

**FABIO VENZI**

**BEE HIVE LODGE No. 2809**  
**UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND**  
(Consecrated on June 16th,1900)

London, January 25th, 2025

**SYMBOLISM OF THE "BEE HIVE" IN FREEMASONRY  
AND THE  
CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

This historic London Lodge, of which I am honoured to be a member, bears a name that evokes an important symbol, the *Bee Hive*, deep rooted in the world of Christian Tradition and esotericism.

Indeed, a symbolic use was made of beehives, bees and honey across all ancient civilizations. The first testimony of an association between man, bees and their precious nectar dates as far back as the Neolithic age (approximately 9000 years ago), is present on the walls of a Spanish cave, Cueva de la Araña, depicting an apiary and a human foraging honey.

In Greek mythology, bees were considered messengers of the Muses. In a comedy written by Aristophanes and situated in Athens, on the second day of the Thesmophoria, a celebration for women devoted to the goddesses Demetra and Persephone, women known as "Melissai", abstained from sexual relations over a three-day period, whilst fasting and sleeping on the ground on the chaste tree, an aphrodisiac plant. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, the hero offered Artemis a garland of flowers gathered from an uncontaminated field on which the shepherd did not dare to graze his flock as access was granted to bees alone in view of the purity of the place.

Honey was likewise a key player in the history of the Celts, and was used by the Druids in medicinal preparations and mead, a sacred drink

consumed during a wide range of ceremonies and at weddings. These populations kept bees, in either hollow tree trunks or hives fashioned from woven hemp rope or straw, at the edge of the forests where the cultivated fields and pastures came to an end.

The Celts viewed bees as messengers of the Gods, a symbol of perfection, wisdom and immortality of the soul, in possession of secret knowledge deriving directly from the Other world. These creatures were believed to be associated with knowledge of the future and divine inspiration.

The Druid *Brehon Laws*, the ancient laws of Ireland, heralded an era of democracy and equality, characterised by a profound sense of justice. The laws also protected the bees and their hives, so much so that on the Isle of Man the theft of bees was deemed a capital offence. Beehives were considered the symbol of an ideal community, with this image of perfection being depicted in beehive-tombs and in initiatic chambers. Several examples of these structures are still visible today in Newgrange and Dowth.<sup>1</sup>

During recent renovation works, a Beehive was uncovered in the famous Rosslyn Chapel. The hive was enclosed inside a pinnacle on the roof, carved for this specific purpose by the stonemasons. The Bees accessed the hive through an opening in an intricately carved flower placed on the pinnacle. It is however noteworthy how the construction did not allow access to permit collection of the honey. Its sole purpose seems to have been to act as a protective haven for the bees in times of inclement weather.

### *The Beehive*

The symbol of a beehive, or apiary, was used in the past as an ideogram to indicate a sagely administered, serene and fruitful life governed over by a single chief. This aligned with the notion whereby the hive acted as a safe haven for the swarm, providing appropriate living conditions to allow them to carry out their tasks, raise the offspring and produce honey. In Delfi and Ephesus, the priests and priestesses were known as “Melissae” (Bees) and their council as

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Chevalier - Alain Gheerbran, *Dizionario dei Simboli*, Bur – Rizzoli, Milan, 1989.

“Hyron” (Hive). On this topic, Charbonneau-Lassay recalls how during the Middle Ages in France:

For the same reason, several large monasteries assumed a name associated with the life of the bees, including the Cistercian Abbey of Melleray in Meillaraie-de-Bretagne, diocese of Nantes, the crest of which is still today represented by a silver beehive on a blue background accompanied by three bees from the hive.<sup>2</sup>

going on to state:

The terrestrial Church, headed by the Pope, has been emblematically likened to a beehive. Indeed, under the supervision and general authority of the Supreme Pontiff, the sacred teachings, represented by honey, are preserved, and the precise discipline mandated by the Pontiff indicates a specific position for each person within Christian society... In line with another form of symbology indicating Noah's Ark, the beehive is once again associated with the Saviour of the world as it is in Him that all Christian souls, mystical bees, find just repose, peace, spiritual support and the comforting nourishment provided by the “science of all things godly”.<sup>3</sup>

## *Honey*

Honey symbolizes the emblem of purity and truth; indeed, once collected it requires no additional manipulation and remains unalterable. A symbol of peace, in *Deuteronomy* (26, 9) we learn that the promised land is “*a land flowing with milk and honey*”, and in *Ecclesiasticus* (XI, 3), Solomon states: “*The bee is little among such as fly, but her fruit is the chief of sweet things*”.

In Egypt, a myth narrates how the Sun god, *Ra*, shed tears which, falling to the ground, assumed the form of bees: this gave rise to honey, which became fundamental in the preparation of unguents.

