

	<p>Tommaso Crudeli and the Florentine Lodge (1739)</p> <p><i>When the Florentine Inquisition uncovered a lodge founded by English Freemasons, local poet Tommaso Crudeli was arrested on charges of heresy and sedition. He was tortured, imprisoned for years, and released only to die soon after. Crudeli became one of the first “martyrs” of Masonic persecution, his suffering dramatizing the Church’s fear of Enlightenment lodges opening on Italian soil.</i></p>
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Freemasonry as we know it emerged in 1717 with the founding of the first Grand Lodge in London. The new fraternity – rooted in Enlightenment ideals, religious tolerance, and esoteric rituals – spread quickly across Europe. The Catholic Church’s first encounters with Freemasonry occurred in the 1730s, and they were far from cordial. In 1737 the Inquisition investigated a lodge in Florence, Italy (founded by English Masons but admitting local Catholics), and found its activities suspicious. One Italian Freemason, Tommaso Crudeli, was even arrested and tortured by Church authorities; he died shortly after his release, becoming an early martyr of the Masonic-Catholic clash.

In 1738 Pope Clement XII took the dramatic step of issuing *In Eminenti Apostolatus*, the first papal bull condemning Freemasonry. Clement XII decreed that any Catholic who “became a Freemason” would incur automatic excommunication. He cited several reasons: the Masons’ secrecy, their binding oaths, and the mixing of men of “any religion or sect” under an appearance of natural virtue. Clement wrote that if the Freemasons “*were not doing evil they would not have so great a hatred of the light,*” arguing that their

secrecy itself aroused suspicion of immoral aims. He warned that Masons “*break into the household like thieves, and like foxes seek to destroy the vineyard,*” metaphorically accusing them of subverting the Church and society from within. This papal pronouncement – issued just two decades after Freemasonry’s founding – set the tone for the Church’s stance. Catholic rulers in countries like Spain, Portugal, and parts of Italy soon followed suit by banning Masonic lodges, aligning with the papal view that Masonry threatened both “*the peace of the temporal state*” and “*the spiritual salvation of souls*”.

Pope Benedict XIV reinforced the ban in 1751 with the constitution *Providas Romanorum*. Benedict XIV not only reaffirmed Clement’s judgments but went further, accusing Freemasonry of promoting heresy by accepting men of diverse faiths as brothers.

Providas Romanorum (Pope Benedict XIV, 1751)

“We confirm, strengthen, and renew by our apostolic authority all the decrees made against such societies... those who enroll themselves are subject to excommunication.”
— *Constitution, 18 March 1751*

He viewed the Mason’s emphasis on *Natural Law* and reason as undermining the Church’s moral authority. In short, the 18th-century Church saw the Craft’s religious tolerance and Enlightenment-driven ideals as a direct challenge to Catholic doctrine and hierarchy. The result was an “openly hostile” stance – any Catholic affiliating with the Masons faced harsh spiritual penalties and social suspicion.

Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of England (1738)

“Our Society is founded on the purest principles of piety and virtue... no man can be made a Mason without a declaration of his belief in God.”
— *Minutes of the Grand Lodge, 1738*

Notwithstanding these threats, Freemasonry continued to spread on the continent (especially in Enlightenment circles and among certain aristocrats). Some Catholics quietly remained or became Freemasons despite the bulls, but many others were deterred. The stage was set for an extended conflict: an increasingly liberal, free-thinking fraternal order on one side, and a vigilant Catholic authority determined to quash what it perceived as a dangerous rival on the other.

Case Study - 2

The Papal States Crackdown (1820s)

In the wake of Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo (1821), Pope Pius VII ordered sweeping action against the Carbonari and their Masonic allies. In the Papal States, suspected Masons were arrested en masse, interrogated, and in some cases executed for alleged revolutionary plotting. The Church portrayed this as a defensive battle against sedition; Freemasons remembered it as proof of Rome's terror of liberal thought.



Catholic Encyclopedia (1913 edition, "Freemasonry")

"Freemasonry displays all the elements of religion; it has temples and altars, prayers, a moral code, and a religious faith. To Catholics, this constitutes a rival to the religion of the Gospel."

"The Church has always condemned secret societies which shelter themselves under oaths of secrecy and exclude from their deliberations the light of authority... chief among these has been Freemasonry."

— Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. VI, Vol. XIII, 1913

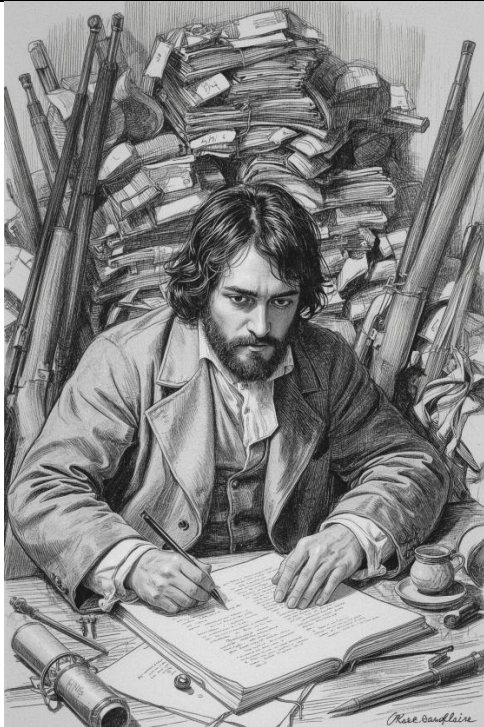
19th Century: Revolution, Modernity, and Papal Condemnations

The 1800s saw the feud between Catholicism and Freemasonry intensify and take on political dimensions worldwide. During this era, many revolutionaries, liberal reformers, and nation-builders were Freemasons, and the Catholic Church grew alarmed at the fraternity's influence in secular affairs. In Europe and Latin America especially, Masons were often at the forefront of movements for republican government, separation of church and state, and curtailing of clerical privileges. From the Church's perspective, Freemasonry became virtually synonymous with **anti-clericalism** and revolutionary agitation.

Pope Pius VII linked Freemasonry to the secret revolutionary society of the *Carbonari* when he outlawed the latter in 1821 (*Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo*). The Carbonari sought Italian unification and the limitation of papal temporal power, goals the Pope saw as consonant with Masonic aims. Pius VII's bull declared that any "*Freemasons that could be discovered within the Church must be excommunicated for fear of plotting conspiracies against Church and State*," explicitly naming the Freemasons as political subversives. His successor Leo XII in *Quo Graviora* (1825) lamented that earlier papal warnings went unheeded, "*out of the old Masonic societies even more dangerous sects had sprung*". The Vatican became convinced that secret societies were networking internationally "*by the bond of the same criminal purposes*" – a grand conspiracy theory uniting Freemasons and kindred sects in a plot against throne and altar.

Throughout the 19th century, successive popes issued a litany of condemnations. Pope Gregory XVI in *Mirari Vos* (1832) blamed "*the calamities of the age*" largely on secret societies spreading *indifferentism* and false ideas of tolerance. Pope Pius IX – who reigned during the turbulent mid-century revolutions and lost the Papal States to Italy's liberal-nationalist forces (many of whom were Masons) – was especially vocal. He lambasted Freemasonry in multiple encyclicals and allocutions, calling it an "*insidious, fraudulent and perverse organization*" and declaring that *various secret sects "differing only in appearance" were united in openly or secretly plotting "against the Church or lawful authority"*. Pius IX even published a collection of purported secret documents, the *Permanent Instruction of the Alta Vendita*, which described an alleged Masonic/Carbonari plan to infiltrate and subvert the Church from within. He believed this evidence important enough that he urged it be exposed to public scrutiny. (The *Alta Vendita* document – whether authentic or not – became a touchstone for Catholic conspiracy theories about Masons "at war" with Christian civilization.)

Case Study - 3



The Alta Vendita Panic (Mid-19th Century)

The publication of the so-called Permanent Instruction of the Alta Vendita, allegedly penned by Italian revolutionaries with Masonic ties, caused uproar in Rome. It detailed a supposed century-long plan to infiltrate the Church and subvert it from within. Pius IX and later Leo XIII urged Catholics to study it as a warning. Whether forgery or genuine, it dramatized the sense of siege—an existential war between the Vatican and the lodge.

Humanum Genus (Pope Leo XIII, 1884)

“Their ultimate purpose is the overthrow of the whole religious and political order of the world which the Christian teaching has produced, and the substitution of a new state of things in accordance with their ideas, of which the foundations and laws shall be drawn from mere naturalism.”

— Encyclical Letter, 20 April 1884

The most sweeping papal attack came from Pope Leo XIII. In 1884, Leo XIII devoted an entire encyclical, *Humanum Genus*, to condemning Freemasonry as the foremost symbol of modernity’s ills. He asserted that *all secret societies ultimately “proceed and return” to the Masonic sect, “which is a kind of center” uniting them*. Leo XIII charged that the **ultimate purpose** of Freemasonry was *“the overthrow of the whole religious, political, and social order based on Christian institutions”* and the establishment of a new order *“based on pure Naturalism”*. In the encyclical, he denounced Masonic political doctrines such as the equality of all citizens and the idea that authority derives from the consent of the governed – ideas which he saw as dangerously undermining divinely-ordained hierarchy. He also echoed his predecessors in decrying Masonic religious philosophy: because Freemasons place human reason and natural moral law

above revealed truth, Leo XIII argued, they effectively “*have no faith in those things which we have learned by the revelation of God*”. In the eyes of the 19th-century papacy, Freemasonry’s promotion of secular education, liberal democracy, and religious pluralism was nothing less than an organized attempt to *destroy the Catholic Church* and the Christian foundations of society.

