

DIVINE SERVICE A UNIQUE INDIAN MASONIC CEREMONY

JUSTICE DEVINDER GUPTA O.S.M.,

M.W. THE GRAND MASTER OF GRAND LODGE OF INDIA,
FREEMASON' HALL, JANPATH, NEW DELHI 110001

Dear Brethren,

I thank the Organizers of the 8th World Conference in providing me the opportunity to speak before this august assembly of Grand Masters and other erudite Freemasons, from all over the world, representing a wide variety of cultures. My Country -India, as you may know, is a vast country, with a very large population and a vibrant democracy. It is a multi lingual, multi cultural, multi ethnic and a multi religious country. It is a country where we live in unity amidst diversity.

Grand Lodge of India though was consecrated as a Sovereign Grand Lodge having jurisdiction in an over the geographical territories of India in November 1961, advent of Freemasonry in India is over 300 years old. There are now about 350 Lodges and about equal number of other Masonic bodies located in different parts of the country with a total membership of about 18,000 Freemasons under the Grand Lodge of India. There

are number of Lodges and other Masonic bodies functioning in India under their respective parent Grand Lodges.

The broad theme of this conference is "Spiritual Openness in the Modern World" and one of its sub theme is "Exchange of live experiences of Regular Grand Lodges of the World". It is in this context, that I have come before you, to share my experience of a rather unique Ceremony, which we have adopted in our country, for public demonstration projecting the underlying principles of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, as propagated by Freemasonry and identifying common threads for linking these principles, with the teachings contained in the Religious Books of the Major Religions of the World.

By way of a preamble, I would like to add that God created Man. He didn't create Religion. It is man who created Religion. We in Freemasonry however believe in a Supreme Being and believe in the brotherhood of man, irrespective of caste, creed or religion. To reflect this spirit in Freemasonry, we in India have the unique practice of displaying on the Altar of the Masonic Temples, not one, but Five Volumes of the Sacred Laws viz. The Bible, representing Christianity, The Bhagwat Gita, representing Hinduism, The Quoran, representing Islam, The Holy Granth Sahib, represents Sikhism and the Zend Avesta representing the Parsi religion - all of which coexist in our country in amity, peace and harmony, in a spirit of mutual tolerance and respect. These volumes are opened reverentially at the opening of every Lodge and closed formally with all respect and reverence, when the business of the Lodge is over. While the

Square and Compasses are opened on the Religious Book belonging to the faith of the Worshipful Master, the candidates take their obligation in the three degrees on the Religious Book of their faith. The Worshipful Master appoints every year five Members of the Lodge as Bearers of the five Volumes of the Sacred Laws, to carry the five religious books reverentially at the opening and closing of the Lodge or on other important occasions.

All of us here are well aware of the different degrees of misunderstanding and misinformation that prevail in most of the countries, about Freemasonry. As a part of our effort to demystify Freemasonry and to spread its beneficial influence, and in keeping with the Economic Liberalization that is currently sweeping the world, particularly in the developing countries, Grand Lodge of India decided to start the process of Masonic Liberalization as well, without, I must hasten to add, compromising in any way the basic tenets of Freemasonry. The concept of Divine Service is based on this premise.

The first significance of the ceremony of Divine Service is that it is open to the general public including the ladies. Secondly, it is not as if any Lodge can conduct a Divine Service of its own at any time. It is always regarded as a Grand Lodge Ceremony and can be organized only with the prior permission of the Grand Lodge invariably with the Grand Master himself, or his duly authorized Senior Grand Officer conducting it, according to a predetermined prescribed procedure. While in small and in medium Cities, the Divine Service is generally held in the Masonic Temple itself, where the Public is allowed to come and witness the ceremony, in larger cities it is often held in

large public halls, with appropriate Masonic Furniture. Usually a prominent public figure is requested to preside over the function, as a guest of Honour. Freemasons attend the ceremony in the regalia of their respective ranks, thus adding colour to the function.

The Grand Master in full regalia, accompanied by Cher senior Freemasons in colourful regalia, enters the temple, or the hall in procession, with the Standard Bearer behind him and the Sword Bearer in front of him, along with the Guest of Honour to the accompaniment of appropriate music.

After the Grand Master and the presiding Guest of Honour are conducted to their respective seats by the Director of Ceremonies, the Five Bearers of the Volumes of the Sacred Laws proceed in procession to the altar and ceremonially place the Volumes of the Sacred Laws with due reverence. The Director of ceremonies requests ail present to stand. With the sign of reverence and kneefing before the Altar he opens ail the Volumes of the Sacred Laws.

The Grand Master then formally welcomes the Chief Guest and the members of the Public, who are gathered to witness the Devine Service, giving a brief explanation of what Freemasonry is and what Freemasons stand for, as also the objectives of the Divine Service.

The Divine Service then commences with a solemn and beautiful prayer by the Chaplain, which is called the "Freemasons' Prayer", imploring the Almighty God to bless

all Freemasons wherever they may be and to provide them speedy relief, if it be His will from their distress, trouble, sorrows, needs, sickness or any other adversities or sufferings.

With a brief introductory remark by the Grand Master appropriate extracts from the Five Scriptures, carefully selected by scholars on the aspect of Invocation of the Supreme being, are then read out solemnly in the respective languages by the concerned Bearers of the Volumes of the Sacred Laws. Again with a brief introductory remark by the Grand Master appropriate extracts from the Five Scriptures on the aspects of Adoration, Supplication and Dedication are read out one by one. The portions of the scriptures as read out are translated in English which enables those present, to appreciate how there is a common thread of thoughts and sentiments running through

all the scriptures and thereby establishes the oneness of God and the commonality of approach to Him in all the Religions. This ceremony of Divine Service thus projects and demonstrates the ideals of Freemasonry to the Public, and enables them to understand

the basic Philosophy of Universal Brotherhood, as propagated by Freemasonry.

After the portions of the scriptures are read as above, covering the four aspects of Invocation, Adoration, Supplication and Dedication, all present are requested to stand and say together an Affirmation as follows: -"We affirm our common faith that the lives of all Human Beings are in the Hands of God and that He is wherever Living Beings Are."

The Divine Service then concludes with a beautiful prayer by the Chaplain called the "Prayer for the Future" in which he beseeches to God to pour down His spirit on the Craft, so that all its Members may be given a new Vision, new Life and new Fellowship, both with one another and the world at large, as also to proclaim His message of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. The prayer also requests the God to open our hearts to receive His power, open our eyes so that we may see His out stretched Hands to bless and finally to do with us as He Wills and not what we may desire.

Since the media is also invited to attend the Divine Service, the event is often reported in the local newspapers with appropriate photographs and sometimes these Divine Services are also shown in Television by way of news clippings. The feed back so far received shows that the public is quite impressed by the Divine Service and at the end of it, are now better informed about Freemasonry and its objectives and laudable purposes.

I have narrated the details of our Divine Service so that I may share with you this interesting experience. I do hope you have enjoyed listening to it.