Numerous initiates refer to having been nourished with honey during their infancy, including Zeus, entrusted following the death of his mother to the goat Amaltea and to the honeybees on Mount Ida, who

---

<sup>2</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *Il Bestiario di Cristo*, Arkeios, Rome, 1994, page 538.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *Il Bestiario di Cristo*, Arkeios, Roma, 1994, pages 539-540.

distilled their honey for him and gifted this elixir, forbidden to mankind, to the future leader of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Amongst its wealth of properties, in ancient times, honey was believed to banish demons, as mentioned in Isaiah (7, 15): *“He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right”*.

Alchemists used honey throughout the stage of their work known as *Cibation* to prevent the Matter from putrefying; this practice derived from the use made of these substances by our ancestors to impede the corruption of corpses. The Hermetics used the term “Honey” to indicate Fiery Water or Vinegar, due to the sweetness it yields to those who succeed in obtaining it.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Beehive, Bees and Honey in the Christian Tradition*

*“From primordial times, man has considered bees as one of the most wonderful gifts of God: the Inspired Saints and Poets have sung their praise in all languages, meditators have become ecstatic on beholding their wisdom, code of conduct, activity, and the perfection of their industry”*: thus the French historian and archaeologist Louis Charbonneau-Lassay (1861-1946) introduced his study of the symbology of the beehive and bees in his monumental *The Bestiary of*

---

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Pont-Humbert, *Dizionario dei simboli dei riti e delle credenze*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1997, page 148.

<sup>5</sup> Luigi Trosi, *Dizionario di Alchimia*, Bastogi, Foggia, 1997, page 173.

*Christ*, the highest existing source of Christological symbology.<sup>6</sup> This literature genre originated towards the II century A.C with an anonymous text written in ancient Greek, the *Physiologist*. The document was subjected to numerous translations, giving rise to Bestiaries during the Middle Ages. Encyclopaedic works were published and the topic drew increasingly closer to the area of natural sciences. Louis Charbonneau-Lassay thus strived to elicit a return to pure symbolism, deemed more in line with the spirit of the Church.<sup>7</sup>

By examining each symbol as an actual or fantastical animal, mythical or real creature, the *Bestiary* describes how they were used in the Medieval and other historic iconographies to metaphorically represent the figure of Jesus Christ, with reference to traditions that had preceded the birth of Christ. Charbonneau-Lassay initially underlines the association of the symbol of the bee and honey in the Hindu and Jewish Traditions with the divine Verb, highlighting the general eloquence and language used to convey this association, up until the onset of the Christian Tradition:

The centuries of Christianity likewise present this dual symbolism of eloquence, indicated by gold and honey, in the nickname Crisostomo, “golden mouth”, given to John, the illustrious saintly bishop of Constantinople, and in the nickname Doctor Mellifluus attributed to Saint Bernard.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay was closely linked to two authentic Christian organisations of an initiatic nature which were established in the 15th century. The first was the *Estoile Internelle* (the inner star), the number of members of which was (is?) limited by statute to twelve, co-opted for life, with each being obliged to appoint a successor prior to their death. The Head at the start of the 20th century was Canon Barbot (1841-1927). In this role, between 1925 and 1927, Barbot gave Charbonneau Lassay a series of iconographic documents dating back to the origins of the confraternity, for the purpose of facilitating his research for the *Bestiary*. The second confraternity, the *Fraternité des Chevaliers du Divin Paraclet*, also led by Canon Barbot in the role of Master Chevalier was (is?) as secret as the first, although more open, featuring an unlimited number of members. The two confraternities were (are?) linked in some way, as demonstrated by the letters written by Marcel Clavelle, born Jean Reyor (1905-1988), with regard to the Intercessor. (René Guenon, *Theosophy, History of a Pseudo-Religion*, 1921.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Pierre Brach, *Louis Charbonneau-Lassay et le Bestiaire du Christ*, Conference held on 7-12-1996 in Loudun (collegial church of Sainte-Croix) on occasion of the fifty-year commemoration of the death of Louis Charbonneau-Lassay

<sup>8</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *Il Bestiario di Cristo*, Arkeios, Rome, 1994, page 525.

