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Topic 6

### öThe Rose and the Cross: Unlocking a Complex Combination Symbolö

As the candidate enters the fourth apartment of the 18<sup>th</sup> degree, he is clothed in sackcloth and wearing a veil that obscures his sight. During the ceremony, he is relieved of these emblems of ignorance and disgrace and is invested with the True Word. During the ceremony, he observes one of Freemasonry's most profound symbols: the rose and the cross. Each of these objects possesses its own unique meanings, but we see them here combined. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, the candidate is introduced and encouraged to unlock the secrets of one of our most sacred combination symbols. The mysteries housed within the meaning of these two interlaced symbols may well solve one of philosophy's most contested moral and ethical questions.

Before going any further, it is important to define what is meant by a öcombination symbol.ö A combination symbol consists of two separate symbols paired together to form one unified idea. Freemasonry is full of such examples, most notably the very emblem of our order: the Masonic square and compass. Symbolically, the square represents the earth and its inhabitants, including but not limited to mankind. According to our ancient predecessors, the world was flat and rectangular. Thus, the square can easily represent the earth and its material possessions. We are reminded of this in our ritual as we walk the floor of the lodge room, a surface that represents the nature of the earth through the understanding of the ancients. Symbolically, the compass represents the deity. A compass is used to draw arches and circles. The circle can easily be viewed as a symbol of the deity because of its perpetual nature. Hence, the combination of the square and the compass represents the idea of unity: the unity of God and man, the unity of the Father and His creation.

Like the Masonic square and compass, the rose and the cross is also a combination symbol. Before unlocking the combination of the rose and the cross, it is essential to ascertain the various meanings of each individual entity. The cross is a symbol that transcends religions and traditions throughout the world. As we are reminded in the 18<sup>th</sup> degree, we are not to limit our interpretations of the Masonic symbols through the lens of one tradition. We must remember that not only Christians but also pagans use the cross as an important symbol of their respective faiths. In Egypt, the ankh cross represented Maat, the goddess of Truth, as well as the sexual union of Isis and Osiris. In Babylon, the cross represented the moon deity. Anyone who has gazed at a full moon on a clear night has observed the way it casts a light in the shape of a cross, so this link is quite logical. In Assyria, the cross represented the four directions from which light could travel. According to the Hindus of India, the cross represented the union of the material and the spiritual. Moving to Scandinavia, the Tau cross was an emblem of Thor's hammer. One of the more obscure and somewhat disturbing uses of the cross comes from ancient Europe where people sacrificed a human being and hung him on a cross. Later, the remains would be buried across fields to encourage fertility. In modern times, this practice is evident through the use of scarecrows.

One may ask, why is the cross such a common symbol? Symbolically, the cross

represents the number four, one of the ancient mystic numbers. This sacred number alludes to the four cardinal directions and the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire). The shape of the cross represents four rays diverging from the point where the two lines intersect. Furthermore, the cross's horizontal line represents the earth, again because it was once believed to be flat. The vertical line represents the divine ray of light coming to earth from the heavens. Thus, like the Masonic square and compass, the cross also represents the idea of the unification of God and man. Interestingly, the cross has a dual nature. It represents life and death, virginity and fertility, the earthly passions and the heavenly perfections. As a Christian, the cross reminds me not only of the death of Christ but also the eternal life made through Him. Overall, the cross represents redemption and immortality.

The rose is also in and of itself a complex symbol. The Rosa genus dates back some 32-35 million years. Traces of the rose have been found in ancient civilizations, including Egypt, Greece, and Persia. The famed Island of Rhodes is named from the word *rhodo*, or rose. As early as 3000 B.C., the rose was used in art.

