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THE FRENCH MASONIC LANDSCAPE

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Freemasonry was established in France in the mid-1720s and the lodges have been a constant presence up to the present day.

France differs from other major European countries like Spain, Italy or Germany where, because of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, Freemasonry was banned for long periods. Of these almost three centuries of Masonry, we should just remove the four years of Nazi occupation (1940-1944) when Freemasonry was banned, although some lodges continued to operate clandestinely. Following those four "black years" where Freemasons were persecuted, French Freemasonry emerged very weak... but not broken as in Germany or Spain.

Of course during these three centuries there were good times - the "golden ages"! - Such as, for example, in the eighteenth century the years 1770-1780, the First Empire (1804-1815) or the Third Republic (1875-1940) where lodges have grown and emerged as very active in social life. But there were also difficult times when Freemasonry was less attractive. For lack of members, many lodges have disappeared, for example between 1815 and 1860 or between 1945 and 1970.

I. Being a Freemason in France today

In 2012 France has just over 150,000 Freemasons (for 60 million inhabitants). This number may seem small to a public accustomed to British figures (over 250,000 Masons in England alone). But it is actually very important when compared to Masonic membership of the other major European countries. Remember that Italy (60 million inhabitants) has only 30,000 masons not to mention Germany (80 million) and only 12,000 masons or Spain (47 million) and 5000 masons!

Indeed, there are in France more Masons than throughout the rest of Europe (excluding Britain) put together! A good knowledge of French Masonry today is therefore important for any observer interested in Freemasonry.

In 2012 the average French Freemason is 57 years old. He was initiated when he was 43. Just like life expectancy, these numbers tend to increase; ten years ago (in 2002) French Masons were on average only 56 years old.

Similarly, today, the 10,000 people who are initiated into Freemasonry each year join their lodge at the average age of 44 years. It is mainly a middle-class membership. Involvement in Freemasonry occurs therefore generally in a second period of adulthood, after an initial period – which runs roughly between the ages of 25 and 40 – when people are building career and family.

In exposing the motivations that lead candidates to join Freemasonry, you leave a purely quantitative aspect to enter qualitative analyses.

I will try to explain, mostly based on my experience, the reasons that may induce today some 10,000 Frenchmen annually to join a Masonic lodge. This is where the trouble starts because it seems that the "reasons for becoming a Freemason" in France are quite different from those that can be found in Britain. The "reasons for becoming a Freemason" in France are of course first of all related to the image of Freemasonry in French society. And this image is itself largely the result of the role of Freemasonry in the history of France.

I will not go into details here of the French Masonic history, but I would just highlight some of its important features.

In a Catholic country like France, where Freemasonry was condemned by the Pope as early as 1738 (and since then many times) this has of course been a major influence on the lodges.

The first result is that conservative and conformist Frenchmen were not tempted to become Freemasons since the main religious authority has always viewed Freemasonry as heretical and dangerous. In the complexity of eighteenth century society, for reasons I will not explain here, this condemnation of Freemasonry had very little impact. But in the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church's strong opposition to freemasonry kept conservatives away from the lodges. Instead their opponents, supporters of progress in both philosophy and politics, gradually made lodges a meeting and rallying point. Throughout all the nineteenth century, French Freemasons evolved from a sincere – but rather "platonic" – philosophical liberalism to a militant commitment in favour of new ideas both in religion and politics. Political and social circumstances profoundly led to these developments.

Thus French Freemasonry felt itself impelled to play a major political role in the transformation of France into a modern democracy between 1880 and 1914. French Freemasons have been very involved in French politics and especially in the Radical Party who established a dominant role in French politics from 1880 to 1940. The Radical party, despite its name, is essentially a Liberal and Social Democratic party. It should be added that if Freemasons were involved in politics in that period everyone was actively political in France between 1880 and 1940. For example, the Catholic Church, far from being limited to religious or spiritual matters, has always involved itself in French public affairs. This was a time when French society was highly politicized. Taken as a whole France from 1880 to 1940 was deeply divided into two opposite sides: a conservative France supported the Catholic Church as opposed to a liberal and progressive France which rallied round Freemasonry.

