

BENITO JUAREZ, HIS MASONIC FORMATION, STRUGGLES AND LEGACY

By: Carlos Antonio Martinez, Jr.

Last year, our Mexican Brothers and a great number of our Latin American Brethren celebrated the bicentennial of the birth of one of the most important men in the history of Mexico, and, one who is surely a central element in the Latin American humanistic and political thought. Juarez is the Champion of the Mexican Republic, and the Emancipator of Consciences of people that for centuries lived in spiritual meekness, which degenerated in a Franco-Fanaticism, nourished by the ignorance and superstitions promoted by a clerical class ever avaricious of wealth and power.

Freemasonry, in Mexico and all around the globe, recognizes the importance of the spiritual formation of man; it promulgates itself stimulated by a profound desire of Universal Union; its degrees and diverse rites and systems acknowledge the existence of God, it requests that its aspirants declare themselves to be Believers, and, subsequently, it instructs its members never to be \geq stupid atheists nor libertine irreligious \leq . Both Scottish and York Rites are imbued with the most pure aspiration of connecting the Mason with the Divine, and never have Mexican Freemasons pronounced themselves against any religion or church. The Mexican Craft has never renounced the Universal Breath of Masonry, but, faced with the sudden impetuous attacks of a seditious clergy, like that which existed in Mexico in times of The Colony and during the 19th century, men of progressive thoughts had to step into the arena in defense of the ideals of Evolution and Transformation that Freemasonry proclaims in its Tribunal of Conscience and which, constitute the implicit leit motiv of its teachings and rituals.

Juarez was one of those men, and the collaborators that accompanied him in his struggle, the Men of the Liberal Reform, are the best example of how the principles, postulates and doctrines of Freemasonry must stimulate and nourish the restlessness and courage of the social and political institutions of all countries. The Mexican United States were founded by Masons, and the Mexican Liberal Reform is, without a doubt, the second foundation of the Republic, while at the same time the definitive inauguration that placed Mexico among the civilized nations of the world. Thus it was recognized in Europe, particularly by Bro.: Victor Hugo, and so it was recorded in the American Continent and the rest of the world.

Juarez is celebrated for his human condition, full of virtues and defects; He is praised for his enormous merits and for being the most vivid example of perseverance in the struggle against all the adversities, whether it be in his personal life, or, in his political undertakings. In his personal life, Juarez emanates from the most historically marginalized social class of Mexico, the indigenous. Benito attained emancipation, studied and learned, became a Lawyer amidst all misfortunes and calamities, succeeded in becoming high magistrate, legislator, governor of his native state Oaxaca, and, finally, President of the Republic. He opposed the super powers of the world, combated the

french occupation of Napoleon, III and an ephemeral ≥brass-coated≤ Austrian Emperor named Maximilian of Hapsburg, and confronted one of the most intolerant and avaricious roman catholic clergies in the world of his time, a clergy enriched beyond satiety with vast real estate, more than two thirds of non-producing Mexican land in its possession, the so called ≥Dead Hands Holdings≤, and eager to exert preeminence over the terrestrial power of the State, notwithstanding the renowned Christian mandate that situates God and Cesar each at their respective place and ambience. Juarez was and is exalted for having defeated adversity, for his ideals, and for his moral triumph over the enemies of Freedom and Progress.

The presence of Juarez in Freemasonry is unarguable, though historical data varies. European-Styled and Organized Masonry arrived in Mexico during the first decade of the 19th century, allegedly brought by Mr. Joel R. Pinsett, Plenipotentiary Minister of the U.S. Government in Mexico, and, already in 1824 Guadalupe Victoria, first President of Independent Mexico, discharged the duties of Grand Master of The National Grand Lodge of Mexico; However, in 1806, it is said that Miguel Hidalgo, the spear-header of the struggle for independence of ≥New Spain≤ (as Mexico was formerly known), was initiated a Mason in a Lodge without a name or exact location in the city of Mexico, but, there is no exact data on this regard. This particular Lodge was probably of ≥Cadizian Inspiration≤, in other words, one of those founded in Cadiz, Spain by Don Francisco De Miranda, with the purpose of promoting the Independence of the North-American Colonies: ≥The Lodges of Rational Knights of Lautaro≤.

