

THE PRESIDENTIAL OATH AND OTHER SOLEMN PROMISES

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On January 20, 2009, the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court will administer the Presidential Oath to the president-elect. The Oath is clearly laid out in the U.S. Constitution in the last paragraph of Article II, Section 1, which reads:

Before he enter on the execution of his office, he shall take the following Oath or Affirmation: ----- "I, Name, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and I will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

When he took the oath, our Masonic Brother George Washington placed his hand on the Masonic Bible and raised his other hand toward heaven: his elbow forming a right-angle with his palm outward. This gesture shows solemnity, reverence, and respect toward God and country. Bro.: Washington was making his promise to his fellow citizens while calling upon Almighty God as a witness. According to the noted Masonic scholar, Brother, Sir Knight and Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33 , and a K.T., said that the modern form of taking an Oath is by placing the hands on the Holy Bible. He described how the word "corporal" refers to the linen cloth on which, in the Roman Catholic Church, the sacred elements consecrated as "the body of our Lord" are placed. Hence, the expression "corporal oath" originated in the ancient custom of swearing while touching the corporal cloth.

A remarkable 37 years before he took the Presidential Oath, George Washington, in a different venue, touched the Holy Bible as he took another oath in which he assumed the obligations of a Master Mason on August 4, 1753, in the Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Over a dozen subsequent presidents have been Masons. At the start of the 20th Century, President and Brother William McKinley was suddenly and brutally assassinated in Buffalo, New York. Shots rang out, and it was quickly reported that McKinley was struck by bullets. Being notified of this, Bro.: Roosevelt immediately rushed from Vermont to Buffalo, NY, only to be told that Bro.: McKinley was expected to recover and live. Roosevelt returned to his previous plans for a family trip in the Adirondack Mountains, only to subsequently learn of McKinley's sudden turn for the worse and his eventual death. Roosevelt came back to Buffalo once more ---this time to take the Presidential Oath of Office in a lawyer's office. Not a very glamorous setting, but the Oath was still binding. It is remarkable that no Bible was used at that event. However, a Bible was present for Roosevelt's Inauguration in 1905.

After President John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, Bro.: Lyndon B. Johnson (an Entered Apprentice Mason) was given the Oath by Federal District Judge Sarah Hughes aboard the presidential aircraft Air Force One. Brother Johnson repeated each phrase of the above-mentioned Oath, and the Judge also added at the end, "So help me God." Although the Constitution doesn't specify that phrase at all, it was and is appropriate. Bro.: Johnson repeated that as well, and it has been regularly spoken in subsequent inaugurations.

Presidential and Brother Warren Harding often said that although Masonic ceremonies and obligations are kept private among members, the high ideals resulting from those obligations deserve to be openly proclaimed to the world.

In addition to the Presidential Oath and Masonic Obligations, there are many other oaths which are solemn promises, such as the Hippocratic Oath among physicians, wedding vows between men and women, the Enlistment Oath in the Armed Services, and the oath of a witness to tell the truth in a court proceeding. I happen to be a "Notary Public" and any person giving a statement before a Notary must declare, under oath, specific facts in the declaration outlining what they said, did, or subscribed to in the matter at hand. The author of the declaration pledges that the information is correct and true to the best of his (or her) knowledge. In return, the Notary memorializes the giving of the Oath by affixing his 'seal' to the document. Breaking an oath is technically perjury, but in



modern days, perjury is usually confined to willfully breaking an oath or giving false testimony in a Court of Law.

An oath is defined as a promise or a statement-of-fact invoking a pledge of sincerity coupled with a pledge describing performance of an action. An oath usually has sacred overtones ---usually calling upon human witnesses (in a real, tangible and physical presence to act as a mortal stimulus in exhorting future compliance....and then, calling upon the spiritual force of Almighty God to create an even higher (and definitely more solemn & binding) atmosphere which would further exhort and enforce compliance of the oath's peculiar characteristics or stipulations. The aim is that an oath taken with sentiments of a "faithful heart" coupled with the sincerity & devotion of a "faithful mind" will be adhered to and abided by "faithful hands."

The Vice President of the United States ---- Members of Congress, and other government officials take the following oath:

"I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

Title 28, Chapter 1, Part 453 of the United States Code, prescribes that each Supreme Court Justice takes the following oath:

"I, (NAME), do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will administer justice without respect to persons, and do equal right to the poor and to the rich, and that I will faithfully and impartially discharge and perform all the duties incumbent upon me as (TITLE) under the Constitution and laws of the United States. So help me God."

