

Masonic Etiquette

By J. Kirk Nicholson, Jr., PGM, Georgia

This Short Talk Bulletin was designed to remind us of the ill-defined and often overlooked niceties of common courtesy which should be applied in our lodge rooms. We thank M.W. Brother Nicholson for these thought-provoking reminders.

Although Etiquette (Masonic or otherwise) is something that most of us practice at all times, it is a subject that we, as Masons, should review in our minds and hearts from time to time.

Etiquette, according to the dictionary, implies observance of the formal requirements governing behavior in polite society. Very little of Masonic etiquette or its customs have been defined in our written laws. The rules of polite manners and correct behavior have been transmitted from the past. Where no such rules are expressed, the good taste and sensitive feelings of the individual Brother remain as the only guidance.

To be more graphic in describing Masonic Etiquette, there is nothing in any Masonic Code which requires us to bathe or wear a clean shirt when we attend lodge. These are matters of good taste or poor taste, as the case may be.

In several Jurisdictions, the subject of etiquette has been addressed in pamphlets available to the Brethren. From these pamphlets, many of the comments in this Short Talk Bulletin have been extracted. The information is basic in nature and will be useful to all Brethren.

Our Brethren cannot be blamed if they occasionally adopt some familiarities when they hear and see them from their leaders. An example, addressing a Brother as "Brother Tom" rather than "Brother Jones." All Brethren should be addressed by their surnames at a Masonic gathering. A man does not attend a lodge communication in his capacity as a private individual. He is not just "Tom" or "Joe," but is there as a Master Mason. In Aesop's famous fable of "The Fox and the Lion," we find the adage, "Familiarity breeds contempt." Brother Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) further noted that "Familiarity breeds contempt--and children."

No Brother should ever engage in private conversations or discussions on the sidelines in the lodge. If something becomes so important to be said to another Brother he should follow the guidelines of his own Grand Lodge in asking the Worshipful Master properly for permission to

be excused from the lodge room. Private conversations or discussions should be confined to outside the lodge room, except when the lodge is at ease. This problem was discussed in the September, 1979 Short Talk Bulletin this way:

"One of the most irritating and disconcerting things during any Masonic meeting is when two or more Brethren on the sidelines get into a sotto voce discussion. It's even worse when one of them is hard of hearing. When this happens during degree work, it can throw off even the best of ritualists. We've all seen--and heard--it happen.

"It is a distraction from the solemnity of the ritual. It's discourteous to the degree team; it's robbing the candidate of the benefit of what should be a meaningful experience; and it is insulting to the Brethren who are trying to hear.

"Unfortunately, the offending offensive Brethren don't seem to realize that they are disturbing their colleagues. They don't realize that they can be heard ... or, possibly they don't care."

A number of the niceties of Masonic etiquette deal with the reception of, and respect due to, the Grand Master. The man chosen to lead the Masons in a Jurisdiction has the distinction of being in a position peculiar to the Masonic fraternity. In no other organization is there such an authoritarian figure. In the broadest terms, he is the representative of King Solomon, and as such, there devolves upon him the rights, privileges, respect and power usually reserved for royalty.

Upon his election to the office of Grand Master by his Brethren, the man is no longer a private person, he is the Grand Master. The private man with his partialities and prejudices must disappear in order that only the officer may remain. To be Grand Master is one of the most humbling and exacting of all the duties which the position places upon the person in the office. It means that if his closest friend deserves a reprimand, he must reprimand him; it means that if he must give instructions to those far wiser than himself, he must nevertheless instruct them; it means that whatever limitations, whatever sense of failing and shortcoming he may be conscious of, he must sacrifice to the demand of his position. (To a somewhat lesser degree, these same characteristics also apply to a Worshipful Master.)

The responsibility of the Worshipful Master and every Freemason is to maintain toward the Craft and toward the Grand Master a respectful attitude, not for the sake of the man in that high office, but for the maintenance of its supreme importance. Whether a man is personally liked or disliked ... the office of Grand Master should always be held in high regard. When this man visits a lodge, it is not the person of Grand Master which should be honored, but the honor that is paid to the Grand Master. The honor that is paid to the Grand Master is to the office, the highest which Freemasonry may bestow upon any of its members, yet one which carries with it the heaviest responsibilities.

