

## **Ritual and Ritual Proficiency: Are We Providing What We Advertise?**

Distinguished guests, Eminent Commander, and Sir Knights all, I thank you for the kind invitation to speak tonight and share some thoughts on ritual and ritual proficiency, especially as it relates to our Order and our vows as Knights Templar. I promise you that even though I live inside the Washington, DC, bubble, my remarks tonight will be significantly shorter than the ones being delivered on Capitol Hill, and I hope more enjoyable as well.

In my 40-plus years as a Freemason, I have always been an active participant in our work and a student of our many rituals. I have been blessed to travel across the nation as well as internationally and see work in many jurisdictions and languages— over 25 jurisdictions, at least five languages, and several nations. I've seen a lot of ritual work in a lot of different places. Some of it has been outstanding, and some of it...well, let's just say there was room for improvement.

As Knights Templar, we have long claimed to be the pinnacle of the Masonic journey, especially for the Christian Mason. According to the Masonic Service Association, there were about 875,000 Freemason in 2023. Let's take a conservative number of 75% of those identify as Christians. That means there are about 656,000 men in the USA right now who are eligible to be fellow Knights in our Order. When I checked the MMS, we had about 66,000 active members, which is less than 10% of the estimated number of potential members. Sadly, this is consistent with the percentage of York Rite members in most jurisdictions across the USA. For an organization that has been proclaiming for at least 40 years that "Every Christian Mason Should be a Knight Templar," we are clearly doing something wrong. How might our ritual and ritual proficiency be affecting our membership challenges?

We have a beautiful ritual within the three Orders we confer. The lessons we present in each one are timeless and poignant, and quite honestly, if more men heard these lessons and took them to heart, I firmly believe we would be having fewer issues as a nation, let alone within our several bodies. We receive new Companions with a lesson on the virtue and importance of truth above all things. To be true to ourselves and our fellow men is the greatest of all virtues. This lesson is the first we teach to a pilgrim seeking to enlist in our Order, yet all too often it is a lesson taught poorly. While the cast of the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross is about 15, there are but five sizeable speaking parts that require significant memorization. The remaining 10 parts are either non-speaking or consist of but one or two easily learned lines. Ideally, the High Priest and Sovereign Master should not be the same person

but can be if necessary. I would suggest that there are at least 5 men in every Commandery who can learn and execute these key roles, and there is no reason to ever use the short form of the Order, which is really a monologue. We should put as much work, if not more, into the preparation and conferral of this Order as we do with the Order of the Temple, because it is the first exposure of our Order to the candidate and we should absolutely place our best foot forward. Unfortunately, I have seen far too many Commanderies approach this Order as something that must be done in order to get the candidate through to the Order of the Temple.

One of the issues raised regarding the ritual and creating conferral teams is a matter of resources— people to do the work and time for them to learn what needs to be memorized. This has been a hot topic for at least the last 20 years, and I really think it goes back further than that. In some jurisdictions, we are our own cause for the problem. For example, in Maryland, in all but the Commandery since 2016, there is a Proficiency requirement for presiding officers in lodge, chapter, and council to not only memorize, but be certified in the work of the degrees and, in the case of the lodge, the lectures and charges, plus opening and closing, calling on and off of degrees, the memorial service, and a two-day law school. Until very recently, these requirements had to be completed in one calendar year. It should be no surprise there are many Maryland lodges with Masters serving a decade or more in the East.

It has eased up a bit— no longer requiring all the work to be done in one year, but it is still in place. Unlike Pennsylvania, our work is not as heavily Master-centric, so there are a lot of parts that others perform in each of the degrees. Unfortunately, there is no requirement for a lodge— or a chapter, council, or commandery, for that matter— to be inspected and certified to confer the degrees or orders in their entirety. This means except for the presiding officer, the rest of the officers doing the work could speak like a teacher in a Peanuts® video and the work would be considered “acceptable.” I don’t know about you, but that is not an acceptable solution for me. I believe there are a few things we can do to improve our ritual and ritual performance that are really not difficult and would result in a significant improvement in the quality and quantity of work we can perform and increase the value and professionalism of our work for the candidates. I offer these in no particular order of priority or importance. In fact, I think these can be implemented in parallel.

**Suggestion One:** Annual inspection of each Order on a rotating basis. This is an idea I stole blatantly from the Grand Lodge of Ohio. I propose that each Commandery be assigned an Order for inspection each year, and not just the Order of the Temple.

Ideally, the orders are not the same for each Commandery in a region or district, so that there are inspections on each Order in every adjacent region. Let's make this simple by using Division 3 here in Pennsylvania as an example. In Inspection Year A, Nativity Commandery 71 would be inspected on the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross, Damascus Commandery 95 would be inspected on the Order of Malta, and Mizpah Commandery 96 would be inspected on the Order of the Temple. In Inspection Year B, Nativity would have the Malta, Damascus the Temple, and Mizpah the Red Cross. Finally, Year C would inspect the Order of the Temple at Nativity, Red Cross here at Damascus, and Malta at Mizpah. The cycle then repeats.