Jasper Ridley, The Freemasons: A History of the World’s Most Powerful Secret Society (1999)

“The Catholic Church feared Freemasonry because it represented everything the papacy opposed in the 18th and 19th centuries: liberty, equality, fraternity, secular education, and the separation of church and state.”

— *Ridley, 1999*

It is important to note that many of the Church’s accusations had a kernel of truth *and* a measure of exaggeration. Freemasonry was indeed closely associated with enlightenment and liberal movements: for example, numerous leaders of the American and French Revolutions were Masons, as were Latin American independence heroes like Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín. In Italy, nationalist patriots such as Giuseppe Garibaldi and Giuseppe Mazzini were prominent Masons, and the lodges in France’s Third Republic were hotbeds of anti-clerical sentiment that helped laïcité (secularism) become state policy. From these facts, the Church concluded there was a unified “Masonic conspiracy” against it. Catholic writers routinely alleged that the Freemasons orchestrated the spread of **separation of church and state**, secular public schooling, republicanism, and other “false ideas” of modern society. Indeed, Pope Leo XIII in *Humanum Genus* described the Masons’ ideals of human equality and liberty as pernicious “naturalist doctrines” – essentially condemning the principles of 1789 and liberal democracy as Masonic errors. Freemasons of that era proudly *did* champion many of those ideals, but they would argue it was for the progress of humanity, not simply to spite the Church. Still, in the 19th century the battle lines were firmly drawn: the Vatican positioned itself as the defender of traditional throne-and-altar order, while casting Freemasonry as the vanguard of a secular, anti-Catholic revolution.

Case Study - 4

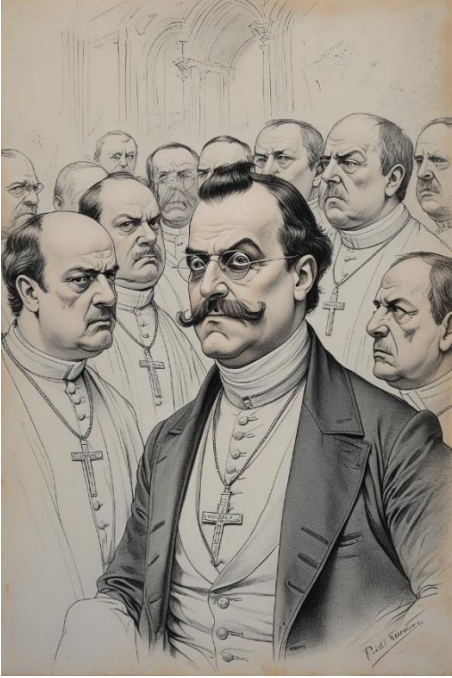
The Philippines and the Rizal Affair (1890s)

Dr. José Rizal, the national hero of the Philippines, was a Freemason who openly criticized the abuses of Spanish friars. His Masonic writings and associations were used as evidence of sedition. In 1896, Rizal was executed by a firing squad in Manila under orders of the Spanish colonial government. For Filipino Freemasons, his martyrdom became proof that the Church feared the liberating ideals of the Craft.



The clash was not only ideological but also sometimes violent. In predominantly Catholic countries, being identified as a Freemason could lead to persecution. The Inquisition and local bishops in Italy and Spain, for instance, tried to “root out Lodges and condemn Freemasons as heretics” during the 18th and early 19th centuries. Conversely, when avowedly Catholic authoritarian regimes rose in the 20th century (such as Francisco Franco’s rule in Spain or Antonio Salazar’s in Portugal), they often outlawed Freemasonry and imprisoned or killed Masons, viewing them as agents of subversion and liberalism. Thus, the enmity became deeply ingrained: “*inveterate*,” as one Catholic commentator described it, “opposed as night and day”. Freemasons, for their part, increasingly saw the Church as a tyrannical, reactionary force – “the *enemy* of civil progress” in the words of many 19th-century liberal activists. This mutual distrust only deepened with episodes like the infamous **Taxil hoax**, which poured fuel on the fire of conspiracy theories.

Case Study - 5

	<p>The Taxil Hoax Revelations (1897)</p> <p><i>Léo Taxil's sensational "confession" in Paris was itself a dramatic public spectacle. Having convinced bishops and even cardinals that Masons worshipped Lucifer, he gathered an expectant crowd—only to reveal the whole tale of Palladian rites, diabolical orgies, and the priestess "Diana Vaughan" was fabricated. Gasps of outrage followed. The episode humiliated the Church hierarchy and remains one of the most theatrical moments in the history of Catholic anti-Masonry.</i></p>
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By the end of the 1800s, the Vatican's position on Masonry was uncompromising and codified into Church law. Catholics who joined Masonic lodges had long been threatened with excommunication; in 1869 Pius IX even made that penalty *ipso facto* (automatic upon membership) and reserved absolution of the sin to the Pope himself. This was later enshrined in the 1917 **Code of Canon Law**, which explicitly stated that Catholics who "join a Masonic sect" incur excommunication. In short, to be both a practicing Catholic and an active Freemason was virtually impossible without defying Church authority. The 19th century had cemented the image of Freemasonry – at least in the Vatican's eyes – as "*the Synagogue of Satan*" plotting a "*war of Anti-Christ against the Church*" (to borrow the florid title of an 1885 Catholic exposé).