The classical version of the "Hippocratic Oath" reads as follows: "I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius and Hygiela and Panaceaia and all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will fulfill according to my ability and judgement this oath and this covenant:

To hold him who has taught me this art as equal to my parents and to live my life in partnership with him, and if he is in need of money to give him a share of mine, and to regard his offspring as equal to my brothers in male lineage and to teach them this art --if they desire to learn it--without fee and covenant; to give a share of the precepts and oral instruction and all the other learning to my sons and to the sons of him who has instructed me and to the pupils who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the medical law, but no one else.

I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment; I will keep them from harm and injustice.

I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect. Similarly I will not give a woman an abortive remedy. In purity and holiness I will guard my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, not even on sufferers from stone, but will withdraw in favor of such men who are engaged in this work.

Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick, remaining free of all intentional injustice, of all mischief and in particular of sexual relations with both female and male persons, be they free or slaves.

What I may see or hear in the course of the treatment or even outside of the treatment in regard to the life of men, which on no account must be spread abroad, I will keep to myself, holding such things shameful to be spoken about.

If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of this be my lot."

The American Veterinary Medical Association's House of Delegates approved a Veterinarian's Oath in July 1969 and amended in 1999:



"Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge."

"I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics. I accept as a lifelong obligation the continual improvement of my scientific knowledge and competence."

Persons wishing to become naturalized citizens of the United States of America take an Oath of Allegiance, which reads:

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, so help me God."

(Note) In some cases, the United States Citizenship & Immigration Services allows the oath to be taken without the clauses: "...that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law."

Fr. Christian Rosenkreutz, the founder of legitimate Rosicrucian Societies, was born in 1378 and died in 1484 at the age of 106. Fr. Rosenkreutz was a Catholic priest who travelled from Germany to Cyprus, to Damascus, to Jerusalem, to Arabia, then to Spain and thence back to Germany. He knew first-hand the many virtues (as well as drawbacks) associated with immigration. Many Catholic Orders such as the Cistercians, the Benedictines, the Dominicans, and others, have their own "Rules" which they strive to follow. Fr. Rosenkreutz was forming a new Order which was similar to those Orders, and in doing so, he set up certain "Rules" for members of his Society of the Rose & Cross to follow:

- To care for the sick "free"-- meaning free of charge = gratis. They were to "be free from limitations" as to WHO was treated and/or who was helped; WHAT methods of treatment were utilized; WHEN it occurred; WHERE it took place; or HOW it was done. It was implied that no limitations were to be made, so long as all efforts made were honorable ---and intended to help; and not harm. Some critics of that model found it peculiar, but most rational people would describe it as People-helping-People with self-imposed ethical guidelines, in a reverent setting with no blasphemy. Furthermore, the members of the Rose & Cross Society were to wear the routine wearing apparel/garments of whatever country they resided in at a given time. This was to avoid any clashes of culture or being mistakenly labelled a 'heretic'. Compare the meek and mild tone of the Rosicrucian "Rules" with the equally meek and mild tone of "the Hippocratic Oath". Both focus on helping our fellow man in the most ethical way possible.

With the similar tone between the Rosicrucian "Rules" and "the Hippocratic Oath", I am reminded that both of these guidelines speak of extending help to the sick as well as being a beacon of justice and high morals. It is a refreshing sight in today's world to think of Care Givers who disqualify themselves from improper sexual relations, improper gossiping, improper divulging of intimate details or improper leaking of confidential information. It is also refreshing to think that at one point in time, Care Givers often thought of sharing money with those in need or providing a service gratis ---if a genuine 'need' was there and it was deemed the right thing to do by their conscience. I am reminded of our many Masonic Oaths and Obligations. I think of the history of the Knights of the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes, and of Malta. When we think of Hospitallers....we need to think about the valiant Knights who gave aid, comfort, food, shelter, and treatment to the sick & poor ---not only in a 'hospital' setting, but in every conceivable form of "adverse conditions". Their pledge to their fellow man was their handshake. A



