

The 3 Degrees of the Question

by Richard D. Carver

As Americans, we use many expressions in our vernacular that were likely derived from Freemasonry, or at least have some sort of Masonic significance. These are everyday remarks like, “they hoodwinked me,” meaning *they concealed information from me*, or an expression like being “black-balled,” even though in our jurisdiction it is a black cube that does the deed, or my mother’s favorite: “Free, white and over 21.”

I heard my mother say this on several occasions, usually when referring to my grandfather, and I never gave much thought to its actual meaning and assumed it was just her way of stating disapproval for her step-father as politically correctly as her personality permitted. It seemed that after the death of my grandmother, granddad became a bit of a hound dog; prone to carousing, womanizing and the internal processing of fairly large quantities of grain alcohol. My mother obviously disapproved, but would say, “Oh well, he is free, white and over 21 so he can do whatever he wants...”

After joining the Masonic Fraternity, I came to the realization that the expression was likely a definition of the requirements for Masonic membership, albeit crude and out of date. “Free” is the shortened form of the word *freeborn*, and “white” is really just a redundant and rather racist definition of the same requirement. It remains unfortunate likelihood that prejudice and racism has undoubtedly accounted for the rejection of non-white candidates — a practice that enlightened thinking has now served to eliminate. 21 was the minimum lawful age in most jurisdictions until fairly recent times.

Another expression we occasionally hear is about “giving someone the 3rd degree.” On the surface, it certainly seems likely to be a Masonic reference, but there is an even more likely meaning in history, which also involved three degrees.

Near the end of the 12th Century, Pope Lucius III issued the papal bull *ad abolendam* declaring the practice of Catharism as heresy. Catharism was based on dualist Christian

and Gnostic beliefs, and it regarded the resurrection as a doctrine of “rebirth” rather than the physical rising of a dead body from the grave. This definition vastly differed from the doctrine taught by the Catholic Church, and soon came to be regarded as blasphemous heresy.

Blasphemy and heresy were considered crimes of considerable weight, and were expressively exempt from the normal systems of trial and justice. There were a number of tribunals and Papal Inquisitions throughout the European kingdoms during the Middle Ages, and Pope Gregory IX further expanded the scope of *ad abolendam* with the addition of *Excommunicamus* in 1232 to include not only the Cathars, but also Muslims, Jews and nearly anyone suspected of any form of heresy, which came to be defined as any belief or opinion outside the strict teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Crusades and Holy Wars of the period soon demanded the attentions of the Church and the many kingdoms, and the importance of these decrees became diluted. By the 15th century, they were almost forgotten although still existing in law.

Alonso de Hojeda, a Dominican friar, convinced Queen Isabel of Spain that the religious descent from the Moors, Muslims and most especially from the Jews living in Spain and Portugal, contradicted and undermined the policy of political and religious unity mandated by the Holy See. He convinced Pope Sixtus IV to proclaim *Exigit sinceras devotionis affectus*, thus authorizing what became known as the Spanish Inquisition.

Between 1480 and 1530 there was intense interest in the Inquisition. By decree, local kingdoms were allowed to appoint interrogators, known as Inquisitors, and their methods of interrogating and achieving confessions from suspected heretics was largely uncontrolled. Details of the *Autos de Fe`* reached the Pope and detailed gruesome and sadistic periods of torture and grotesque public executions held in an almost carnival atmosphere.

The Pope realized the Inquisition was rapidly becoming a depraved spectacle of unspeakable atrocities, and mandated that only Franciscan and Benedictine Monks would be allowed to serve as Inquisitors, and they were specifically prohibited from the drawing of blood. This greatly disturbed the Friars of the Dominican Order, who prided themselves on their ability to efficiently extract confessions, and they petitioned the Pope for dispensation to continue their works. The Pope agreed, but remained steadfast that none were to draw blood.

Technically speaking, the only prohibited torture became the use of cutting in order to achieve a confession. If, during the process of interrogating a heretic, a limb should be pulled off or even his body pulled apart, that was considered a side-effect of the method and was interpreted as God's Will. Naturally, this led to the invention of a series of insidiously barbaric devices that stretched, bent and crushed the human body beyond the limits of human endurance.

Austrian Empress Maria Theresa noted the spiraling barbarity and the level of competition forming between the various factions of Inquisitors as to who could best test the limits of their authority. While she did not have the power to completely suspend the Inquisition, she could at least inject certain limits on how it was applied in her jurisdiction. She decreed that all further interrogations would be conducted using three specific and escalating applications of torture, called the Degrees of the Question.

The First Degree of the Question was the use of thumbscrews. As the name implies, this involved a device placed on the joint of the thumb and then a pair of screws tightened against a flat bar until the bone broke. If application to both thumbs failed to extract the desired results, the next stage was used.

The Second Degree of the Question involved burning of the skin, usually with a hot iron or candle. The sensitive area along the torso between the waist and the armpit inflicted the most physical pain, and provided the Inquisitor a very spacious area to work with for extended sessions. Should this method fail, a final method remained.

The Third Degree of the Question was the *strappado*. This involved the tying of the hands behind the back; then a rope attached to the wrists and fed through a pulley or passed over a beam in the ceiling. The Inquisitor and his assistants would then pull the rope so the arms lifted the victim off the ground and caused excruciating pain. Often, a drop-and-jerk method was employed, or an assistant would cling to the victim to add extra weight to intensify the level of pain.

Anyone who weathered the Third Degree of the Question without rendering a confession was deemed to be innocent. Those who confessed were burned at the stake, which was not a raging bonfire as imagination might expect, but was instead a very slow roasting over carefully placed coals, beginning with the feet, so that the process might last for a period of days before death occurred.

Given the brutality of the Inquisition, Empress Theresa's application of the Three Degrees of the Question were actually hailed by secular and religious leaders of the period as an example of Christian mercy, and indicative of the humanitarian qualities of her reign. Even using her liberal application of the Inquisition, innocent victims often died or became maimed for life.

Today, as Freemasons we *confer* the Degrees. In ancient times, The Three Degree of the Question were most definitely received!