There are at least four advantages here. First, with a staggered cycle, all Orders are being practiced and evaluated annually within a reasonable distance of other Commanderies, so these Commanderies can work even more closely to visit and support one another. Where there might be a smaller or struggling Commandery, those nearby might step up to help cover the smaller parts so that members of the Commandery being inspected could focus on the larger ones. For example, in the Red Cross, the Commandery being inspected might be expected to fill the High Priest, Sovereign Master, and Companion Conductor/Master of Infantry roles, but could have assistance from other Commanderies on the other parts. Second, by having a known schedule, the line officers will know what Order "their" inspection Order will be when sitting as Commander, assuming no one were to drop from the line or skip stations for some reason. Third, even a small Commandery like Nativity with an higher average age of membership should be able to identify at least three members to fill the key stations in each Order. Then, as members become more comfortable in taking on roles and good membership development brings more candidates to the ranks— hopefully some younger men included— the smaller Commanderies will be growing and the base for ritual participants will be growing as well. Finally, with the Order all being inspected in a reasonable geographic area, the three Commanderies in this example can work together to bring candidates to each of the other Commanderies for conferral, providing a better experience for the candidates because the Commandery conferring the Order will have been working to prepare for the inspection on that Order, giving a high-quality experience for the candidates. Everyone wins.

**Suggestion Two:** Line Officers administrate the Commandery, and sideliners confer the Orders. Now, this sounds counterintuitive to Suggestion One, but stay with me for a moment. There are men who are great at planning and executing events and activities, and there are men who are outstanding ritualists. We know them

ourselves. What we don't find very often, and certainly not in the quantity necessary to fill every chair in any of our bodies, are men who are both great leaders **and** administrators as well as outstanding ritualists. This should not surprise us, because the skills necessary for administration and leadership are not the same as those for being masters of ritual. This is not a bad thing and is really something of which we need to take advantage. Initially, it may be necessary for line officers to fill the key roles in the Orders. However, I would hope that the Commander is looking at his roster and identifying individuals who are not officers who might be encouraged to take a role, even a small one, and making a personal visit to extend the invitation. Some roles, like the Jewish Council, have no speaking role, making them ideal for our more senior members who want to feel engaged but acknowledge they are not mobile enough to perform the tactics or comfortable with their memory to remember many lines. Also, that Jewish Council was made up of the elders of the tribes— what better men to take those roles than the elder statesmen of our own Commandery? Similarly, banner guards in the Order of Malta have no speaking role, and accommodations can be made for them to be seated during the work.

Parts can also be logically divided among multiple speakers. For example, the Order of the Temple is a journey to several asylums along the route to Jerusalem. Logically, it would not be the same knights serving as Commander or prelates at each one. Have different men take these roles in different sections— especially the prelate. It not only eases the amount of memorization, but aids in the presentation of the message and feel of the journey between asylums and the passage of time. There are other examples of “sharing the work” that I am sure you can identify, and I encourage your creative thoughts.

Suggestion Three: Recognize Ritual Proficiency and Performance. Again, this is something I found elsewhere, and I really hate reinventing the wheel. Our Fratres in the Grand Commandery of Indiana did an excellent job in creating a system to recognize proficiency and performance of the Ritual. In 2015, when I was grand commander of Maryland, I introduced it there with three levels: Pilgrim, Warrior, and Knight. The Indiana model now has a fourth level, Commander, as well. It is based on collecting a number of points based on performing certain parts of the ritual at least twice on active candidates. Upon reaching the first level, Pilgrim, a ribbon bar is awarded. After that, as points are accumulated, the old bar is exchanged for a new one. In the Maryland implementation, we did recognize those who had met the previous proficiency requirements which were eliminated by Vaught Decision 8 with the Pilgrim level for having certified in one Order and the Warrior level for certifying in two or three as a recognition of the work previously

completed. It is a small token, but that little metal bar and a locally produced certificate are often a source of pride for the recipient, and serve as an encouragement for others to seek similar recognition. I commend it to you and your Grand Commandery for consideration and adoption.

We claim to be the premier Masonic organization and the destination for all Christian Masons. We have great lessons to share in our historic Orders. There are certainly enough Master Masons who are candidates for our Order available who have not yet experienced our work, and countless more men who are of a like mind, but simply are unaware of the Knights Templar, our Masonic affiliation, and the method to become one of the Poor Soldiers of Christ in the twenty-first century. It is important for us to be prepared and equipped to explain the work of our Order, the importance of membership in it. Likewise, it is critical that we are prepared and equipped to present our ritual work at the highest level of proficiency and skill that befits our status as a premier body, offering the candidate the absolute best experience, education, and yes, value, to add to his Masonic and Christian journey.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to be here this evening and the wonderful fellowship and courtesies extended. It has been my honor to serve you and our Grand Encampment. I pray my words have been encouraging and thought-provoking, and I wish each of you all the success and blessings of our Heavenly Father.