

Chapter 4

Doing Alms Before Men

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Go into the organized do-good business in a big way. Find an area of the human body that has not been exploited. Exploit it. Set a quota, have a kick-off dinner, ring the doorbells.

DURING THE PERIOD when the prestige of American Freemasonry was at its highest point, our Brethren knew a little something about charity. It was the "greatest of these," they were taught—the topmost round on Jacob's Ladder. It was one of the Tenets of a Mason's Profession. It was one of the reasons why a Master Mason was induced to become a Master Mason, as we are reminded by the Senior Warden at the opening and closing of every Lodge. Yellowed pages from ancient minute books describe how they put those precepts into action.

Our Brethren had some strange ideas about the practice of charity. Not only was their basic attitude rather odd, but they had such an impractical, horse-and-buggy technique! It is difficult to imagine where they got such queer notions unless it was from Jesus of Nazareth in his Sermon on the Mount:

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them . . . When thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men . . . But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.¹"

INTERESTINGLY ENOUGH, in those areas of the world where the prestige of Freemasonry still is at a high point, Masonic benevolence still is practiced in accordance with the admonition of the Galilean carpenter.

Only in America—restless, itchy, pragmatic America—do we have the aggressive school of thought with its noisy insistence that we must indeed do alms before men, and sound the trumpets, and let the left hand (and everyone else) know what the right hand is doing. Provides lots of publicity. Creates a favorable image. Gets people to talking about the Fraternity. Helps increase membership.

HERE ARE A FEW signs of the times:

—Just listen to the talk when Masonic leaders get together. Invariably it will drift in the direction of Doing Alms Before Men.

—A distinguished Grand Master in his address to his Grand Lodge looked over the fence at the green grass in the pasture of "some well-known organizations" devoting their energies to organized charities which, he said, "have reflected great credit on the sponsoring organization." Despite a benevolent program running into tremendous sums of money, he was unhappy because his Jurisdiction was not engaged in an *organized*

charity.

—The learned Past Grand Master complaining that "we have let service clubs take over to a very large extent the functions of Freemasonry." (With utter astonishment I heard him say it!)

—The Grand Orator in his Grand Lodge address unburdening himself of the following scholarly dissertation :

"Now men, I know that you have a very fine program in your Grand Lodge, and I know that the subordinate Lodges have programs for youth— excellent! I understand that in the Grand Lodge you are helping in the educational field, making it possible for grants to be given to youth that they might be able to carry on their work in school. Excellent. . .! But men, the question is, are we doing enough, and are we carrying it far enough? Are we giving these kids what they really need to make them better citizens? . . I know that Rotary has the student exchange program with other nations, which is excellent; I know that the Lions work with people who are sightless and need glasses, and so on. I know that other outfits have the seeing-eye dog; the other lodges have cerebral palsy programs like the Elks work on . . . But, men, I think the time has come . . . that we are going to have to pick a field of endeavor and put it through, with all the strength and enthusiasm we have, if we are going to justify our reason for being a Masonic Lodge and a Masonic Order."

—The fact that regional conferences of Grand Lodges in the last four years have discussed such subjects as "Should Freemasonry Have an Object?" "Should a Lodge Sponsor a Project Serving to Identify the Lodge with a Community?" "Should Not Symbolic Masonry Have a Definite Objective? If so, What Should It Be?"

—The well-known fact that Masonic leaders of all grades and descriptions have twitching heebie-jeebies. Looking nervously at other organizations, they wonder whether our Craft also should not be doing something spectacular to attract attention to itself, completely ignoring the fact that during the time when American Freemasonry made the least noise, it commanded the greatest respect.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED? Several things, I should say. An American society running in circles, for one thing. Urbanization and centralization. Decline of the personal element in Masonic charity, to Freemasonry's distinct loss. The age of organized charities. Launching of large scale charitable projects, with all modern fund-raising techniques, by many affiliated and allied groups. General lack of knowledge and discrimination as to what Speculative Freemasonry is and what it is not.