The French subconscious was very affected by this foundational period of modern France. Once again in 2012, the Freemason is perceived in France as someone who seeks to improve society and who cares about the big issues facing the world today. So for most of those who wish to join Freemasonry, it's really about someone looking for a place for thinking and working with these "big questions". It seems quite natural for the lodge to be a place for listening to a presentation on poverty, sustainable development, or the web, and then the members of the lodge discuss these issues trying to improve their knowledge of these issues by such debates. As a Masonic "apparatchik" I'm a kind of "official" Free-mason, or at least a visible one, and my neighbours, people

I meet over dinner, will very naturally ask: "What do the Freemasons think about the new Bioethics issues? ", " What is the position of Freemasonry on sustainable development? " Etc... I understand how much it may sound strange to British Masonic ears!

But of course the initiatory and ritual dimension of Freemasonry is also an aspect that is striking and has always been very associated with Masonry. First, because, even in the most "political" period some French Masons have always supported this initiatory conception of Masonry. There was even, after the First World War, a kind of "symbolic revival" in the lodges. Paradoxically, the controversy with the Catholic Church has also reinforced that. Indeed, not wanting to suggest that its hostility to Masonry was principally justified purely by questions of power and influence on society, Catholic scholars have denounced the heretical, Gnostic and esoteric nature of Masonry... These controversies have caused the idea to become established that Masonry is an initiatory society and that the Masonic commitment has a spiritual dimension, even if that spirituality was not exactly a "mainstream" one.

The image of Freemasonry forged by this history – as being both socially progressive and esoteric in philosophy – remains very present in the French subconscious. The need to think in good company about major social issues, and the desire to work on philosophical and spiritual matters, are the two main motivations today exhibited by those interested in Freemasonry in France.

French Masons are dedicated to Freemasonry ... much of their time. French lodges meet every fortnight. But if you are officer of the lodge, or if you participate within a working group, you will have one or two more meetings and you may find yourself attending a meeting a week. The meetings of the lodges are divided into two main categories: the ceremonies themselves, and secondly the working meetings around a subject. In France (and other countries have also followed this pattern) apart from four to five meetings each year devoted to the ceremonies or to Masonic instruction, lodges work on philosophical and symbolic matters. Usually the schedule is as follows. After the opening of the lodge in the first degree, and the reading of the minutes of the previous meeting, a brother will lecture on a philosophical or symbolic subject (for 30 to 45 minutes), then the other brethren of the lodge will ask questions or contribute to the lecture. These exchanges are framed by ritual and must be done in a moderate and courteous tone regardless of differences of opinion. The nature of the topics depends of course on the orientation of the lodge: these range across social issues, philosophical problems or symbolism. For the Masons delivering the lecture, it is often the result of lengthy work. He presents to his fellows the outcome of a strong commitment to personal research. He wants to share with them all the interest he found in the issue.

However, there are also "mandatory lectures". As in the case of progressing from one degree to another. When, after a year or two, the lodge considers that the apprentice may become a fellow craft, we'll require him to work on one of the symbols of the first degree. The aim is of course to check if the new brother has thought about and meditated upon the symbolic teaching of his degree. Similarly, a year or two later, when the lodge wishes to raise him to the Master degree, he is expected to submit a research paper on one aspect or another of the second degree. It is also an opportunity for other members of the lodge to reconsider important symbolic elements of their own Masonic life.

II. The French Grand Lodges

As you may have noticed, I have so far spoken of "the Freemasons" in general. But France has yet another feature, it has not just one Grand Lodge, such as in England, but several Masonic organizations. There are of course differences between those organizations, which we will deal with at length. But before doing so, I want to emphasize the point that for the general public, but also for many Masons, there is just "Freemasonry". Moreover, for a good part of it, the Masonic life of a brother will be quite similar whatever Grand Lodge he belongs to. I should add that my experience leads me to think that when a person becomes a Freemason in these different denominations, the Grand Lodge he joins is more determined by chance encounters than by a "philosophical" choice. Thus, I myself joined the Grand Orient, and today it is my family, but I might equally have joined the Grand Lodge of France instead, where I also had a good friend, and I would have probably been very pleased there too.

Let me now introduce you to the heart of our subject, the presentation of the "French Masonic landscape". We will review those Grand Lodges that together encompass all the 150,000 French Masons.