In Greek mythology, we find a story relating the origin of the rose. The Greek goddess of flowers, Flora, was strolling through the woods and discovered a beautiful young girl, who unfortunately was deceased. Flora transformed the girl into a beautiful flower. Flora's husband Zephyrus, the West wind, then blew all the clouds away so Apollo, the sun god, could shine his rays of light down upon the new flower. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, provided the rose with beauty, brilliance, joy, and charm. Dionysus, the god of wine, added the rose's fragrance and nectar. All of this resulted in the most beautiful flower of them all. Aurora and Iris disseminated the news of this new flower by painting the morning sky with the rose's color and by adding the rose's color to the rainbow. Aphrodite named the flower Eros in honor of her son, who was the god of love. Obviously, the word *Eros* contains the word *rose* if we move the *e* to the end of the word. In this manner, the rose and its connection to the concept of love was born.

Earlier myths suggest that only white roses existed in ancient times. To the Greeks, the rose's red color came from Venus pricking her finger on a bush when chasing after her lover Adonis. To Christians, the red rose stems from the belief that Christ's blood fell on a white rose as the base of the cross, thereby creating the red rose.

The Greeks, and later the Romans, had an interesting use for the rose. We see in Rome the term *sub rosa*, which means *under the rose*. When roses were hung from a ceiling or painted on the ceiling of a room, all things said and done in that room were to be kept secret. This custom is based in Greek mythology as well. Eros gave Harpocrates, the god of silence, the rose as a bribe to keep him from revealing the gods' weaknesses. In this manner, the rose moved from not only being related to the concept of love but also to the concepts of secrecy and silence.

For the Persians, a rose was used as a symbol of life itself, and appropriately so. The rose's beauty represented the perfection which we should all strive toward; the rose's thorns represented life's many difficulties; the rose's recurring blooms taught that continuous effort should be made to attain perfection.

One of history's most interesting rivalries involves the rose. In England, the rival houses of Lancaster and York once fought for the control of the English crown. The red rose was an emblem of the House of Lancaster whereas the white rose was an emblem of the House of York. When Henry VII came to power at the end of this famous feud called the War of the Roses, he created the Tudor Rose, a two-tone rose combining the colors of red and white. Here we see a rose used to reconcile rivalry.

Symbolically, the rose is a much more popular symbol than any of its fellow flower

counterparts. Using only the most sophisticated research mechanism, that is "Google," we find that one website exists that discusses the asterisk's symbolic nature, one site for the daisy, one site for the geranium, five sites for the daffodil, seven sites for the iris, and nine sites for the carnation. There are 25 sites for the tulip, 60 for the sunflower, and 227 for the lily. However, when "googling" the phrase "rose and symbolism," an astonishing 3,700-plus sites emerge. By far, the rose has a unique place in the world of floral symbols.

Like the cross, the rose also has a dual nature. The Greek goddess Aphrodite used both white and red roses to represent love. While the white rose represented the love's beautiful, innocent, and pure nature, the red rose represented love's desire for sexual gratification or lust. Interestingly, in Greece rose wreaths were sometimes worn by virgins to symbolize their purity while at other times the same wreaths were worn during times of drinking and feasting.

Another connection can be made between the cross and the rose because they are both prevalent in Christian symbolism. To many Christians, the rose symbolizes the Mother of God, or the Virgin Mary. Here, too, we find that Christians observe the rose's dual nature; it represents not only love and beauty but also pain and death. The rosary was originally a rose garden dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Later, the rosary referred to a string of beads, sometimes made of dried rose hips or rose wood, a practice that continues today in Catholicism.

Again, we must ask "why?" Why is the rose such a popular symbol? It is important to note that the wild rose has five petals, and of course the number five is an ancient, sacred number. The number five moves us beyond the material and into the realm of the spiritual, which includes the concept of immortality. The number "5" further alludes to the fifth element, aether. Because of the rose's five petals, it is easily identifiable with the concept of the soul, the immortal part of man.

In Freemasonry, the number five also alludes to the five senses: hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. Although it may be difficult to hear a rose and I would deter you from eating one, we can surely see its magnificent beauty, smell its delightful fragrance, and feel its soft petals and sharp thorns. The fact that we can sensually observe the rose is a key to unlocking the meaning of its combination with the cross.