man's word should be his bond. In Masonry and especially in the Orders of Knighthood -- an Oath involves significant promises to do what is morally right, with no mental reservations, no tactics of evasion, nothing but clear, articulate and unequivocal words ---- following a specific set of guidelines and Ancient Landmarks which govern good conduct. The Oath or Obligation is spoken in a formal setting that has been deemed a just and lawful place, and the presence of the duly elected Officials of a Lodge (or other Masonic entity) assures that it follows regular and uniform standards. Just as "the Hippocratic Oath" refers to the courtesy of letting people tend to their private matters without intimate data being divulged without their consent...Masons similarly respect the polite behavior of respecting the private matters of a friend and Brother. Even non-Masons may tell their friends to "keep that matter under your hat"; so nearly everyone is familiar with the discretion of keeping silent as a favor to someone; especially if it does not threaten anyone's life nor pose a threat to our nation. Lastly, the Masonic Obligations do not replace God in any manner. Freemasonry is a fraternity. Churches are Houses of worshipping Almighty God. Genuine Masonic Obligations do not attempt to dictate, diminish, or alter what a man feels in his heart toward his Creator. Many people do not understand this. They think it is sinful for men of different religious Faiths to hear an Opening Prayer of Invocation or a Closing Prayer of Benediction. When I am in an attitude of prayer..I am quietly and solemnly praying to my Creator. I let the man next to me (if he happens to be a Masonic Brother) pray in the manner in which he chooses. At the conclusion of these prayers, I have never seen or heard of a man whose Faith was shaken. Most are glad to have the chance to pause and pray. We, humans, share the same planet Earth...we are all essentially standing side-by-side in prayer on this planet. I would hope that the critics would see that honorable actions can arise from honorable people who assume honorable Oaths.

Albert G. Mackey knew about people who voiced criticisms of oaths for various reasons. In his "Encyclopedia of Freemasonry", he responded to these critics with clear logical answers: Mackey said that : *" an Oath or promise cannot, in itself, be sinful, unless there is something immoral in the obligation it imposes. Simply to promise secrecy, or the performance of any good action, and to strengthen this promise by the solemnity of an oath, is not, in itself, forbidden by any Divine or human law. Indeed, the infirmity of human nature demands, in many instances, the sacred sanction of such an attestation; and it is continually exacted in the transactions of man with man, without any notion of sinfulness."* Mackey noted objections from various groups that some oaths are attended by a penalty of a serious or capital nature. He noted that, in Masonry, the oaths are both historic and symbolic. In my own private opinion, the so-called "penalties" help jog a candidate's conscience to earnestly comply with the promises made therein with nearly every fiber in their being. I've heard people in today's society (both Masons and non-Masons) utter comments in their daily chores such as : "I would rather lose my right arm than break a promise to _____" (a friend/spouse/family member). I applaud those people not for hypothetically vowing to cut-off their right arm if they failed their objective. I applaud them because they valued their promise highly; they used something they valued dearly as a counterweight. By complying with the provisions of the oath: the oath-taker gains the best of all worlds: He faithfully performs his stated goal; he doesn't lose or forfeit that item of collateral value (the potential loss of which gave him incentive or 'backbone' to stay the course faithfully). The joy of faithfully carrying-out the terms of an oath is often more prized by the person who knows that a reverse action would have occurred had the oath been broken. Most children know that a penalty of shame or disgrace is more "chilling to the soul" than a physical reprimand. Some people detest spanking children. I don't approve of violent or harsh child-abuse; but I know that the few spankings I received as a child quickly enabled me to see which actions or behavior had a penalty tied to it. For the most part, I abided-by the expected standard & tried to avoid the penalty. It was a deterrent which gave me 'back-bone'. An honorable oath will never fail society. Only people fail. The success or failure of oaths rests upon the shoulders of those who make their pledge. The party or parties involved should take the oath seriously with the full intention of trying their best to comply with each provision in the oath, while doing nothing wrong or harmful which might jeopardize the process or breach the terms of it. All of these oaths have one other common thread: they are promises that have a very real impact on society. The ending of a slightly different translation of the Hippocratic Oath sums up this sentiment: "And now, if you will be true to this, your oath, may prosperity and good repute be ever yours; the opposite, if you shall prove yourselves forsworn."



As we listen to the Presidential Oath on January 20, 2009, let us remember the effort which must be exerted to comply with that oath. And, let us strive to fulfill all those solemn promises, obligations, oaths, vows, responsibilities, and duties that we have pledged toward ourselves, our family, our friends, our nation, and our God.

Sources / Recommended Readings:

- The Constitution of The United States of America
- the Scottish Rite Journal of Freemasonry, published by The Supreme Council, 33^o , for the Southern Jurisdiction of the USA. January 1997. Vol CV, Number 1, Pages 21-22.
- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33^o , and a K.T.
- Public Broadcasting Service, website:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_classical.html
- American Veterinary Medical Association

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