Again, at the outset, let's get one thing straight: I am not attacking organized charities, nor benevolent foundations, nor research projects, nor the humanitarian objectives of any Masonic or related organization, nor the cherished hobby of any individual. The point upon which I am insistent is this: that Ancient Craft Freemasonry has its own peculiar calling in the scheme of things; it operates in its unique manner; it has done so very well in the past; it will continue to do so if we will but permit it, and that when it ceases to

operate in the manner of Freemasonry, then it ceases to be Freemasonry.

Like all other problems facing our Fraternity today, *this is one we had better think through.*

CONSIDER these few premises:

1. In the first place, may I ask what is wrong with the charitable and benevolent work Symbolic Freemasonry is doing now?

From where I view the scene it looks rather impressive:

—Masonic homes, hospitals, orphanages in 35 States of the Union.

—Sizable expenditures for relief, benevolent grants and other charitable services in at least 40 States.

—Liberal contributions to a nation-wide visitation program in veterans' hospitals by more than half the Grand Lodges of our nation.

—Benevolence rendered by individual Lodges and individual Masons in the U. S. A. in an amount impossible to compute, but which is known to be at least a half-million dollars annually.

(All the above in the year 1964 alone added up to a total in excess of \$27,000,000. But that is by no means the entire story.)

—Scholarship programs in nine Grand Lodges; scholarships authorized by individual Lodges in 25 States.

—Blood banks of far-reaching importance in some Jurisdictions, notably Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, New York and Oregon.

—A nationally acclaimed hospital erected by the generosity of the Masons of Minnesota on the campus of the State University.

—A history-making research program pioneering in the field of gerontology by the Masons of New York, preceded by strikingly successful research leading to control of rheumatic fever.

Looking beyond the borders of the United States we find:

—Impressive grants to a long list of benevolent institutions and organizations annually by the Grand Lodges of the English, Irish and Scottish constitutions, in addition to numerous homes, hospitals and institutions under Masonic sponsorship.

—Annuities and mortgage payments on behalf of widows and dependents by the Australian Grand Lodges.

—Night schools for vocational training maintained by Freemasons in Greece.

—Scholarship programs in England, Ireland, Scotland, the Australian Jurisdictions and the Canadian Grand Lodges that are recognized nationally for their excellence and their liberality.

OF COURSE, it has become popular now to say without thinking that Masonic homes do not count because "we are just taking care of our own—sort of like an insurance policy."

And what, may I inquire, is so reprehensible about taking care of one's own? Every responsible head of every family I know anything about takes care of his own first and last, and spends the greater part of his adult life doing it. The laws of the various States regard family support as a rather praiseworthy effort—at least they frown on "runaway pappies" who *do not* support their own!

And when it comes to comparing Masonic homes with an insurance policy—well, that would be a hilarious joke if it were not such a tragic example of Masonic ignorance. *We haven't thought that one through, either.*

One time I was going through the Indiana Masonic Home with a clergyman friend of mine who is not a Master Mason. I said to him (rather apologetically, I fear), "We are criticized sometimes because the facilities of our Home are open only to destitute persons who are Masons or who have a Masonic family relationship." Quick as a flash he rebuked me: "On the contrary," he said, "that is one of the finest features of your Home—the fact that you provide a place of refuge for needy and worthy persons who are bound by a common tie."

Coming as it did from a man who is not a Mason, that statement caused me to reflect a bit. After all, *why should we apologize?* Our ancient Craft was engaged in its noble work of benevolence long, long before the organized do-good societies were ever dreamed of. Why berate ourselves for carrying on a great work that is the admiration of those not members of the Fraternity?