20th Century: Continued Prohibition and Attempts at Dialogue

Case Study - 6

The Anti-Masonic Exhibition in Rome (1908)

Held in the Eternal City under papal blessing, the 1908 Anti-Masonic Exhibition presented visitors with lurid displays of Masonic regalia, caricatures, and alleged “proof” of conspiracies against the Church. Banners proclaimed Freemasonry as the handmaiden of Satan and revolution. To the faithful, it reinforced the Vatican’s warnings; to Masons, it was theatrical propaganda, demonizing them before the world.



Despite the embarrassment of the Taxil hoax, the Catholic Church entered the 20th century maintaining its official hard line against Freemasonry. The new 1917 Code of Canon Law explicitly confirmed that Catholics who joined Masonic associations (or similar groups plotting against Church or state) were excommunicated. This prohibition was “comprehensive and perpetual,” as earlier papal bulls had intended it to be. In addition, Canon Law forbade publication of books or materials favourable to Freemasonry, trying to curb any pro-Masonic sentiment among the faithful.

Case Study - 7



Spain under Franco (1936–1975)

After the Spanish Civil War, General Francisco Franco outlawed Freemasonry and declared membership treason. A 1940 law imposed prison terms up to 30 years on Masons, and thousands were jailed or executed. Franco claimed Freemasons and Communists had conspired against Catholic Spain. Lodges went underground for decades; many Spanish Masons were forced into exile, keeping alive a sense of tragic persecution.

In practice, the intensity of the conflict varied by region. In traditionally Catholic countries across Europe and Latin America, the 20th century saw continued tussles between pro-church and pro-Mason forces. For example, regimes aligned with the Church sometimes persecuted Freemasons: Franco's Spain (1939–1975) imprisoned or exiled Masons, and Vichy France (1940–44) also suppressed Masonic lodges. On the other hand, vehemently anti-clerical governments influenced by Masons enacted policies against the Church – such as Mexico's 1917 constitution and subsequent laws that severely restricted the Catholic Church's rights (many Mexican revolutionary leaders, like President Plutarco Calles, were Freemasons and saw the Church as an obstacle to progress). These seesawing fortunes meant that the *global* focus of the feud extended far beyond Rome or London; from the Philippines to Brazil, one can find episodes of Catholics and Masons in opposition. The Church's leadership consistently encouraged Catholics to see Masonry as "*the enemy*". In 1949, for instance, the Holy Office (now the Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith) reaffirmed that any Catholic who even aided a Masonic organization was suspect of heresy. Eastern Orthodox churches likewise took a stance against Masonry – a 1930s encyclical of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate labeled Freemasonry a danger to Christianity – highlighting that the mistrust of the Craft was not limited to Roman Catholicism.

After World War II, the tone began to soften slightly on the Church's side, even if the law did not. The Cold War era shifted the Catholic Church's primary foe from the Masons to atheistic Communism (which, ironically, also suppressed Freemasonry in communist countries). Freemasonry in places like the United States or Britain was seen by most

Catholics as a relatively benign fraternal order, quite distant from the revolutionary lodges of Latin Europe. By the 1960s, as the Church underwent the reforms of **Vatican II (1962–65)**, some hoped that the old enmity might be reconsidered. In fact, during the 1970s a few Catholic leaders engaged in quiet dialogues with Masonic representatives. Notably, the German Bishops' Conference held an official consultation from 1974–1980 to examine whether “contemporary” Freemasonry was still incompatible with the faith. Similarly, in some countries like the U.S., bishops' committees commissioned studies on Freemasonry (e.g. Catholic author William Whalen's 1985 report) to discern if the fraternity's principles continued to pose a spiritual danger.

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 1983)

“The faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion... the Church's negative judgment remains unchanged.”
 — *Declaration on Masonic Associations, 26 November 1983*

Ultimately, the Vatican maintained its position – though with some nuances. In 1981, after confusion stemming from an ambiguous 1974 Vatican letter, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) clarified that *“the Church's negative position on Masonic associations remains unaltered since their principles have always been regarded as irreconcilable with the Church's doctrine”*. When the **Code of Canon Law was revised in 1983**, it notably *omitted* the word “Masons” or “Freemasons” from the list of forbidden societies. This omission led some to think the prohibition was lifted. In reality, the canon (1374) forbids Catholics from joining any organization *“which plots against the Church”* – a general clause that certainly included Freemasonry in the judgment of Church authorities. To dispel any doubt, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (then Prefect of the CDF, later Pope Benedict XVI) issued a declaration on November 26, 1983, stating clearly: *“The faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion.”* He added that the Church's judgment that Masonry is incompatible with Catholic faith **“remains unchanged”** despite the new code. Pope John Paul II personally approved this declaration. Thus, even in the late 20th century, as far as official policy was concerned, nothing had essentially changed since Clement XII – except the wording of the canon law.