The first, the oldest... and still the most important is the Grand Orient of France. This is the "old house" (La vieille maison) of French Freemasonry. A first "Grand Lodge of France" appeared around 1735. It struggled to establish its authority over the lodges but knew several crises. In 1771, a radical reform based on a return to Masonic principles – election of officers, representation for all the lodges ... – brought about its transformation into the Grand Orient of France. The philosophy of the Grand Orient is to bring together the different Masonic currents and sensitivities around the basic principles of the Order. This managed to achieve the unity of Masonry in France in the late eighteenth century. But this unity was broken in 1821 by a quarrel over the high degrees and the creation of the Supreme Council of France with its own Grand Lodge. However it nevertheless succeeded in bringing together for a long time a large proportion of French Masons: nearly two thirds by the late nineteenth century, and probably still more than half in 1950-1960. Today with just over 50,000 members it covers a third of French Masons. The Grand Orient is at the heart of the French Masonic history and integrates well within it. The advent of the Republic is in part a Masonic story. During the visitors' tour of the Grand Temple situated in the rue Cadet in Paris, we do not fail to recall that it was mainly here that were developed the great founding laws of modern France: laws on civil liberties, freedom of association, freedom of the press, the first laws of social protection ... Among the 33 members of the Board of the Grand Orient in the late nineteenth century, you would usually find several government ministers. At that time, more than a third of the MPs were Freemasons. The Grand Orient is not only proud of this glorious past, but even today it considers itself as a moral authority in politics. While no longer involved in long debates between political parties, it regularly issues reminders of the importance of the founding values of the Republic. It has recently made some statements about the debate on the place of foreigners in French society, and inveighed against the reactionary views of the far right.

But the Grand Orient is also the repository of a rich and long Masonic tradition considered to be the spiritual and initiatory dimension. It was indeed affected by the "symbolic revival" experienced by French Freemasonry in the inter-war period (1920-1940) and again since the 1970s. So today, some of its lodges are especially interested

in "social issues", while others focus exclusively on philosophical or symbolic subjects. Many lodges work in both fields. Indeed many Masons belonging to the Grand Orient generally think that once one has worked at one's own development with some philosophical reflection, it is a duty to look also to the development of others, especially in the case of others rather less geared up to do so than oneself. The individual development of Masons must lead to action for a better society. But, we repeat, in France many institutions are involved in the political field. For example, several times a year the Churches, the Catholic Church at the forefront, will take a position on any issue discussed within parliament. It seems quite natural to the French that, from time to time, the President of the Republic or a politician will receive the Grand Master of the Grand Orient in order to ascertain the views "of Freemasonry" on a particular problem of French society. About ten years ago; the French parliament developed a series of laws known as "bioethics". These laws are intended to regulate medical practice taking into account the progress of science. Pointers were sought that would make the law fully consistent with the conception of Man, human nature and the person. Members of Parliament then decided to seek the views of "moral authorities" of French society. It seemed quite natural to consult the Grand Orient. To meet this demand the Grand Orient created a "Bioethics Committee" gathering Brothers doctors, biologists and researchers. It made a high quality report to the extent that some of its findings were incorporated into the law. By consulting the Grand Orient, parliamentarians felt that it represented the views of a portion of French society committed to liberal philosophy after the manner of the Enlightenment. A few weeks ago, having lunch in a café in the Rue Cadet, I was surprised to see on foot, smiling and hands in pockets, the Socialist candidate for president. He regarded it as natural, during his campaign programme consulting among a certain number of opinion leaders, to meet with the Grand Master of the Grand Orient of France. The Grand Orient has long been the epitome of Freemasonry in the country's history. Even today, much to the chagrin of other Grand Lodges, in the mind of the general public the Grand Orient and Freemasonry are often synonymous. To end this presentation of the Grand Orient, I would particularly suggest two elements.

First, if the 'political' dimension remains attached to the identity of the Grand Orient, it is no longer associated with a particular political party today as was the case in the late nineteenth century with the Radical Party (essentially Liberal, you remember) or until 1940 with the Socialist Party. For instance, it is common knowledge that leading public figures of the Conservative Party belong these days to the Grand Orient.

Lastly, I do not think that the daily life of its lodges differs very much from that of the Lodges of other French Grand Lodges. Some of its lodges may deal a little more with social issues, but as elsewhere, the day to day work of the lodges is made up of lectures on philosophical questions, on the symbols of the different degrees and of Masonic ceremonies. To conclude, this link with politics, which is the major criticism of Anglo-Saxon Masonry vis-à-vis the Grand Orient de France is, quite on the contrary, a source of pride for its members. They feel that Freemasonry has thus marked, and still does mark, in a most beneficial way, the history of their country.