At last, we can begin to unlock the secrets of this intriguing combination symbol. One meaning alludes to the rose's link to a fresh beginning, a dawning so to speak, and the cross's link to immortality. According to Albert Pike in *Morals and Dogma*, "the Cross and Rose together are therefore hieroglyphically to be read, the *Dawn of Eternal Life* which all Nations have hoped for by the advent of a Redeemer" (291). Remembering Aurora's use of the rose to paint the dawning of the sun and the illusion to immortality symbolized by the cross, Pike's reasoning is well substantiated.

However, that is only one interpretation. As I alluded to in the introduction, the rose and the cross may well help solve one of philosophy's most profound questions. That question is: from whence do morals, ethics, and virtue derive? Some philosophers take Plato's viewpoint and believe that morality is based on faith and divine goodness. Since an all-knowing, all-loving Father created mankind, these thinkers believe that the Supreme Architect implanted a sense of morality and virtue in all humans. To Platonic scholars and thinkers, moral and ethical wisdom occurs when we connect with our higher selves and discover moral rightness. Other philosophers take Aristotle's viewpoint and believe that morality is based on reason. Using such utilitarian concepts as "the greatest good for the greatest number equals moral rightness," these thinkers logically conclude what is "right" and what is "wrong." Through the use of mathematical reasoning, the concepts of "right" and "wrong" become a course in deductive

reasoning.

The combination of the rose and cross serves as a bridge between these two different schools of thought. Whereas the cross is a symbol of faith and immortality, the rose is an object we can study and observe with the assistance of the senses. The rose, although mortal itself, contains elements of the immortal by way of the number five. The rose, like mankind, has a spark of the divine. The flower takes from the earth the needed nutrients to grow and blossom into a beautiful creation. Mankind goes through the same process. In this manner, Freemasonry breaks free from the limitations of classical schools of philosophy and teaches a greater truth: in order to learn and become wise, we must use both reason and faith.

Although this lesson is certainly a major part of the 18<sup>th</sup> degree, it is also introduced to us in our symbolic degrees. During the beautiful Fellow Craft lecture, the candidate is placed between two pillars. At the top of the pillar on his left is the terrestrial globe and on his right is the celestial globe. The two globes are said to be "the noblest instruments for improving the mind and giving it the most distinct idea of any problem or proposition as well as enabling it to solve the same." We attempt to understand the earth, or the terrestrial globe, through our use of reason and logic. Scientists study its physical and biological nature, and we all learn to live in and with our planet as best we can. We also attempt to study the heavens, or the celestial globe, using observation and reason, but time and distance keep us from directly observing many of the heavenly bodies. To the ancients, the heavens were certainly symbolic of their faith in a Divine Creator. Even for us, our knowledge of the earth and our surroundings is indeed finite. Where reason ends, faith begins. Hence, as we stand between those two symbolic pillars topped with emblems of faith and reason, we are taught that we must balance our knowledge. In order to be wise, we must learn to hone our minds through study, reason, and logic as well as to rely on our faith, follow our heart, and trust in our Creator. Thus, true wisdom consists of both reason and faith.

In summary, the symbol of the rose and the cross unlocks for us one of the enigmas of our existence. The true word, *I.N.R.I.*, reminds us that *reason* and *faith* are both important elements of wisdom. By using our senses and our minds, we can better understand the Supreme Architect's Creation and Nature. However, we cannot logically deduct that our Creator exists, which is why He provides us with *faith*. As we learn to balance reason and faith, we become wise. Once again, Freemasonry provides us with a key to unlock the gates of life's many mysteries. Along our path, we will certainly arrive at more locked gates; however, through time and study, the keys to those mysteries will be revealed. The rose and the cross, reason and faith - when united as one, they provide us with the pure light of knowledge, a light that will shine as brightly as the sun.

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