One difference, however, was the acknowledgment that Freemasonry is not monolithic. The Catholic Church began to admit that Masonry in an English-speaking country (for example) might not be actively plotting against the Church, yet it still saw the **philosophical principles** of the lodge as problematic. The German bishops' study in 1980 concluded that even “well-disposed” Masonic lodges (those not overtly hostile to the Church) held a worldview that embodied a *naturalistic religion*, lacking

acknowledgement of revealed truth, and that this was **“incompatible with Christian faith”**. Core Masonic rites were seen as implicitly relativistic – treating all religions as equally valid paths under the Grand Architect. To Catholic theologians, this relativism and the *de facto* religious character of Masonic ritual (with temples, altars, prayers, initiation rites, etc.) made it a *“rival to the religion of the Gospel”*. Indeed, the **New Catholic Encyclopedia** noted that *“Freemasonry displays all the elements of religion”* and therefore essentially sets up a parallel creed, however benign it might seem. Additionally, the Church never ceased objecting to the **secret oaths** Masons take – swearing to keep lodge secrets under penalty of gruesome death. Even if Masons considered those old penalties symbolic, the Church viewed such oaths as morally unacceptable and *“sacrilegious”*. All these factors meant that every official review ended in the same place: a Catholic *cannot* be a Mason without betraying his faith, according to Church authorities.

In recent decades, there have been small signs of thaw on a personal level, but not in doctrine. In some regions, Catholic and Masonic leaders have engaged in informal dialogue to dispel past misunderstandings. For example, a Cardinal in Italy in 2024 remarked on an *“evolution in mutual understanding”* over the last fifty years and even called for a more permanent dialogue between the Church and the Masons. However, the Vatican swiftly reiterated that the longstanding ban remains firmly in place. As recently as November 2023, the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith – with Pope Francis’s approval – issued a new document **reaffirming** that active membership in Freemasonry is forbidden for Catholics due to *“irreconcilability between Catholic doctrine and Freemasonry”*. In short, the Church’s official position has not wavered: the antagonism of principles that began in the 18th century is still judged to exist.

That said, the practical reality of the Catholic-Masonic conflict has mellowed considerably compared to the past. Freemasonry no longer occupies the spotlight in Vatican pronouncements the way it once did; it is now a more marginal issue in Church life, coming up mainly when someone asks or when confusion arises. Many Catholics today perceive Masonry – especially in Anglophone countries – as a harmless charitable fraternity (indeed, some American Catholics quietly remain or become Masons, focusing on the social club aspect). Conversely, many Masons have toned down any anti-clerical rhetoric and emphasize that members are free to follow any faith. The era of violent clashes and sweeping political influence has waned. Nonetheless, the formal bridge between the two institutions remains broken. To this day a practicing Catholic in good standing cannot also be a Freemason, and any Masonic initiation by a Catholic is considered a *grave sin*. The legacy of 300 years of mistrust is not easily erased.

Freemasonry's Perspective and Responses

Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of England (1738)

“Our Society is founded on the purest principles of piety and virtue... no man can be made a Mason without a declaration of his belief in God.”

— *Minutes of the Grand Lodge, 1738*

Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite* (1871)

“Masonry propagates no creed except its own most simple and sublime one, that universal religion, taught by Nature and by Reason. The equality of rights, liberty of conscience, and human fraternity are its watchwords.”

— *Morals and Dogma, 1871*

How have the Freemasons themselves viewed this protracted conflict? It's important to recognize that Freemasonry, unlike the centrally governed Catholic Church, has no single spokesperson or unified policy – Grand Lodges are independent and the Craft is diverse around the world. However, a few general themes emerge in the Masonic response over time:

1. Denial of Anti-Catholic Aims: Freemasons have long denied that their fraternity is inherently anti-Christian or anti-Catholic. From the earliest papal bull onward, Masons protested that they were not conspiring against the Church. In 1738, when Clement XII first struck, many Catholic gentlemen and even some clergy were members of lodges (especially in places like Austria, southern Germany, and France). They were taken aback by the harsh condemnation. Some early Masonic writings – such as those by the Grand Lodges of England – stressed that Freemasonry was “a system of morality, veiled in allegory”, not a religion, and that it actually encouraged members to be upright in their faith. Far from plotting in darkness, these Masons argued their only secrets were quaint rituals and signs, not satanic schemes.

Over the years, whenever accused of nefarious deeds, the typical Masonic stance has been to ask for evidence and point out that many of their members are devout people. For example, American and British Freemasons often note that numerous Protestant Christians (including ministers) are active Masons, and they see no conflict with their religious duties. Catholic masons (where they have existed) have argued similarly. In the 20th century, when some Catholic theologians suggested that *perhaps “not all lodges plot against the Church,”* Freemasons welcomed this nuance – because indeed most regular lodges, especially in the English tradition, focus on fellowship, charitable works

(like funding hospitals and orphanages), and personal development, rather than any political agenda. A modern Masonic writer states plainly: “Freemasons as a group do not plan murders. They plan how to fund hospitals. Freemasons do not plan the overthrow of governments... They in fact teach against those things”. In short, the Craft has consistently tried to distance itself from the conspiratorial image painted by its opponents.