A visit from the Grand Master should be one of the highlights of the year for any lodge. This is the case whether the lodge invites the Grand Master for a special occasion or the Grand Master arrives for other reasons.

If a lodge wishes to invite the Grand Master for a special occasion, the Grand Master should be written to as far in advance as possible. His time is in great demand and the sooner an invitation is sent the more likely he will be able to accept. If possible, give him a first choice and second choice date. Be specific in your invitation. Give him the exact time the meeting is to begin; whether dinner will be served and if so, at what time; where the meeting is to be held, (i.e. Lodge Hall, First Methodist Church) and the street address. If the meeting place is not on the main street, directions should be given on how to reach there. Give him information on the kind of program; if you wish him to speak (and if on a special topic, give him the subject), whether awards are to be presented, if the meeting is a family meeting, open but for men only, or tiled; time you expect him to arrive. (See Short Talk Bulletin, July, 1978 - "The Masonic Speaker.")

No lodge should ever feel that they cannot invite the Grand Master or that the Grand Master would not visit them. No lodge is too small or too far away for the Grand Master. He will be pleased to accept the invitation if a convenient date can be worked out. He feels that each lodge is equal, regardless of size, distance or what has been traditional. He is Grand Master of all Masons in his Jurisdiction.

A committee should be appointed for the Grand Master's comfort. When he arrives, the Worshipful Master should be available to greet him along with the committee. If for some reason plans for the evening have changed (the award recipient cannot attend, etc.) the Grand Master should be advised immediately of changes.

If it is a dinner meeting, formal or picnic style, the Worshipful Master and committee should see that a head table or proper seating is arranged for the Grand Master. The Grand Master and his party should be afforded every courtesy and he should be escorted to his place at the head table or to the head of the line if the meal is to be served buffet style. The Worshipful Master's committee should be able to introduce the Brethren to the Grand Master and to generally make him feel welcome.

During the meeting (open, closed or family) the Worshipful Master should have an outlined program. He should have done his homework and know who will introduce the guests, who will present the Grand Master at the Holy Altar, etc. If it is a closed meeting, he should carry out the order of business in a correct manner according to the Code of his Jurisdiction and have the meeting begin and end on time.

"The Worshipful Master who carefully plans his meeting for the reception of the Grand Master, who takes his officers and members into his confidence, who appoints the necessary committees and gives each of them proper instruction in the details of his part in the ceremonies, and who, last, but not least, builds his program so that it will serve to accent the message of the Grand

Master, will be amply rewarded. His will be the satisfaction which always comes from a well-planned and well-executed meeting." (MASONIC ETIQUETTE, by John A. Dunaway, PGM, Ga.)

One important thing to remember when the Grand Master visits your lodge. Regardless of the type of meeting (family, open, closed) when the Grand Master has finished speaking, there should be nothing to follow him except the closing. No other speakers should be permitted to address the lodge when he has concluded. As one of our late Grand Masters so aptly expressed it: "When the Grand Master finishes speaking, even the dogs quit barking."

When the Grand Master is unable to visit a lodge and he sends his personal representative, the representative should be given every courtesy. He should be accorded respect and should never be addressed by his first name during any part of a closed lodge ceremony.

Regarding a Worshipful Master's Hat: again we should think of good taste. A cap (golf, hunting, etc.) flop hat, or red plaid hat is inappropriate. A Master would never wish to wear any type hat that would distract from the dignity of the office. The Worshipful Master should remove his hat only (1) for the Grand Master in person; (2) during prayer; (3) when giving the obligations when the name of Deity is spoken and (4) if a funeral is held in a church or chapel.

The hat is not the personal property of the Master but belongs to the lodge and is an emblem of the Master's authority.