Recently after consummating the Independence of Mexico, in 1821, the Mexican Society is faced with the fundamental political debate of its history: to decide whether the new country is to be constituted as either a Centralist or Federalist Republic. Since then, Masonry has played a crucial role in Mexican History; the so called ≥Scottish Rite≤, integrated by Peninsular Spaniards and some Mexican Natives eager to retain their viceroyship-given privileges, pronounced themselves in favor of a centralist political organization. The Mestizos, the emerging social class, decided to fight for a model of federal republic and grouped themselves in the ≥York Rite≤. Both Masonic Systems, or Rituals, became authentic political parties, and, according to Don Jose Maria Mateosπs ≥History of Masonry in Mexico: 1806-1884≤, soon thereafter, Masonic Lodges ceased being so, and transformed themselves into virtual chambers of power and influence. The Masonic Symbolism and Rituals were eventually made to disappear, in order to constitute themselves as legitimate political parties, where to be ≥Scottish≤ meant to be ≥Centralist≤, and to be ≥Yorker≤ meant to be ≥Federalist≤. There were Scottish and Yorker Masons in Congress, and their debates were so forceful and heated that their ≥Patriotic Fraternity≤ ceased to exist as a result of their ongoing battle over Power, and their obstinacy to make either one of the projects prevail. Finally, the project for a Federal Nation won, in other words, the ≥Yorkers Party≤ had attained victory.

Not very long after that, nine Freemasons, five of the York Rite and four of the Scottish Rite, disgusted with seeing these Lodges being something that they should not, decided to terminate their allegiance to their respective Grand Bodies and created/founded a Masonic System that prevailed all throughout the 19th Century and, which, they called:

≥The Mexican National Rite of Freemasonry≤. This system was officially instituted in 1825, and though ≥Irregular≤ (≥clandestine≤ by today's tenets) in the eyes of North American and European Grand Bodies/Lodges, it had among its members the Most Illustrious Mexicans of the 19th Century. In addition to seeking the re-unification of Mexican Masonry, their aim was to labor in strict accordance with the ancestral rituals and symbolism of the Craft. But, the state of things in the Mexican Political Realm, the seditious posture of the Mexican Catholic Clergy obsessed with controlling education and maintaining a ferocious grip over politics in the country, just like they did with their enormous real estate and agricultural riches, prompted the liberal bench to re-group, once again; However, this time, no longer as ≥Yorker≤ or ≥Scottish ≥ factions, but, marching under the banners of two opposing forces: Liberals against Conservatives, or, better stated: Freemasons against Clericals. The struggle was bitter and it degenerated in a civil war, ≥The Mexican War of Reform≤, a battle that left behind costly social, political and economical devastation, and a bitterness, that, since almost a decade ago, it has unfortunately begun to resurface in the Mexican reality of today, notwithstanding the decisive triumph of ≥Light≤ over ≥Obscurantism≤.

To many historians, without creditable data, Benito Pablo Juarez Garcia was probably initiated in one of these Lodges, operating under the jurisdiction of The National Mexican Rite, in either the cities of Mexico or Oaxaca. It is eagerly suggested, however, that on January 15, 1847, such initiation actually took place in a Lodge called: ≥Independence Number 2≤. Those of the opinion that his initiation occurred in Oaxaca, somewhere around 1833 or 1834, postulate that it was in a Lodge of the York Rite known as: ≥Mirror of Virtues≤ of the many instituted by the Grand National Lodge of Mexico in 1824. The Mexican Masonic Historian/Scholar Don Rafael Zayas Enriquez, asserts that indeed the event took place in Mexico city, and to that effect he states: ≥ã Juarez was a Francmason that belonged to the Mexican National Rite, and in which he attained the Ninth Degree, equivalent to the 33rd of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. He was so fervently devoted to his Masonic Practices and Principles that his name is now used with much veneration in all the rituals, and many lodges and philosophical bodies have adopted it as a sacred symbol ä≤.

Some of the personalities who assisted to the ceremony of initiation were the Brothers Manuel Crescencio Rejon, ≥The Pericles of Mexican Orators≤, Don Valentin Gomez Farias, Patriarch of Mexican Democracy and, then, President of the Republic, Don Pedro Zubieta, Secretary of the Treasury, Pedro Lemus, General Commander of the Federal District and the State of Mexico; the Brothers and Federal Legislators Jose Maria Del Rio, Fernando Ortega, Tiburcio Canas and Francisco Banuet. Also present were Don Agustin Buenrostro, Joaquin Navarro, Don Ambrosio Moreno, Secretary of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, Miguel Lerdo De Tejada and other Distinguished Brethren. It is added by the chroniclers that, since the night of his initiation, Bro.: Juarez adopted the nickname ≥Guillermo Tell≤ in an significant gesture to demonstrate that, just like the Swiss Hero William Tell, he too would be energetic and constant in defending the safety and liberty of his family, country and compatriots.