The second French Masonic body is the "Grand Lodge of France." In 1821, some members of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Supreme Council believed that high grades should not be under the domination of the Craft, as was the case in the Grand Orient. They therefore constituted another Masonic organization: the Supreme

Council of France. As the name suggests, the Supreme Council of France is primarily an organization for high degrees. But as to join the high degrees, you should first be a Mason... the Supreme Council of France created Craft lodges and a "Central Grand Lodge" (Grande Loge Centrale) to manage them. Throughout the nineteenth century, the "Central Grand Lodge" had no independence and was under the direct authority of the Supreme Council. In the 1870-1880's, the symbolic lodges were "rebelling" against the authority of the Supreme Council. After various adventures that I will not trace in detail, the Supreme Council granted autonomy and "independence" to its symbolic lodges. The "Central Grand Lodge" became the "Grand Lodge of France" in 1894. Although the Grand Orient remained much more important throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the Grand Lodge of France did gradually become "the other Masonic order in France". Ideologically there were no differences between the two organizations. The 'Grand Lodge' brethren were as liberal and republican as were their fellows of the Grand Orient. Their only differences were about Masonic emphases. Of course an organization created by a Supreme Council naturally gives more importance to the high degrees. It should also be noted that the Grand Lodge would be even more influenced by the "symbolic revival" that affected French Masonry between 1920 and 1940 and since the 1950s. Today the Grand Lodge of France, in bringing together 25,000 Brothers, states in one of the first articles of its constitution that "Freemasonry is a traditional and universal initiatory order based on Brotherhood". If, since the 1950's, the Grand Lodge has proclaimed that its lodges are no longer involved in "social issues", the matter is not so clear: for instance, last Thursday, on March 22, the Grand Lodge organized a very interesting conference on "Ethics and Media."

In 1913, the lodge "Le Centre des Amis" had a dispute with the Grand Orient. It left, and with one or two other lodges formed the "French National Grand Lodge" (Grande Loge Nationale Francaise, the 'GLNF'). From the beginning the new French National Grand Lodge established relationships with English Masonry. A few months later it was "recognized" by the United Grand Lodge of England. Thus, almost 40 years after the 1877 break with the Grand Orient, English Masonry once more had a sister organization in France. Quite different from the two historical French Masonic orders, the National Grand Lodge long remained a small organization. For half a century, its members were English citizens living in France or were French Anglophile. From the 1970s, things changed with the new Grand Secretary: Yves Trestournel. It implemented a strategy to develop its organization rapidly, rather in the manner of a 'forced march'. For 30 years the French National Grand Lodge brought about a growth rate previously unknown in French Freemasonry. Its membership rose from some 3,000 to 4,000 in 1970 to nearly 40,000 members by 2000. Trestournel's idea was also to develop the GLNF along lines somewhat parallel to the Grand Orient. The Grand Orient characteristically brought together liberal and intellectual middle-classes; GLNF sought to recruit heavily in the more conservative business middle classes. The Grand Orient had an internal organization that was based on yearly elections and against-entrenched powers (such as the Grand Lodge);-Trestournel set about organizing the GLNF as a pyramid based on downwards cooptation. It must be said that until recent years this strategy has proven to be very efficient. The GLNF seemed to fulfill all its objectives. Around 2000 it overtook the Grand Lodge of France and became the second Masonic organization in France. The GLNF then announced that its goal was to exceed the membership of the Grand Orient and become the largest Masonic organization in

France. It was proceeding along this path when a very serious crisis broke out which we will discuss in detail.

Ah! I forgot to tell you something ... In France 20% of the Brothers are sisters! Women's Masonry reappeared in the late nineteenth century but remained marginal until the 1960s. It has since known a strong growth. The sisters may belong to the Co-masonry of Le Droit Humain (15,000 members) which is today in France a respected Grand Lodge of "good standing". Note that although Co-masonry welcomes men and women on an equal footing; nearly 70% of members are women. But there is also a Grande Loge Féminine de France (12,000 members) which has grown substantially since 1980. In conclusion it must be mentioned that, after years of terrible controversies; through determined action mounted by a very small minority, the Grand Orient has finally decided to take the far-reaching step of permitting those lodges who are so minded to initiate women and/or to affiliate sisters.

