



The Overy Papers

Number 12 The Holy St John's

Fraternal Greetings Brethren

I have often wondered about the phrase in our closing. "In the name of God and the Holy Saint Johns. Until I joined this lodge I had never heard of it and wondered how a Christian Saint became a part of our ritual that was supposed to be secular and not a part of a religious order.

I also found that many had used this subject for "Masonic Papers" and most had written many pages most, of which, I must admit, I did not understand.

So I assume that there are probably many people who know more about this subject than I do and they will think I have missed out parts that they feel important but let's face it 99% of us just want to know the basics. Also remember this spot is always open and I would love to hear a response to any of my talks but remember the lodge dictates a talk of about five minutes.

So here, for your reading pleasure, is my interpretation on where it all came from and provide a simple explanation based on my knowledge on English History.

First I realized it was Saint's John's and not St John, so there are two of them. They are St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist. Both were alive at the same time and both knew Jesus although, if they knew one another is not recorded.

So I will start the story far back into the mists of time when Stonehenge was new and the Druids and similar religions were present in what is now the UK and Europe.

There were two very important and popular festivals with these early people. They were "Midsummer" at the "Summer solstice" and "Midwinter" at the "Winter solstice." Which basically represent the Longest and Shortest days of the year.

Many years later when Christianity arrived many of these old major festive days were transferred to the Christian Calendar and re-named.

Midsummer became St. John the Baptist's Day and the day was fixed as the 24 of June. Of course Midsummer or the Summer Solstice occurs on either the 21 or 22 of June depending where you live in the northern hemisphere and if you live in the southern hemisphere it happens in December.

Midwinter became St. John the Evangelist's Day and the day was fixed as the 27 of December. Once again Midwinter or the Winter Solstice occurs on either the 21 or 22 of December depending where you live in the northern hemisphere and if you live in the southern hemisphere it happens in June.

Many Countries and Professions have a Patron Saint and during the medieval period they were chosen as religious guardians over a place or specific occupation. Canada for example also has two St. Anne, the Virgin Mary's mother and St. Joseph, the father of Jesus.

But I can find no historical explanation why the "Operative Masons" of the Middle Ages adopted two, and those two, were our two Saint's John. You would have expected they would have used St. Thomas who was the Patron Saint of architecture and building, but then I suppose that is another of life's little puzzles.

And so we move forward in time to the first Grand Lodge of England that was officially organized in England on June 24th 1717 the Festival Day of Saint John the Baptist and they used him as their Patron Saint. It was nearly one hundred years later on the 27 December 1813 the United Grand Lodge was created on the Festival Day of Saint John the Evangelist and he was added to give us two Patron Saints.

The Patron Saint day of St. John the Baptist is symbolic of a day of beginnings, while the day of the St. John the Evangelist is symbolic as a day of endings and it is assumed that this is one reason the early ritualists of our fraternity took the two saints from the operative masons to add them to our rituals. Also it is told that they removed all Christian dogma, and made their observance universal for men of all beliefs.

So, for us as Freemasons, we use this symbolic day of the 24 June when the world gets most light to represent a new beginning of life and the day of 27 December, when the world gets least light, to represent of the attainment of wisdom and the rewards of a life well-spent.

So the two Saint's John were accepted as they fitted well in our system of Great Moral Teachings and few great men could have been found who better exemplified, through their lives and works, the teachings of Freemasonry.

St. John the Baptist was a man of character and integrity, and someone we could all do well to emulate. In him we have a singular instance of purity, of zeal, simplicity of manners, and an ardent wish to benefit mankind by his example. To him we are also indebted for that well known phrase, "Peace on earth, good will toward men."

Saint John the Evangelist is considered equal in his zeal for the same qualities, and because of his abilities as a speaker and a writer it was possible to spread the teachings to a far broader audience.

So together, the two Saint's John represent those qualities of character that all good Freemasons are expected to aspire to.

All Craft Lodges were originally expected to remember these two important Festival Days as a precious link with the past and to use them as an opportunity for the renewal of allegiance to everything in Freemasonry symbolized by these two Saints.

In some rituals they still dedicate their lodges to the Holy Saint's John as we do but this practice stopped in England when The United Grand Lodge removed the reference. Why they did it is not certain but it is thought it was to remove any hint of a Christian bias. Mind you it still continued in the newly created USA and because of that is still used in our ritual.

Some regret that today there is a disinterest to honor our two Patron Saints because although it is a Christian ideal, the Masonic interpretation carries the same lesson for all religions.

Also it symbolizes the cycle of activity and repose, which is so fittingly expressed in our familiar phrases: "From labour to refreshment and From refreshment to labour."

In our Lodge, all "Installations" between 1913 and 1937 were carried out on the 27 of December, Saint John the Evangelist day. Then in 1938 it was changed to the 24 June, Saint John the Baptist day. Then eventually in June 1958 we changed our 'Installation' to the second Tuesday in the month of June, and as we know this year it was 10 June.

So today all we are left with is one short line in our ritual and I hope this helps you to understand where it came from.

Thank you and whatever I say may we continue in peace and harmony.

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