

# **The Traditional Observance Lodge**

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While many Masons may have heard about European Concept lodges, which are themselves a relatively new concept in American Freemasonry, few have heard of the Traditional Observance lodge. Traditional Observance lodges are similar to European Concept lodges in that they also incorporate higher dues, festive boards, a strict dress code and higher standards of ritual, but differ in that they choose to follow a close observance of the traditional initiatic elements of Continental European and South American Freemasonry.

This observance is characterized by a solemn approach to holding stated communications and conferring degrees, the use of the Chamber of Reflection as part of the initiation ceremony, forming the Chain of Union after the meetings, longer time between degrees and the requirement for candidates to present a paper before the lodge on the lessons of each degree prior to advancement. Traditional Observance lodges are also more likely to use the term Agape rather than Festive Board to describe the meal which follows the meetings. Agape is the ancient Greek word for “love,” and in Freemasonry the term signifies a meal eaten in common by a congregation of Masons in token of Brotherly Love.

A non-profit organization working to promote the study and understanding of traditional Freemasonry called the Masonic Restoration Foundation (MRF) provides education and support for Traditional Observance lodges in recognized jurisdictions. The MRF seeks to foster a network of lodges and individuals of strong spiritual and intellectual character that will help preserve the initiatic tradition within American Freemasonry for future generations.

Members of Traditional Observance lodges believe very strongly that the foremost purpose of Freemasonry is to provide an atmosphere where good men can unite together in a common pursuit of virtue in service to God. The “work” of a Traditional Observance lodge is not to review minutes or bills, or plan social or philanthropic activities, but rather to create an atmosphere where the members can learn the lessons of Freemasonry and how they can be inculcated into their daily lives.

This is referred to as Masonic Formation, which is the ever continuing process of spiritual and intellectual formation that all Freemasons must undergo in order to improve themselves in Masonry. This term differs from Masonic Education in that it refers to a process of growth concerned with much more than intellectual faculties. Masonic Formation is the process of fitting the rough ashlar of the imperfect being into the perfect ashlar fit for the divine temple. It is a constant transformation through the use of Masonic symbols, rituals, and teachings.

Everything that occurs in a Traditional Observance lodge is undertaken within this context. Success is viewed as effectively imparting the traditional teachings hidden within Masonic symbols and the spiritual unification of the brethren in such a pursuit. Successful Traditional Observance lodges, though usually maintaining a small membership of less than 50 brothers, retain and engage their members with meaningful human fellowship, stimulating discourse and enriching programs.

Traditional Observance lodges endeavor to make Masonic teachings and philosophy accessible and interesting to the members and do not shy away from dealing with the spiritual issues and questions that many men begin to find more meaningful as they mature. The Traditional Observance lodge seeks to create an ambience where true learning can occur by taking the members inward to the core of their being rather than outward toward the profane elements of life.

A typical meeting of such a lodge may go as follows. The brethren, all properly dressed according to the dress code (at minimum black suit, white shirt and black tie), will arrive at the lodge hall, which will be dimly lit by candlelight, with classical music softly playing in the background. If there is a degree the brethren will maintain complete silence prior to the ceremony. Otherwise they will converse quietly over some light refreshments before entering the lodge room and being properly seated.

Once the lodge officers have ceremoniously marched in and the lodge formally opened, the Worshipful Master will call for a period of silence, usually lasting several minutes. Following this the Master will call for the scheduled papers and pieces of music to be presented in an arranged order. During the meeting there will be no reading of the minutes or any administrative business of any sort (if allowed in the jurisdiction).

The music that is presented is usually of a contemplative nature and is viewed as an important component of every meeting as it contributes to the overall beauty and solemnity of the atmosphere. The music is also intended to acquaint the brethren with the spectrum of Masonic music composed during the 18th Century and to educate them on the profound history of the classical musical tradition and its relationship to the Masonic Mysteries.

The presentation of papers is viewed as an essential aspect of the life of the lodge and promotes the continued study of Masonic lessons by the brethren. The topic of the papers must be relevant to the interests of the lodge and papers of a strictly historical or biographical nature are rarely entertained in the lodge room, though they may be presented during the Agape. Topics considered appropriate for the lodge room are symbolism, initiation, ritual, metaphysics, philosophy and art. These topics and their relationship to Masonry can be found in the context of the major world religions, esoteric movements such as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah and many other Western and Eastern traditions.

Before closing the lodge the Worshipful Master will call for another period of silence. Once the lodge has been formally closed the brethren will gather around the altar

for a ceremony known as the Chain of Union, which is meant to symbolize the common commitment to Masonic ideals and connection with other Masons from all over the world. The brethren will then retire to the Agape, which is usually a catered meal with formal toasts and where a discussion of the main paper presented earlier will take place.

In conclusion, Traditional Observance lodges give their members the opportunity to partake in a ritual and sociability that they cannot find anywhere else. Traditional Masonry allows brothers to move their minds from the mundane to the mystical, away from life's petty particulars to attention on its transcendent meaning. While Traditional Freemasonry may not appeal to everyone, it is proving to be a success in more and more jurisdictions around the United States.