To understand Freemasonry in France, I should also say a few words about some typically French Masonic issues: the views of the high degrees and the concept of "Rite".

The high degrees were very popular in the eighteenth century and are still an important aspect of Masonic life in France. French Masonic history has also brought about that each Grand Lodge is linked with specific high degrees organizations. Thus, to take the two oldest, the Brothers of the Grand Orient may continue their Masonic path in the "Supreme Council-Grand College of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite", while those of the Grand Lodge of France will join the "Supreme Council of France". But, from the eighteenth century the place and the way of working the high degrees remains a controversial issue among the Masons. Thus, from its inception, the Grand Orient of France considered that the high degrees were an interesting aspect of Freemasonry, but that the most important part of Masonry lay in the Craft. This is still its position today. On the contrary, there are Masons who think the opposite: that is to say that the very substance of Freemasonry lies in the high degrees and the Craft is a necessary and nice preparation to them.

Of course I'm simplifying to make myself understood. We find this idea in the eighteenth century and when, in 1821, some Masons of the Grand Orient split to create the Supreme Council of France they formed a Masonic body centered on the practice of high degrees. One could say that these ideas have really been incorporated into the genetic codes of French Masonic organizations. So today, the Supreme Council of France retains a great influence on the operation of the Grand Lodge of France, while the higher degrees have no role at all in Grand Orient governance.

It is also important to have a word about what we call in France "Rite". Masons work to various "Rites" such as the following: the "French Rite", the "Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite", the "Rectified Scottish Rite", the "Rite of Memphis Mizraim"... Usually, in Masonic language the French word "Rite" is translated in English by "Working". I think this is an incorrect translation which can mislead. Indeed, in France, the different "Rites" are much more varied among themselves than are the English "workings". Although their sources are of course common and, whatever the "Rite", the Masonic legends all speak of the Temple of Solomon, Hiram, and so on ... But over the centuries, the presentation of symbols, interpretations, etc. that are proposed by each Rite have

evolved in slightly different directions. Beyond these ritual differences, French Masons have come to believe that these various "Rites" represent various paths in Masonry; that each one has its particular mood and personality. So you can hear in French lodges that the "French Rite" is moral, the "Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite" is an Hermetic teaching, and that the "Rectified Rite" is a Christian theosophical path. But the story does not finish with those various kinds of Craft rituals. Another very important difference must be emphasized, that these "Rites" for the "Craft", have been linked to various systems of high degrees in French Masonic history. Thus, while the Masonic historian knows that they are of different origins, there is the idea that three Craft degrees according to the "Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite" working, and the 30 high degrees that were strung out in 1804 (for reasons to be yet conjectured), form a whole and is a ladder that has symbolic and initiatory consistency. This concept of "Rites" as a path uniting a version of the Craft and a specific scale of high degrees can also be found elsewhere, as in Scandinavia for instance with the Swedish Rite. Those views of Masonry allow some officers of the high degrees organizations to think that, for the coherence of the Masonic path, high degrees organizations should keep an eye on the Craft lodges. Thus in 1950-1960, when a current of French Masonry wanted to get closer to the Anglo-Saxon standards, some had developed great ingenuity to explain that the Grand Lodges were of course independent... but that the Supreme Councils remained the "guardians of the Rite" ... It is more or less the equivalent of that wonderful sentence of the 1813 Union which states (broadly) "Freemasonry has only three grades including the fourth"! Similarly for some French masons "Grand Lodges are completely independent from the time they consult the Supreme Councils for the important issues"!

I think this way of thinking has become dominant in France ... except within the Grand Orient where, on the contrary, it is the Supreme Council who must ask permission to the Board when it wants to make an important decision!

I'm sorry to deal with all those issues, which may seem a little complicated, but they are important to understand what is happening today ... including the terrible crisis of the GLNF.

III. A major event, the GLNF crisis

GLNF has experienced strong growth in the last thirty years. But behind this success in terms of membership, it had also experienced several crises. These crises had various reasons.