2. Has it ever occurred to our restless Brethren that to "tag" Craft Freemasonry with someone's pet fund drive could serve to limit even more the scope of our benevolence? Dr. Thomas S. Roy, Past Grand Master of Massachusetts, has a classic illustration on the monitorial work of the Entered Apprentice degree —how the length of a Lodge is from east to west, its breadth from north to south, its height from the earth to the heavens, its depth from its surface to its center. All this serves to remind us that Masonic charity should be equally extensive to the point of being limitless—that there is a place to begin the practice of charity, but no place to stop! A Freemasonry tagged with the label of a specific objective would, I fear, have both its beginning and its end in that objective.

3. Should Symbolic Freemasonry become the sponsoring, fund-raising agency of someone's cherished project, what would we do with our Declaration of Principles and our ritual? It might be a good idea for our restless Brethren to go to their Craft

Lodges and listen to the ritual again sometime—particularly the lesson of the square in the Entered Apprentice degree and the lesson of the globes in the Fellow Craft degree. The Declaration of Principles might be read with profit, paying particular heed to those statements reminding us that the practice of charity is the *fruit* of Masonry's teaching—not the reason for its existence.

Yes, our Craft has just about as much business singling out a specific ailment to cure as it has identifying itself with a certain political party or a certain religious sect.

4. Should we go into the organized do-good business we would be detracting from the dignity and effectiveness of Freemasonry.

Just how ridiculous would our Fraternity look going out in search of a project? May Heaven forbid that the label of any physical or mental infirmity should ever be fastened onto our ancient Craft! Let our noble Institution never become known merely as the organization which does so much for St. Vitus' dance, or halitosis, or the ingrown toenail, or the seven-year itch!

NOW THIS DOES not mean that I am giving the charitable work of Ancient Craft Freemasonry a Grade A rating. Not at all. Our experience in Indiana on the Feast of St. John the Evangelist, 1963, when *one Lodge out of every five* failed or refused to pass the Box of Fraternal Assistance at its Table Lodge ceremony is a symptom of an illness of serious proportions.

I believe Craft Masonry should broaden its charities, for one thing. It should seek to restore the personal element in Masonic charity. But the charities of Masonry should be *the charities of Masonry*—not a bill of goods sold the Fraternity by some agency eager to capitalize upon its funds and its influence. Such programs should be of our own making; they should be conducted in accordance with our traditions and practices; they should not be absorbed by any big business fund-raising enterprise or technique. And they should concentrate on those areas where they can be most effective to individuals, rather than scattering shotgun fire at a score of copycat projects.

Thank God for benevolent programs and humanitarian research, and for the American generosity which makes them possible! As individuals we should support them liberally, as Freemasons are taught to do, and we *are* supporting them liberally as every fund-raising agency knows. But as a Fraternity we have plenty to do to practice charity in the manner consistent with our obligations and traditions. Let our noble Craft stay off the sucker lists.

WHEN ALL THE aches and pains and diseases, all the handicaps and deformities and deterioration of man's physical body have been attacked and conquered through fund-raising campaigns, men and women and children still will be rejected and insecure and lonely and disturbed. Young people still will need help in furthering their education. Surely a few will need hospitalization and life-giving blood. Yes, and men left alone to die in veterans' hospitals still will need to be reminded that they have not been entirely forgotten. Even those whose bodies are whole will suffer disappointment, financial crises,

stress, anguish, bereavement. They will become old, and be left unwanted and alone.

Somewhere there will be need for sympathy and compassion in ministering to *all* the ills that flesh is heir to—not to just an isolated germ, nor to a specialized area of the human body!

Is there not yet a place, then, for the mission our gentle Craft has performed for generation upon generation—a mission no impersonal agency in the world can match? To open the heart of compassion to all God's children . . . to care for the widow and the orphan . . . to stretch forth the hand to assist and support the Brother who also has traveled, who has shared a common experience, who has knelt

at a common altar, who is bound by a mystic tie, who has used the familiar working tools to make men wiser, better, and consequently, happier . . . is not that what we have come here to do?

¹St. Matthew 6: 1-3.