



MEETING IN CHAPTER

BY RICHARD W. VAN DOREN, 33°

“Meeting in chapter tonight?” my friend and brother asked. I nodded and smiled in response and hurriedly went about my business. That brief exchange, however, was far from over. A faint, distant note of dissonance had sounded in my subconscious mind.

Although the most common Masonic body is the ‘Lodge,’ at least two high degree Masonic bodies meet in ‘chapters’: Knights Rose Croix of the Scottish Rite and Royal Arch Masons in the York Rite. Grand lodges also sponsor chapters of the Order of DeMolay for boys.

For the next few hours, days and weeks, that distant dissonant note would grow insistently louder until I could no longer avoid the question, “Why do we meet in a ‘chapter?’” My first recourse was to turn to the dictionary.

chapter, noun, [from the Middle English *chapitre*, division of a book, meeting of canons, Old French, Latin *capitulum* meeting place of canons].

1: a main division of a book;

2^a: a regular meeting of the canons of a cathedral or collegiate church or of the members of a religious house;

2^b: the body of canons of a cathedral or collegiate church;

2^c: a local branch of a society or fraternity.¹

The first meaning didn’t appear to be what I was looking for. The first and second meanings under number two seemed to need a bit more investigation. The third meaning under number two told me what I already knew and didn’t seem very satisfying. Perhaps if I looked further.

canon, noun, [from the Middle English *canoun*, Anglo-French *canunte*, Latin *canonicus*, one living under a rule].

1: one of the clergy of a medieval cathedral or large church living in community under a rule;

2: a clergyman belonging to the chapter or the staff of a cathedral or collegiate church;

3. CANON REGULAR.²

Well, it was looking as though I should be investigating something about medieval church life, but I wasn’t sure how or if this was really related to Freemasonry. I was doubtful. Since it appeared to come from Middle English, I decided to look



In 1129, the Knights Templar received their monastic rule from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, head of the Cistercian Order.

further into the language aspect and grabbed a copy of Partridge’s *Origins*, an etymological dictionary.

Chapter [Middle English, from Middle French *chapitre*, Old French *chapitre*: Latin *capitulum* : CHIEF. From the reading of a chapter, esp. of the Bible, at the beginning of all formal meetings of persons in religious orders, comes chapter, a body of, e.g., canons of a cathedral.³

It seemed as though I had hit a dead end in my brief investigation. I shoved it to a recess of my mind and didn’t pursue the matter at the time. I had other things to attend to, I told myself. And there the matter might have rested if it hadn’t been for two events that I never could have foreseen.

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

A few years after my friend and brother had asked that simple question, I found myself in England and Wales. Looking at the map, I spotted a visitor’s interest item marked Tintern Abbey. Being a former English major in undergraduate school, I thought immediately of the literary reference to Wordsworth’s poem and decided that I had to see this site while I was so close.

The abbey, built circa A.D. 1131, was a large affair that once housed as many as 20 monks and 70 laypersons. It was constructed and operated by the Cistercian Order, which was founded under the influence of the powerful French monk, Bernard of Clairvaux. [The Cistercians in Great Britain had their “mother house” at Fountains, in Yorkshire.] As I wandered around the site, I was
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impressed by the size, scope and beauty of what it had once been. The abbey, now in the hands of the Welsh Historic Monuments Trust, was well marked and each room or building was identified.

The sign read: *Chapter House*. But what I found myself in was the very image of the layout of a Masonic Lodge. In the East, there was a raised dais. Along the North and South sides, were niches where the monks had been seated. It was an oblong square room with Windows in the East and West. In the West, there was a beautiful entrance and some steps to a large open area in the middle of the room. The chapter house was located in the Eastern sector of the abbey complex.

The explanation about the chapter house said that it was the seat of all administration of running the abbey; that the abbot would meet with all of the monks assembled each day and make assignments as to work, instruct the monks on any number of subjects, hear complaints, take administrative action against monks that had violated the rules of the Order, etc. In short, it was the very center of the monastic life. That included the initiation and reception of new members of the Order. No one but members of the Order were allowed to enter. That small, distant note of insistence was now ringing again.