Firstly there have been regularly high tensions between the direction of the GLNF and its high degrees organizations. For the reasons I have explained, the "Supreme Council for France" (Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite) or the "Grand Priory of the Gauls" (Rectified Scottish Rite) felt they had subcontracted the "administrative management" of "their" craft lodges to the GLNF but that they should be consulted for important decisions about lodges of "their" Rite. In 2000 tensions were so high with the "Grand Priory of the Gauls' that the relationships with the GLNF were broken. Many of the Rectified Scottish Rite Brothers then left the "regular" Grand Lodge.

But the main source of tension was the opacity of decision-making circuits in the GLNF. Although the lodges were convened once a year to a "general assembly" ...

this assembly had no power. The Grand Master was appointed by a "Sovereign Grand Committee" ... of which he named the members! Moreover, since 1986, a series of changes in the internal regulations, made in the utmost discretion, concentrated all the powers of management – finances, real estate issues etc.– in a "Board" consisting of a dozen co-opted members. Both for reasons of efficiency, in that everything should support growth, and with the idea of breaking with the traditional practices of French Masonry (where we spend our time organizing elections and in seeking advice from everyone before making any decisions), this organization of nearly 40,000 members was led by a dozen people ... who in practice were accountable merely to themselves! Grand Masters such as Claude Charbonniaud and Jean-Charles Foellner had the intelligence to go to the limits of consensus ... but never to exceed these limits. This made for a bad atmosphere, especially because the GLNF, to build temples to house all these new Masons asked a lot of money from its members, but the disquiet never went further. After all, building a vast and powerful organization for regular Masonry in France was worth some sacrifice and some necessary arrangements.

However, an event happened to trigger a wave of protest that began to shake and crack deeply this beautiful building built in thirty years. In 2008, Grand Master Jean-Charles Foellner came to the end of his mandate. A very reputable Brother, Jean Murat, was the leading candidate to succeed him. Murat had been a Provincial Grand Master, and Worshipful Master of the Lodge of Research; he was widely appreciated and his social status – general (medical doctor) in the French army – was a fair one to become Grand Master. To the surprise of all, the Past Grand Master Foellner supported another candidate: Francois Stifani. Stifani was unknown in Masonry. Brethren quickly learned that his main qualification was to be the lawyer and financial adviser of the Past Grand Master! As procedures lent themselves to arrangement Stifani was easily appointed Grand Master of the GLNF. A few weeks after his election he introduced a new amendment in the internal regulations that extended his term from 3 to 5 years. Some months later, he arranged for the GLNF to buy a luxury apartment in a fashionable district of Paris for the use of the Grand Master. These decisions were beginning to generate more and more questions from officers, Worshipful Masters and Brothers. But Brethren are Legitimists and if Stifani had not clumsily blundered on ... he probably could be continuing to lead the GLNF as he wanted. But to the first Brothers who were so moved as to allow themselves to ask questions about those decisions, Stifani replied that he was Grand Master and he did what he wanted. His answer was more or less on the lines that the Grand Master is for the Freemasons what the Pope is for Roman Catholics... infallible. The multiplication of these provocative statements created many incidents, with brothers and officers becoming increasingly exasperated. All this led to a clash in a meeting of the "Sovereign Grand Committee", an unprecedented clash in what had been until then merely a "recording chamber". At other times, the pyramidal structure of the GLNF would probably have digested these incidents. But we are now in the days of the Internet. What would have remained in the discreet conclaves of Masonic dignitaries some years ago soon spread all over the web. Opponents created websites to give voice to critics that the governance of the GLNF refused to consider. The tensions that had been so long bottled up within the organization of the GLNF burst out everywhere. In 2010, the General Assembly, usually a "rubber stamp", witnessed an unprecedented attendance and – unheard – voted against the Grand Master and his general progress report. The many irregularities during this meeting resulted in several complaints to court. Quarrels within the GLNF then passed from a purely Masonic

story in a series of court cases. This fight among Freemasons of course attracted the attention of the press. The GLNF's "Affairs" then started to spread out into the press. Failing to reconcile the parties, the judge appointed a "judicial administrator". GLNF would now be headed by a woman ... Master Legrand! (Would you believe that? In French this is a pun and Master Legrand might well have been chosen by the court for that very reason!)