With specific focus on the association between bees and Christ:

Based on the magnificent pages by means of which Virgil paid homage to the perfection of bees, a series of symbolists have succeeded in forging a comparison between the incessant spiritual activity of Jesus Christ in his Church and the enlivening activity carried out by the mother bee inside her apiary. Fervet apus, uttered Virgil, "her work proceeds actively". This comparison is seemingly even more apt as Virgil, in the same way as Aristotle and all the other Ancient writers, never refers to the queen bee, but rather to the "king of bees", maintaining how the entire hive owes its existence to the latter, how the order and concord that reign within the hive are the fruit of his work, and how he is surrounded by attention by all present... The inspired symbolists opted to use the symbol of the bee to represent the image of Jesus Christ who grants the just the eternal sweetness of honey, whilst others receive the deserved bitterness of punishment, symbolized in the painful sting of a bee. The ancient Hermetics assigned the Hebrew name of Jéhudel to the seraph responsible for dispensing the just severeness of Christ: "the Sting of God"... Lastly, bees were also used as the crest of Christ, the light of the world, as mentioned in the Gospel of Saint John. "In the same way as Christ... - narrates an Armenian bestiary – the bee spreads the light of the world". This also alludes to the presence of wax, which was and remains today, one of the liturgic symbols of the Saviour.<sup>9</sup>

Charbonneau-Lassay likens the symbol of the beehive to the Theological Virtue of *Hope*, in line with the divine promises. By this means, Christians find the strength to endure and make spiritual use of the trials they traverse, in order to subsequently gather the goods they are rewarded with, of which the beehive, from which honey is gathered, represents the symbolic image. From as early as the 13th century, Thomas de Cantimpré in his *The universal good of bees*, inspired by Albertus Magnus' *The Life of the Bee*, drew a parallel between the beehive and Christian society.

In view of their specific features, bees have been assimilated to the emblems of wisdom, order and concord and, in particular within Christianity, assigned the virtue of *Justice*, which likewise embraces the aforementioned characteristics. In the noble heraldry of the Middle Ages, bees were used to convey an image of moral purity.

In the Christian Tradition, thanks to the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, the Latin liturgy officially consecrated honey as the symbol of

---

<sup>9</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *Il Bestiario di Cristo*, Arkeios, Rome, 1994, pages 526-527.

*Holy Communion*, adopting as an Incipit to the Holy Mass the words: “*Cibavit eos ex adipibus frumenti, et de la petra melle salutavit eos*”, “He has fed them with the finest part of the wheat and nourished them with honey from the rock”, a transposition from *Psalms LXXXI* (17) in which David attributes the Lord as having addressed his people by stating: “*I shall feed them with the finest wheat and shall satisfy them with honey from the rock*”; Charbonneau-Lassay thus wrote:

This beautiful symbolism was adopted throughout the ages of Christianity by a significant number of authors. During the 3rd century, the stonemason Autun, who carved the funeral stone for Pectorius, on referring to the Holy Communion inscribed the following: “Refresh, O friend, thy soul with the ever-flowing waters of treasure-bestowing wisdom. Receive the sweet honey of the Saviour of the Saints, eat with delight holding the fish (the Christ) in thy hands....”. We should also bear in mind how Saint Hippolytus prescribed the delivery of three forms of nourishment to the communicants: first a cup of water, followed by honey and lastly a cup of wine, “all of which consecrated”.<sup>10</sup>

In the Christian symbology, Saint Ambrose is at times represented as a mitred bishop holding his staff in his hand and with a beehive at his feet, purportedly as his words sounded “sweeter than honey”. Legend narrates how, as an infant, on falling asleep, a swarm of bees sought shelter in the Saint's mouth and used his palate as a living honeycomb. When the bees resumed their flight, the baby awoke suffused in holiness. As hard-working as the bees and a sweet and good-natured person, Saint Ambrose went on to serve Christ and became the patron saint of beekeepers. Bees are believed to conceal within a spark of divine intelligence; moreover, in the same way as Jesus Christ, worker bees do not reproduce, but rather produce honey, together with the wax used to create candles, thus providing sweetness and light.

In the Jewish Tradition, the word bee derives from the root meaning “word” and points to the mission of this precious insect: to reveal the divine word, the Truth. In several Jewish communities, prior to sending their sons to study the Torah and the Talmud, where they start to learn the alphabet (alef-bet), the mothers bake Honey-based

---

<sup>10</sup> Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *Il Bestiario di Cristo*, Arkeios, Rome, 1994, page 547.

sweetmeats in the form of the letters of the alphabet, thus allowing their children to savour the pleasure of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

In the Islamic Tradition, the *Qur'an* recites (16, 71): “*From the bellies of bees comes out a liquid of diverse colours, in which there is healing for people*”, symbolizing therefore both a cure and spiritual healing. However, in India, in the Puranic tradition comprised of a series of sacred Hindu texts, honey indicates the colour black of Aishvarya, one of the feet on the throne of *Sadâshiva*. Other Indian texts are of the opinion that honey represents the image of the spirit inebriated by the pollen of knowledge. In a poetic image of burning desire, Kama, the Hindu god of love, is depicted with a bowstring formed of bees. In Hindu art, *Vishnu* is also portrayed as a bee resting on a lotus flower, whilst *Shiva* is depicted as a bee above a triangle.<sup>12</sup>

### *In Freemasonry*

The beehive represents the virtue of hard work and perseverance, reminding us of the importance of full commitment throughout all areas of life. In the same way that bees contribute tirelessly to the wellbeing of the hive, Freemasons are encouraged to apply themselves diligently not only for their own sake, but for the benefit of society as a whole.