Albert Mackey, Encyclopedia of Freemasonry (1873)

“Religious liberty is the natural right of every man. Masonry teaches not dogma, but the equality of all men in the sight of God. Hence the Mason is bound to respect the faith of his brother, whatever name he may give to the Deity.”

— Mackey, Vol. I, 1873

2. Opposition to Church “Tyranny”: On the flip side, many Freemasons (especially in historically Catholic countries) have considered the Catholic Church to be an oppressor of liberty and progress. The 18th-century lodge members in places like Tuscany or France saw the Church’s bans as an attack on freedom of association and thought. When Pope Clement XII’s bull led to Inquisition actions, Masons portrayed it as *religious tyranny clamping down on Enlightenment ideas*. Masonic accounts highlight cases like Brother Crudeli of Florence – tortured simply for belonging to a lodge – as evidence that the Church “*could not tolerate any challenge to its spiritual authority by any group that met in secret and discussed philosophy, science and humanism*”. In this view, the Church’s antagonism was less about theology and more about power: Freemasonry was spreading “*the fire of free thought and religious liberty*” which threatened the Church’s worldly influence. This argument was explicitly made in a recent Masonic retrospective, which claimed that the Church’s “visceral reaction” in 1738 was “*the response of a powerful institution watching its hold on the world disintegrate*” in the face of new ideas.

During the 19th century, French and Italian Freemasons in particular took pride in opposing ultramontane Catholic political power. The lodge became a place for liberals, republicans, and patriots to network against what they saw as clerical domination. It is notable that when the Church condemned concepts like separation of church and state or democratic equality as “Masonic errors,” Freemasons wore those very labels as badges of honor. A Masonic source frankly acknowledges: “*Indeed, Freemasonry is guilty of the charge of believing each human being is sovereign unto themselves and deserving of personal liberty. Government exists to serve the people, not to rule over them from golden thrones.*” This defiant embrace of Enlightenment values shows that

Masons fully understood their liberal principles clashed with the reactionary stance of 19th-century Popes – and they were proud of it.

Thomas Smith Webb, Freemason's Monitor (1797)

“The design of the Masonic Institution is to make its members better men. Its foundation is virtue, its practice benevolence, and its end universal happiness.”

— Webb, Albany 1797

3. Regret over Church Hostility & Calls for Dialogue: At the same time, Freemasons often expressed disappointment that Catholic authorities could not see the compatibility between Masonry's moral teachings and Christianity. After all, many Masonic rites incorporate faith in God (the “Great Architect of the Universe”) and inculcate virtues like charity, truth, and brotherly love. Far from being satanic, most lodges open with prayer and forbid discussion of sectarian religion or politics precisely to maintain harmony among men of different creeds. Especially in the Anglophone world, Masons often cite that *tolerance* and *charity* are core tenets of the Craft – values that are also Christian. As one American Mason (who was also a Catholic) put it, *“regular Freemasonry is definitely not anti-Catholic. We have many Catholic members”*. These Masons find it puzzling that the Church would anathematize an organization that, in their lived experience, encourages good citizenship and upright conduct.

United Grand Lodge of England (1999)

“Freemasonry is not a religion. It requires of its members a belief in a Supreme Being, but leaves to each the liberty of interpreting that belief according to his own conscience. It strongly discourages attempts to recruit members, and forbids political or religious discussion within its meetings.”

— UGLE “Aims and Relationships of the Craft,” 1999 Revision

Over the last few decades, numerous Masonic Grand Lodges have publicly stated that it is unfortunate the Catholic Church maintains its ban, but they respect the Church's right to decide its rules for members. They typically stop short of engaging in theological debates, since Masonic etiquette avoids religious disputes. However, where possible, Freemasons have shown willingness to clear up misconceptions – for example by allowing clergy or scholars to review their ritual books to prove there's nothing anti-Christian in them. In some instances, local Masons and Catholic priests have even developed friendly relations (there are anecdotes of priests participating in lodge social

events, though not as members). Freemasonry has **never** retaliated by banning Catholics; in fact, it has always been open to men of any faith, and this did not change despite centuries of popes calling it anathema. This inclusivity is a point of pride for the Craft – but from the Church’s side, it is interpreted as religious indifferentism. That is a stalemate that dialogue has yet to overcome.

