

Centennial Celebration Moments #26

A Final Look at the Development of the DeMolay Ritual

The Fourth Edition of the DeMolay Ritual came out in 1926 with a major revision of the DeMolay Degree, but it was not well-accepted by the Chapters. Most Chapters simply refused to change. As early as the 1927 Seventh Annual Session of the Grand Council of the Order of DeMolay, held in Louisville, Kentucky from March 21-22, it was obvious there was trouble in paradise. In the first place, the Fourth Edition had been published by the committee without the vote or endorsement of the Grand Council. The Ritual Committee report indicated that the previous major rewrite “was a mistake, and that the degree as thus tempered has not met with the approval of the members of this Grand Council, nor of the boys themselves generally.” The report then goes on to detail all the changes to restore the ritual to its earlier splendor. But this is when they ADDED the Orator’s Memorial Prayer at the end of the drama as we know it today. This part of the report was adopted.

They then report, “Your committee has considered very carefully the several suggestions that some sort of fun degree be authorized for the use of chapters. This committee is of the opinion that any such auxiliary or side degree is not a desirable feature of DeMolay work. In the opinion of this committee, the maintaining of the present dignified plan of DeMolay is desirable, and there should not be any frivolous diversion which is apt to detract from the impressions conveyed by the Degrees of the Order. For these reasons the committee recommends that no fun degree be endorsed or permitted.” This part of the report was also adopted, and the wisdom of this decision is proven every time some youth is injured or worse in college fraternities that still permit or promote hazing.

The last recommendation the committee made is that, now that they have listened to the demands of the Chapters and members, “it is our hope that the ritual as it may be adopted at this session will be more or less permanent...” This didn’t get the Grand Council’s approval. There was general skepticism about the work that the committee had done to “fix” the degree again, and the Grand Council members wanted to be sure that the boys and advisors in the Chapters would accept it as written. Nothing is more permanent than change.

Then they heard a long lecture on the 3000 year old custom of circumambulation, essentially that of circling the Chapter Room, why it should be retained in the Initiatory Degree, and should always move in a clockwise direction, thus requiring the order of the Preceptors to be changed. This was approved.

One additional change was proposed—that of adding the sign of distress to the proficiency exam following the Initiatory Degree. That was referred to the committee on Ritual. The Proficiency Exam didn’t appear in the Ritual until the 5th Edition, several years later. The conjecture is that it was being used as a trial in some jurisdictions, but not all, and had not been adopted for use by everyone until 1930. That serves as a reminder that the DeMolay Ritual is a living and breathing document that should and MUST CHANGE to be responsive to the demands of the members and advisors. The sign of distress debuted in the 1st Edition of the Ritual, but it was removed in the 15th Edition of 2013.

1. With so much changing of the ritual happening in the early years, are you surprised that today’s Ritual seems to be close to the same text now, as it was then. What does this suggest to you?

2. Do you agree with the Ritual Committee that a “fun” degree should NEVER be added to the Ritual work?
3. What does “circumambulation” mean? Does it make sense to have it in the Initiatory Degree? Does the symbol of a journey need repetition to be a strong symbol?
4. Why do you think the sign of distress was removed from the Ritual in 2013 upon recommendation of the Ritual and Regalia Committee, and by vote of the Supreme Council? What might have caused it to become out-of-date or even controversial? (There is no right or wrong answer—just think and discuss it.)