I will not go into details of every aspect of the GLNF legal controversies during two long years. The judge and the administrator had in fact contradictory issues. On one side French law states that an association must be managed according to the will of the majority of its members. But on the other hand the French law recognizes the right of associations to adopt specific regulations ... and those of the GLNF gave much power to the Grand Master and very few to the members. Evil tongues say that a judicial administration is also a business and more the crisis lasts the more the fees are. So we spend two years with a series of decisions that favored at one time the opponents, yet at another the challenged Grand Master...

Another element that must also be remembered is that quarrels have become so intense that former executives of GLNF who joined the opposition made very delicate statements. This powerful GLNF which had been built up in a few years needed a lot of money... and money does not always come from very respectable sources. For example it was suggested that the close ties between the direction of the GLNF and some African leaders – who are generally regarded as dictators – were not ... only Masonic! The press also gave some examples of financial packages to build Masonic temples... that were not very orthodox.

The other French Masonic organizations had mixed reactions. On the one hand, they were not particularly unhappy about the collapse of the GLNF which had spent decades explaining that they were not true Masons. On the other, they realized that the series of court cases concerning the GLNF was turning into the nature of a scandal within public opinion. As the general public is not so familiar with the various Grand Lodges in France, this scandal could affect Freemasonry in general. I remind you that for many French people, Masonry is the Grand Orient and they know no more.

These two years of acute crisis have split the GLNF. The situation is further complicated by internal division within the opposition. They were three camps.

First, in adversity, the challenged Grand Master Stifani gathered his followers. They represented one third of the former GLNF. Their strategy was to hold onto power as long as possible and they have multiplied the proceedings in court to enforce the bylaws of the GLNF in their favor.

The opposition, which represented two thirds of the former GLNF, had split into several streams. The relationships between opponents were not always good. Some accuse others of having been a long time inside the controversial management and that their opposition to François Stifani came too late. Others differ in their analysis or of their reform proposals. After many misadventures, the general opposition could have been characterized as being made of up of two strands.

First, those who thought that the problem was Stifani. Once Stifani has gone, the true GLNF will be restored with some reforms correcting the most questionable aspects

of the internal regulations. Those Brothers were lined up behind Jean Murat, the losing candidate in 2007.

Secondly, those who considered that the GLNF structure can no longer work; that the old body was too ill and could not be cured. In any case, if the opposition finally takes power, it must negotiate with the remaining Stifani supporters. Stifani supporters have proven to be skilled and they will continue to hold in their own hands the important matters of control behind the outward frontage of the wonderful regalia of the Grand Master Murat. This stream wanted to create a totally new regular Grand Lodge.

On March 24 (2012), hundreds of lodges of old GLNF started to create the "Grand Lodge of the French Masonic Alliance". When organized, this new Grand Lodge wanted to start a process of recognition with the United Grand Lodge of England.

On March 30, an election has been held at the "Sovereign Grand Committee" of the GLNF. This election took place under very special conditions. Some candidates, among them one of the main challengers of Stifani, have not been allowed to take part in this election. 20 to 30% of members of the former "Sovereign Grand Committee" cannot vote.

IV. Beyond March 2012: additional remarks to bring the GLNF saga up to 15 June 2013

The opposition failed to unite and there were several candidates against Stifani. Stifani beat Murat and came first with 45% of votes. But a few weeks later, at the General Assembly of the lodges, which was more difficult to handle, 60% refused to confirm the nomination. A new election by the Sovereign Grand Committee was again arranged. This time, one of the opponents, a former Stifani Grand Officer, Jean-Pierre Servel was appointed with 60% of votes. On December 1st the General Assembly of the lodges ratified this appointment and Servel became the new Grand Master of the GLNF. One of the first concerns of Servel was trying to recreate a consensus – at least with those who remained in the GLNF – and to stop the supervision by the judicial administrator. He was skilled enough and seems to have managed to restore calm.

But opponents who have left the GLNF say they will not come back because nothing has changed about the opacity of the GLNF management. They also denounced the presence of many "Stifanists" in the so-called "new team" of Jean-Pierre Servel.

All these events took place with, in the background, issues of international Masonic relationship. Indeed, a strong element of the identity of the GLNF was its recognition and its relationship with the United Grand Lodge of England. "We are the only true masons because we are recognized by the First Grand Lodge of the World, that of England, the country where Freemasonry was born" said, and honestly thought, the GLNF Brethren. After various "regular" Grand Lodges, Great Queen Street suspended (19 July 2011) and then removed (12 September 2012) recognition of the GLNF. It was a real trauma for the brothers who have been educated in the Masonic idea that true Masons were only those recognized by London. In the aftermath, many regular Grand Lodges – but not all – have broken relations with GLNF.