4. Reaction to Myths and Accusations: Freemasons have consistently refuted the wilder allegations made against them. When Taxil’s stories were being believed, Masonic authorities denied any “Palladian” rite or Luciferian worship – history vindicated the Masons on that score when Taxil confessed the hoax. Likewise, the forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (which emerged in the early 1900s) painted a picture of a Judeo-Masonic plot to dominate the world; Masons (along with Jewish organizations) debunked it as propaganda. In the 20th century, totalitarian regimes like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia persecuted Freemasons based on similar conspiracy theories, sometimes echoed by extremist Catholic and Orthodox factions. Masons responded by highlighting their contributions to civil society (for example, the vast network of Shriners’ children’s hospitals in North America, or charitable drives in local communities) to demonstrate their true aims. Where the Church saw secrecy as inherently suspect, Freemasons argued that secrecy was merely a way to symbolize trust and to perform rituals with dignity – not to hide wrongdoing. *“The real ‘secrets’ of Masonry,” wrote one Mason, “if such there be, could only be political or anti-religious conspiracies like the plots of the Grand Lodges in Latin countries,”* and these were *condemned by Anglo-American Masons themselves*. In other words, mainstream Masonry disavowed any subversive activities that a fringe lodge or irregular body might have undertaken.

In sum, Freemasonry’s response has oscillated between defensive denial and assertive pride in its role as a modernizing force. When attacked by Church authorities, Masons either quietly endured (especially in places where the Church had power) or pushed back in the public square championing secular governance and freedom. But notably, Freemasons have also often extended an olive branch – pointing out that *membership in Masonry was never meant to alienate a man from his religion*. Many devout Protestant and even some Eastern Orthodox Christians have been Freemasons without feeling any conflict. A few Catholic clergymen over time privately held the view that the Church’s ban was an overreaction (one famous example is Bishop John Carroll, the first Catholic bishop in the United States, whose brother was a Mason and who himself spoke of the fraternity without condemnation). These voices were rare, however, and no Catholic prelate could openly dissent once Rome had spoken. Thus, the Craft simply carried on, initiating willing Catholic laymen who chose to join despite the prohibitions – leaving the question of their standing in the Church to their individual consciences or eventual

confession. In recent years, some Masonic leaders have expressed hope that “*perhaps it is time for the Catholic Church to officially recognize that Freemasonry is not the enemy of the Church but a friend*” in shared values of charity and virtue. Such hopes, while optimistic, acknowledge that it would require the Church to significantly reconsider doctrines long held non-negotiable.

Conspiracy Theories and Popular Interpretations

Pope Pius VII, *Ecclesiam a Jesu Christo* (1821)

“The sect of the Carbonari, in which the Freemasons play a large part, has one and the same criminal intention: to overthrow the whole order of religion and society.”

—Apostolic Constitution, 13 September 1821

No exploration of the Catholic-Mason relationship would be complete without addressing the myriad **conspiracy theories** and popular notions it has spawned. From the 18th century to today, the feud has captured the imagination of many, sometimes outpacing reality. On the Catholic side, an enduring “mythos” developed of the Freemasons as a clandestine *shadow government* of the world. Traditionalist Catholic literature often lumps Freemasons into the same basket as Illuminati, Communists, and Jews (the infamous trope of a **“Judeo-Masonic conspiracy”**). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, clerical writers like Msgr. George F. Dillon and Father E. Cahill wrote books with titles like *“Freemasonry and the Anti-Christian Movement”* explicitly framing the Craft as the mastermind behind secular modernity’s assault on the Church. They contended that everything from the French Revolution to the rise of public schools to the loss of the Papal States was orchestrated by Masonic lodges. This idea was not fringe – it was endorsed at high levels. Pope Leo XIII himself, in *Humanum Genus*, spoke in near-conspiratorial terms of the Masons’ *“criminal purpose” to overthrow Christian society, acting as a “centre” for all secret sects.*

To this day, one can find circles in the Catholic Church (especially among some **integrist** or ultra-traditional groups) that blame Freemasons for internal Church problems. A modern example is the claim that the reforms of Vatican II were the result of Masonic infiltration of the Church – a theory popularized in some books and internet forums. These theorists often cite the *Alta Vendita* document as “proof” that Masons plotted to corrupt the Church over generations. They also resurrect Taxil’s bogus claims, insisting that high-ranking Freemasons knowingly serve Satan. It must be emphasized that the official Catholic Church **does not** endorse such extreme conspiracy theories; its objections to Masonry are framed in terms of theology and philosophy, not wild plots. The Vatican’s 1985 doctrinal reflection explicitly rejected the idea that all Masons are part of an international subversion, acknowledging that the fraternity’s activities differ by country. Nonetheless, the aura of conspiracy remains a part of popular lore. Anti-Masonic publications (some from Catholic publishers) still circulate, recycling discredited allegations – a fact noted wryly even by the Grand Lodge of British Columbia, which maintains a webpage debunking the *Alta Vendita* and other frequent accusations.

Pope Leo XIII, Address to Italian Bishops (1892)

“With these men of the Masonic sect it is nothing less than war. They desire a complete and absolute separation of Church and State. They aim to exclude religion from education, from the family, from the army, from public institutions.”