The beehive is one of the oldest symbols used in Freemasonry and imparts a valuable lesson relating to dedication to work, unity and personal growth, reciprocal love and friendship.

The first known Masonic reference to a beehive can be found in a manuscript entitled *A Letter from the Grand Mistress of the Female Free-Masons to Mr Harding the Printer*, part of the Halliday Collection kept in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. This document is thought to have been written between 1727 and 1730 and, although originally

---

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Pont-Humbert, *Dizionario dei simboli dei riti e delle credenze*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1997, page 148.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Chevalier - Alain Gheerbran, *Dizionario dei Simboli*, Bur – Rizzoli, Milan, 1989.

attributed to Jonathan Swift, the true author remains unknown. Parts of the ritual are as follows:

A bee has in all Ages and Nations been the Grand Hieroglyphick of Masonry, because it excells all other living Creatures in the Contrivance and Commodiousness of its Habitation or combe; ... nay Masonry or Building seems to be of the very Essence or Nature of the Bee, for her Building not the ordinary Way of all other living Creatures, is the Generative Cause which produces the Young ones....

For this Reason the Kings of France both Pagans and Christians, always Eminent Free-Masons, carried three Bees for their Arms...

What Modern Masons call a Lodge was for the above Reasons by Antiquity call'd a HIVE of Free-Masons, and for the same Reasons when a Dissention happens in a Lodge the going off and forming another Lodge is to this Day call'd SWARMING.

The symbol of the beehive is present in English Freemasonry from the start of its 'modern' form, and can be found amongst the symbols of the Third Degree in the *Tracing Board* of the *Royal Cumberland Lodge* n. 41 in Bath, an ancient Lodge established in 1732.<sup>13</sup> The ritual of the *Royal Cumberland Lodge* includes the following reference to the symbology of the beehive:

The Beehive teaches us that as we are born into the world rational and intelligent beings, so ought we also to be industrious ones, and not stand idly by or gaze with listless indifference on even the meanest of our fellow creatures in a state of distress if it is in our power to help them without detriment to ourselves or our connections; the constant practice, – of this virtue is enjoined on all created beings, from the highest Seraph in heaven to the meanest reptile that crawls in the dust.

---

<sup>13</sup> The Royal Cumberland Lodge n.41 is the oldest Lodge in Bath and throughout the county of Somerset. The Lodge proceedings have been conducted uninterruptedly since its establishment in December 1732 to date. All ceremonies for the various Degrees are based on the work of the renowned English Freemason Thomas Dunckerley, used for the first time in 1786. In 1770 Thomas Dunckerley was charged by the Moderns' Grand Lodge to compile a ritual for all three Degrees and is said to have completed the work to the satisfaction of all the Brethren. In 1784, as *Provincial Grand Master*, he set up a new Lodge in Bath., choosing as name the Duke of Cumberland, who had been elected Grand Master in 1782. Dunckerley provided a new ritual and statutes for the new Lodge. These rituals are used in England only by another two Lodges , both stemming from the Royal Cumberland Lodge, i.e. the Royal Albert Edward Lodge N. 906 and the St Alphege Lodge N. 4095, both of which meet in Bath.

The symbol of the beehive is also present in the magnificent *Master's Carpet* by Sherer, in which the symbol is portrayed in the third section of the lesson of the Third Degree. Here, the beehive assumes clearly Christian connotations, highlighting the presence of the Marian and Johannine traditions within the Church and feminine holiness.

In Sherer's representation, the Church (beehive) is supported by and laid upon the four pillars of the *New Testament*: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The solitary flower placed beneath the beehive is a Dianthus. Thus named by the Greek botanist, Theophrastus, Dianthus means "flower of God". To the left, the beehive is surrounded by cereals and daisies, symbolizing Saint John the Evangelist. To the right, a plant of *Hypericum perforatum*, commonly known as St John's wort, a semi-evergreen perennial medicinal plant representing Saint John the Baptist, together with two roses and a rose bud that depict Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary and a child. Allegorically, this representation of the beehive by Sherer appears to resemble the cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres in France.



In the American *Preston-Webb* ritual, the beehive is defined as a symbol of industry and cooperation, as well as an admonishment against intellectual indolence, with the warning that "*he that will so demean himself as not to be endeavoring to add to the common stock of knowledge and understanding, may be deemed a drone in the hive of nature, a useless member of society and unworthy of our protection as Masons*".