Other thunder: on 12th June 2012, five European Grand Lodges (Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg) published a formal statement explaining

that they would never recognize the GLNF again and asking the Grand Lodge of France to set up a Masonic federation with other small Grand Lodges of a spiritual nature to create a new regular body in France. This is what has been called the "Declaration of Basel".

The "Declaration of Basel" sparked enthusiasm in the Grand Lodge of France – which has long tried to join the family of recognized Grand Lodges – and interest in various other Masonic circles.

Negotiations started to build this Masonic Confederation with the aim of a "regular" recognition. After very optimistic announcements, negotiations were in fact quite complicated. Two points were of course issues: the nature of the belief in a Supreme Being, relationships and visits with "liberal" or feminine Grand Lodges.

If the all the lodges of the Grand Lodge of France work "To the Glory of the Great Architect of the Universe", all official GLDF documents state that the brothers could see him as a pure symbol and could profess atheism . Moreover, the Grand Lodge of France, the Grand Lodge "Opera" or the French National Lodge had close relationships (and sometimes even double membership) with the Grand Orient, The Co-Masonic Order Le Droit Humain or the Women's Grand Lodge. What was going to happen? Was it possible that the "Five Grand Lodges" of the "Declaration of Basel" would accept it?

At least, only the GL-AMF was in an easy position. Shaped exactly as the GLNF, its principles were the traditional "regular" Landmarks. On the other hand, provincial lodges of the GLDF which have often old and close relationships with their alter ego from the Grand Orient, would they accept to break those relationships? Not evident.

It is precisely on the issue of Masonic relationships that the French National Lodge – a small but prestigious body – withdrew from the project of confederation. They said that they will enjoy new Masonic contacts, but that they will never change anything to their old and close relations with the Grand Orient or Co-masonry.

In June 2013, the four remaining bodies (GLDF, GL-AMF, GLTSO, GLIF) set up the "Masonic Confederation of France" which proclaims its regularity to the face of the Masonic World... but says nothing about "the two issues".

The GLNF and the "Confederation" will now challenge for getting the "regularity" stamp. Servel will try to convince the British that the terrible "Stifani" story is now over and that, with small reforms, a renewed GLNF could again take its place in the great family of the regular Grand Lodges. The "Confederation" will knock on the door of the five European Grand Lodges and say "we did it, so please now give us your recognition". This complex situation is not only a French issue, it may create tensions inside worldwide regular Masonry.

Time will tell whether the " Masonic Confederation of France" (or at least the GL-AMF) will succeed in the project of becoming the new regular body in France or if, after some years, the GLNF will get back recognition... making the "Stifani episode" only a bad memory?

Today we can nevertheless identify the following issues.

By the numerous examples brought to light (links with African dictators, financial scams ...) the GLNF crisis has definitely tarnished the image of Freemasonry in France. The dignitaries of other Masonic organizations who rejoiced at the GLNF problems were wrong. This "unpacking" with which the press has largely reverberated has probably been the greatest "Masonic scandal" of the modern period in France. Of course other Masonic organizations have also experienced internal crisis in decades past. But they were normal governance crises which have usually been resolved within a few months through the voting mechanism.

Similarly the image of "regularity" within French Freemasonry has been severely damaged. For a long time now most of the French Masonic organizations have had a different perspective than the one defended by the United Grand Lodge of England. But UGLE has for many French Masons kept some prestige. The GLNF crisis has certainly damaged the "aura" of "regular Masonry". A tree is known by its fruits the Gospel says. After two years of hard and sometimes controversial public insults, the fruits of "regularity" in France seem very bitter.

I would nevertheless like to finish on a more optimistic note. Despite the serious problems that the GLNF crisis has created in French Freemasonry, Freemasonry remains attractive for the French. Over the past two to three years, in spite of the terrible things printed about Freemasonry in the papers, we have not observed any decline in the number of applications for membership within the lodges. French masonry seems to be being borne up by a kind of magic trend. We must hope that it will carry on.

One last word... I hope I have helped you to understand better how difficult it is to make French Freemasonry tick the British boxes!