THE RULE OF THE TEMPLARS

Some days later, I was in the town of books, Hay-on-Wye. This small town has more than 140 bookstores. One boasted more than five miles of shelving. My wife and I pledged to each other that we would stay no longer than one day—or cut up our credit cards. In one of the shops, another key bit of information fell into my hands: *The Rule of the Templars*.⁴

The Rule referred to the Rule of St. Benedict, which was used by the Templars. It was also used by the Cistercians. Both orders owed their existence to St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The connections and similarities of the two orders were many. These similarities ranged from the use of *The Rule* to order the lives of the community members, to the layout of the abbeys, the design of the habits of the monks [both were white], to the teachings and practices of the Western Christian mystical tradition.⁵

The connection of the Cistercian abbeys to the lodges of Freemasons was

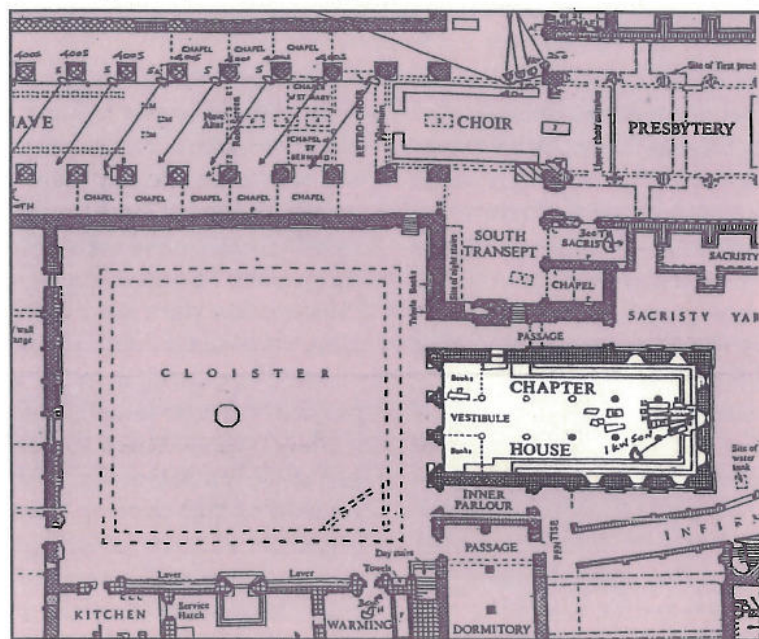
bled monks in the chapter house with the abbot or his designated deputy presiding. No monks were excused from this reading except those too ill and confined to the infirmary. *The Rule* was divided into seven parts: the Primitive Rule, Hierarchical Statutes, Penances, Conventual Life, the Holding of Ordinary Chapters, Further Details on Penances, and Reception into the Order.⁷

THE CHAPTER HOUSE

The chapter house was the second most important building within the monastery following only that of the church itself. It was usually the first structure to be built and was always located in the eastern sector of the monastery, the most remote from outsiders. In some of the abbeys, it was located in the northeast corner, and in others the southeast corner or east central sector.⁸

The chapter house was a hub of activity for the monastic community. It functioned as the administrative headquarters for the entire abbey operation. In the morning, it was customary to begin the day with prayer and a reading of a chapter from *The Rule*. It would immediately be followed by a sermon. The Abbot would preside at a lectern or pulpit located at the east end of the room. Sometimes, his deputy would run the meeting. The monks would be arranged along the north and south walls of the room, occupying stone niches or wooden seats. The chapter topic might be any of those mentioned earlier ranging from rules of behavior of community life to those of monks at work or in the field.

Following the chapter reading, work assignments would be made for the day and reports of progress on prior assignments would be discussed.