— *Allocution to Italian Bishops, 12 May 1892*

On the other side, Freemasons and their supporters have their own simplistic narratives: often casting the Catholic Church as an oppressive, medieval force opposed to enlightenment, sometimes even labeling the Church as “*afraid of losing its worldly wealth and influence*,” and thus attacking the Craft out of jealousy or fear. In Masonic lore, figures like Galileo or the Knights Templar (though not historical Freemasons) are sometimes anachronistically portrayed as proto-Masons persecuted by the Church for seeking knowledge. Popular culture has further muddled the waters. Novels and films often weave *Freemasons vs. Vatican* themes – for example, Dan Brown’s **Angels & Demons** imagines an Illuminati (historically tied to Masonic imagery) vendetta against the papacy. While fiction, such works draw on the real history of conflict and keep those tropes in the public consciousness.

Interestingly, there have also been *attempts at reconciliation in popular interpretation*. Some commentators note that many values Freemasonry promoted – human rights, equality before the law, separation of church and state – have in a roundabout way been accepted or at least accommodated by the modern Catholic Church. For instance, the Church today upholds religious freedom (a concept once anathema and labeled “Masonic”), and the papacy no longer seeks temporal rule. Thus, a few optimists suggest that Freemasonry “won” in advancing modern principles, and the Church eventually made its peace with them. However, this is a surface-level view; doctrinally, the Church still cannot condone the relativistic underpinning it sees in Masonry’s approach to truth. From the Masonic angle, there’s a popular saying that “*Masonry is not a religion but makes good men better*” – some have mused that a devout Catholic could, in theory, be a committed Mason if the Church would permit, since Masonry does not require one to renounce any article of Catholic faith. In practice, though, the Church’s ban forces a choice.

Albert Mackey, Encyclopedia of Freemasonry (1873)

“Religious liberty is the natural right of every man. Masonry teaches not dogma, but the equality of all men in the sight of God. Hence the Mason is bound to respect the faith of his brother, whatever name he may give to the Deity.”

— *Mackey, Vol. I, 1873*

Code of Canon Law (1917), Canon 2335

“Those who enroll in the sect of Freemasons or other societies of the same sort which plot against the Church or legitimate civil authority incur ipso facto excommunication reserved to the Apostolic See.”

— *Codex Iuris Canonici*, 1917

Grand Orient of France, Declaration (1877)

“Freemasonry is a purely human and philosophical institution, which has for its object the search for truth and the practice of solidarity. It no longer exacts a profession of faith in any dogma whatever.”

— *Grand Orient Declaration*, Paris 1877

John Dickie, *The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World* (2020)

“For the papacy, the lodge was a rival altar, a sanctuary of natural religion. For Masons, papal bulls were proof that the old order trembled before the ideals of reason, liberty, and fraternity.”

— *Dickie*, 2020

Conclusion

In sum, the folklore around the Catholic-Masonic relationship ranges from dark conspiracies to hopeful revisionism. The reality, as we have seen, is complex: it involves genuine doctrinal differences (e.g. the **naturalism vs. supernaturalism** debate), historical power struggles, and yes, a dose of irrational fear on both sides at times. The Leo Taxil episode stands as a stark reminder of how credulity and sensationalism can hijack the narrative. Likewise, the enduring image of a *Masonic cabal* manipulating world events is more fiction than fact – Freemasonry is influential in some spheres, but hardly the all-powerful hydra imagined by its enemies. Serious historians approach these claims with skepticism, relying instead on documented links (such as specific laws passed by Masonic legislators, or anti-clerical campaigns led by lodge members) rather than grandiose theories.

For now, the relationship is one of respectful distance. Freemasonry still welcomes men of all faiths, including Catholics (albeit the Catholics join under pain of Church penalties), and it prays for the welfare of all – often invoking the Great Architect to “*bless the Holy Church Universal*” in its old prayers, which ironically includes the Roman Church. The Catholic Church, in turn, prays for the return of those who have “strayed” into secret societies, but otherwise largely ignores the existence of lodges unless asked. Both institutions have weathered revolutions, schisms, and cultural upheavals, and both are survivors in their own right. Their conflict, rooted in the Enlightenment clash between faith and reason, authority and freedom, is itself a part of the tapestry of modern history. Understanding this conflict in depth – beyond the myths – allows practitioners of Freemasonry (and Catholics alike) to appreciate how each has challenged and, in some ways, influenced the other. As one Masonic writer pointed out, many ideals that Freemasonry championed are now “accepted values by many Catholics, and the world at large,” suggesting that the two may not be as irreconcilable in practice as in theory. Whether a true *détente* or dialogue will emerge in the 21st century remains uncertain. But if nothing else, the story of Freemasonry and the Catholic Church reminds us how a determined adherence to principles – on both sides – can shape the course of history, for better or worse, in religion and society.

William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry* (1772)

“Masonry is a beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. Its aim is to promote the happiness of the human race.”

— Preston, London 1772

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