It is noteworthy to add that, for his raising to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason, the hall of sessions of the very Senate of the Republic was outfitted and furnished as a Masonic Temple, and that the ceremony was presided by the Illustrious Bro.: Don Jose Maria Del Rio, then, Grand Master of the Mexican National Rite. It is also said that, aside from having chosen the symbolical name of the Swiss Hero, at all times and in all places, he only wanted to discharge the office of Tyler and no other. There are some Masonic historians, however, who contend that on two terms he was Worshipful Master of his Lodge ≥Independence No. 2≤.

The birthday of Benito Juarez, which occurred in Guelatao, in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico on the 21st of March of 1806, coincided with an epoch of great agitations, where the principal causes behind said agitations around the globe were men's struggles for freedom and progress. The 18th century had left to humanity a legacy of intellectual greatness in the works of French Encyclopedists, inspirers of a Liberalism that engendered the Emancipators of posterior decades. Children of this libertarian traditions were Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, Hidalgo, Morelos, Sucre, San Martin, Bolivar, Mancini, O'Higgins, Robespierre and, of course, Juarez.

Why did Juarez become a Freemason? Surely because he perceived in this Ancient Fraternal Brotherhood the purest seedlings of Fraternity, of Charity, and Mutual Succor. Juarez became a Freemason certainly because our Order did not attack any religion, being his wife Margarita and himself profoundly Catholic. He saw, among Freemasons, the most solid respect to Freedom of Worship, and he understood that being a Free-Mason was equivalent to being a Free-Thinker, and, at the same time, deeply spiritual. Juarez must have comprehended in his Inner Tribunal of Conscience that if Masonry preserved certain rituals, it only sought to perpetuate the Wisdom of Humanity's Remote Past, and insure in the world the permanent existence of laws, principles and teachings that conserve the most liberated character of human condition.

The public performance of Juarez is imbued of Masonic Principles, and it makes evident his religious and spiritual vocation. In fact, Ill.: Bro.: Juarez was never an enemy of the Catholic Church, for he himself was a keen catholic; Neither he, Freemasonry, nor Mexican Masons have expressed opposition to Christianity or to the Catholicism of the people of Mexico. The only pernicious deed that Juarez and the Freemasons of yesterday and today deplore and oppose, is the retrograde character of the Mexican Clergy, the systematic and ancestral hatred that priests express against Mexican Freemasons and Masonry in general. What is the reason? Having given to Mexico the Laws of Reform, and along with them, the passage into a juridical and political modernism expressed in the Separation of Church and State, Secular and Respectful Education, the amortization of the Clergy's holdings, civil marriage while conserving the religious, and a vast number of other decrees of common benefit that only God-Terrified and Obscurantist spirits may come to fear and hate with so much passion, as that of Mexican priests and their fanatic followers of the past and present.

The elevated Masonic Spirit of Benito Juarez had its most fervent expression in the Patriotism and Tolerance with which he conducted his personal, familiar and political

lives. The exact fulfillment of his Masonic and Fraternal duties creating Public Education and building schools, protecting the Freedom of Spoken and Written Opinion, and being ever watchful of the precise enforcement and respect of Constitutional Laws.

In February of 1847, Juarez was elected Vice President of the Grand Lodge ≥The Light≤; In 1854, after being proclaimed the Plan of Ayutla, the Mexican National Rite conferred upon him the 7th Degree, and in 1871 he received the Diploma of Grand Inspector General of The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in Spain. He was also declared Honorary Member of The Grand Consistory of France.

In the festivities of the Bicentennial of his birth, when the Conservative Government that most controversially today presides Mexico looks upon him prejudicially, and chooses to distance itself from the commemorative acts of a Dignitary of International Stature, such as: ≥The Meritorious of The Americas≤, many Latin American Governments contribute to remember, with diverse official activities, the labors and accomplishments of this Immortal Man.

May the example of Bro.: Benito Juarez, with his vices and virtues, be the model of Masonic and Political Excellence to all Freemasons of today and tomorrow, and may the empires of today be warned by his sublime maxim: ≥ã Between individuals as well as between Nations, the Respect to the Rights of another is the Peace ä≤.