Officers' Dress. We have become a casual, society and in some ways this is good. However, just as familiarity breeds contempt, being too casual can cause disrespect. We shall again call on the term "good taste". The dress of lodge officers is prescribed by at least one Grand Lodge in the United States--Pennsylvania--to be "strictly Masonic," consisting of black clothes, tail coat, (evening dress preferred), black vest, black tie, black shoes, black silk hat and white gloves. In some lodges the officers all dress in tuxedos. There is no set rule of dress for the officers, but its practice is to wear attire which will show respect and express the dignity of Masonry. We should remember that we represent a Fraternity that is great because of its sacred foundation and there is no place for carelessness ... in dress, ritual or dignity.

All-too-frequently, we tend to become sloppy in our use of Masonic titles. The Grand Master (except in Pennsylvania) is always addressed as "Most Worshipful." (In Pennsylvania, he is the "Right Worshipful Grand Master.") Past Grand Masters are usually accorded the title of "Most Worshipful." A notable exception is in the Grand Lodge of Texas where Past Grand Masters become "Right Worshipful." It is sometimes confusing as to the proper terms of address. In some jurisdictions you would say "Most Worshipful Brother Jones"; in others, "Most Worshipful Jones"; and in others, "Brother John Jones, Most Worshipful Past Grand Master." It is well to know which is proper in your Jurisdiction.

Professional, civic, military and clerical titles are frequently used in conjunction with Masonic titles; i.e., "Reverend and Brother John Jones"; Doctor and Right Worshipful Thomas Smith";

"Brother and Colonel John Doe." The argument is sometimes given that as we all "meet upon the level" such titles are not necessary. Unless a definite policy is established in your Jurisdiction, it is a matter of personal preference and good taste.

Appearance of lodges is also considered a matter of etiquette. If the lodge room is dirty, the visitors' aprons not clean, and the overall appearance shoddy, it's an indication of lack of concern. "Spruce up!" "Paint up!" "Shape up!" can be a motto for any lodge wishing to show courtesy to its members and visitors.

Prayers at lodge functions should be scrupulously in keeping with Masonic teachings. Never should they be an expression of particular sectarian views or dogmatic creeds. It is a matter of courtesy that all prayers, speeches and discussions at Masonic affairs avoid sectarian, controversial or political tones.

Punctuality in opening and closing is a courtesy, too. It promotes harmony and is an essential element of good leadership.

When thinking of Masonic Etiquette, there is much that can be said and written. We must use common courtesy, good taste, customs, decorum, manners, observance and traditions. Only one Masonic writing discusses the table manners of a Mason. It is found in the oldest known Masonic document on earth, the REGIUS POEM, written in about 1390 by an unidentified English Monk. The original is now in the British Museum in London. Near the end of the poem appear these stanzas which are offered for the interest of the readers of this Short Talk Bulletin:

TABLE MANNERS...

Good manners make a man.
To the next degree look wisely.
To do them reverence by and by;
Do them yet no reverence all in turn.
Unless that thou do them know,
To the meat when thou art set,
Fair and honestly thou eat it;
First look that thine hands be clean
And that thy knife be sharp and keen,
And cut thy bread all at thy meat,
Right as it may be there eaten
If thou sit by a worthier man.
Then thyself thou are one,
Suffer him first to touch the meat,
Ere thyself to it reach.

To the fairest morsel thou might not strike,
Though that thou do it well like;
Keep thine hands fair and well,
From foul smudging of thy towel;
Thereon thou shalt not thy nose blow,
Nor at the meat thy tooth thou pick;
Too deep in cup thou might not sink,
Though thou have good will to drink.
Lest thine eyes would water thereby--

(NOTE): The complete text and commentary of this historic poem is contained in the M.S.A. Digest, "The Regius Poem."

In closing, a quotation from the Grand Lodge of Georgia booklet, *Masonic Etiquette* by John A. Dunaway, PGM, seems to sum up the subject:

"It is by the method of teaching mouth to ear, generation after generation, that the rules of polite manners and correct behavior have been transmitted to us from the past; and where no such rules are formulated at all, in writing or by tradition, the good taste and sensitive feelings of the individual Brother remain the only guidance."

STB - April 1980