

The Holy Saints John and Freemasonry

by Bro. Robert Blackburn

The "Feasts of Saint John," celebrated in the Christian religious tradition, are, in fact, of more ancient origin. The calendar dates June 24, the Feast of St. John the Baptist, and December 27, the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, loosely coincide with the summer and winter solstices. The word "solstice" derives from the Latin word "Sol" meaning Sun and "sinstere" meaning "to stand still." At the summer solstice, the Sun appears at its greatest height on the horizon and affords that day the longest period of light. At the winter solstice, the Sun appears at its lowest point on the horizon, resulting in a correspondingly short period of daylight. The solstices are caused by the Earth's axis rotating on a 23.5 degree angle with relation to the Sun. This angle of rotation is also responsible for Earth's seasonal temperature changes, when the northern and southern hemispheres are alternately closer to the Sun.

Human beings have acknowledged the solstices from time immemorial. For instance, the 5000 year old tomb mound New Grange, located in Ireland, is so constructed that on the winter solstice a shaft of light illuminates its subterranean inner chamber. By 300 B.C.E., the Romans re-arranged their calendar to specially honor the winter solstice. A weeklong festival, called Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun), began on December 21, had its main feast day on December 25, and ended on December 27. This festival featured feasting, dancing, bonfires, decorating homes with greens, and gift giving. When Christianity became the state religion of the Empire, the summer solstice was rededicated to St. John the Baptist (who by tradition was born six months before Jesus), December 25 to the birth of Jesus, and December 27 to St. John the Evangelist.

During Europe's "Middle Ages," St. John the Evangelist's Day, also known as the third day of Christmas, was a particularly popular holiday. Wine or hard cider was brought to the local church for a blessing. The wine was later consumed - no doubt heartily - with the toast, "Drink the love of Saint John."

It is no longer remembered when or why Freemasons adopted the "Holy Saints John" as their patron saints. Certainly, many medieval craft guilds adopted saints as their spiritual patrons. The traditional saint of architects and building, however, is St. Thomas, not the Saints John. Nevertheless, German stone masons meeting in Cologne, as early as 1440, were referring to themselves as "Brethren dedicated to St. John, first among the stars of morning." Scottish stone masons had at least one lodge dedicated to St. John the Evangelist by 1599. Freemasonry's first public grand lodge, the Grand Lodge of England, was founded on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, December 27, 1717, in London. It is following this date, it seems, that the "Holy Saints John" were formally recognized by every Masonic lodge. Today, many lodges use December 27, the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, to install their officers and Masonic grand lodges, marking the start of a new Masonic year, convene in June around the summer solstice and the Feast of St. John the Baptist.

In Masonic symbolism, the Holy Saints John are often depicted as two vertical, parallel lines flanking a circle surrounding a central point (in England, since 1812, the lines were renamed "Moses" and "King Solomon" to be less sectarian). An open book is usually placed above the circle. The point represents the individual Mason.

The book and circle denote the boundaries, set by sacred scripture, by which a Mason is to circumscribe his actions. Depicting the Saints John in this way seems particularly apt. They border the individual Mason like an embodiment of Time - perhaps the beginning and end of a year, perhaps the elapse of a lifetime. Both men also embody certain important, universal characteristics. Saint John the Baptist is considered a zealous man of action, Saint John the Evangelist a man of learning, meditation, and vision. Together, the two represent a balance between fraternal zeal and learned equilibrium, qualities which all Freemasons should strive to emulate