Plan of Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire England, showing the chapter house

best spelled out at Melrose Abbey near Edinburgh, Scotland. The abbey, constructed ca. 1136, was built under the “General or Grand Master of all Masons work”, John Monroe. There was an inscription to that effect at one of the doors. Melrose Lodge has a minute book from 1675. It includes names of members, regulations of the lodge and also an account of the building of the stone “Masons Loft” or gallery, ca. 1684.⁶

Clearly, *The Rule of the Templars* was the guideline and instructional source for the daily lives of the monks and those that they influenced. One chapter of *The Rule* was to be read at the beginning of every day. It was to be read to the assem-

Sometimes, there would be confessions of wrongdoing or complaints heard by members. If a complaint involved wrongdoing of a monk or knight, there would be further investigation and inquiry. A report would then be made to the brethren assembled and a reading of the disciplinary measures to be meted out would be effected. This could range from some minor penance for a mere lapse of the moment to corporal punishment or demotion or removal from the Order for more serious offenses. The demotion or removal was accompanied by formal surrender of the white habit and a barring from association with any other community of the Faith.⁹

INITIATION & OBLIGATION

The chapter house was also the scene of initiations of new members of the Order. The brethren in chapter were first polled to see if there was any objection to the initiate becoming a member. There had to be unanimity for the initiation to proceed. The initiate waited in an adjoining chamber where he was questioned about his motives and reasons for joining the order. He was instructed to confess his sins and any reasons why he would not be acceptable to the brethren as a member of the community. He was asked by three brothers [usually the oldest members of the monastery] the same questions in succession. Affirmative and acceptable replies allowed them to proceed.

The three brethren then repaired to make their report "to the Master" who once again would poll the brethren for agreement to proceed. Thereupon, the

initiate entered the chapter house and was instructed in the need to make an obligation to be a "serf and slave" to the community. It was an arrangement undertaken for life. If he was willing to be so obligated, he then repaired outside for the benefit of prayer to God for guidance. The Master once more polled the members for agreement to the initiation. The initiation itself included a lengthy catechism and instruction on duties and responsibilities of members of the community.¹⁰

The facts of my discovery of the connections of Freemasonry to the chapter house and the answer to the question of why we, as Freemasons, often "meet in chapter" I leave now for the reader to interpret as he sees fit. I choose to believe that there is a strong tradition, stem-



A crusader knight paying homage

ming from St. Bernard of Clairvaux and the Knights Templar, that has come down through the ages to be continued during our present convocations. Perhaps, with time and patience, we shall someday find out the complete and irrevocable truth. ☺

ENDNOTES

1. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, G&C Merriam Company, Springfield, Mass. 1963. Pg 139.
2. *Ibid.*, Pg 122.
3. *Origins, a Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*; Partridge, Eric; Greenwich House, Distributed by Crown Publishers, Inc.; New York, N.Y. 1983. Pg. 91.
4. *The Rule of the Templars, The French Text of the Rule of the Order of the Knights Templar*; Translated and Introduced by J.M. Upton-Ward; The Boydell Press, Boydell & Brewer Ltd.; Suffolk, UK; 1998.
5. For a powerful discussion of this tradition, read *The Heart of the World: A Spiritual Catechism*; Thomas Keating; The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, N.Y.; 1981.
6. *The Evolution of Freemasonry*; Delmar Duane Darrah, 33°; The Masonic Publishing Company, Bloomington, Il.; 1920. pg. 82-84.
7. Upton-Ward; pp. 11-16.
8. For more reading about the layout, form, history and functions of Cistercian Monasteries, see the Internet Website: <http://cistercians.shef.ac.uk>
9. Upton-Ward; pp. 106-7, etc. [see sections on penances and details of penances.]
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-174.

Richard W. Van Doren, 33°, is a Past Master of Princeton Lodge No. 38, Princeton, New Jersey, and is the only United States Founder of Internet Lodge No. 9659, English Constitution. He is a Past Grand Orator of the State of New Jersey, and has authored many articles and publications, both professional and Masonic. He holds a Doctorate in Education and is a counseling psychologist.

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