

Some Thoughts on Ritual Etiquette

by F. SCOTT MERCALDO, *National Ritual Officer*

I must confess that I have spent the better part of my evenings over the last week trying to work out how best to write about Ritual etiquette. It is a topic I have thought a great deal about over the last several years, and when National Council members were asked at our last meeting to write something for *The Garnet and White*, I thought that this might be a good opportunity for me to say something really insightful and interesting on the matter; real, definitive guidance. Every time I started to write though, I invariably began to sound rather fussy and old, and I would scrap it and go to bed. If this had been twenty years ago, I would have had a wastepaper basket full of crumpled-up drafts. Okay, maybe I am fussy and (getting) old, but bear with me.

We live in a time now where public life has become a lot less formal. We are not expected or required (and have not been for many years) to dress for dinner, give up our seats for ladies on trains or be able to speak at length on the subject of Pythagoras. This was the world of our Revered Founders, the world of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. It was a time when there were fewer calls on one's time. It was a time when men were "joiners". It was a time when only men of social standing could go to college.

It is no wonder then, that many of our modern Brothers have difficulty understanding how to act when they step into a Council under Ritual. Quite simply, they are not equipped by their parents, or even the educational system, to function in ways that our Revered Founders would have found second nature.

Perhaps the key thing that Brothers should understand, then, is that attending a Council under Ritual is like attending a religious service. The Ritual commands respect, and is "discharged" (the word our Revered Founders used; so much better than "done") most impressively and effectively by Chapter officers that rehearse their parts beforehand, like actors in a play. The officers should take time to read the Ritual, try and understand its words and their meaning. Otherwise, they cannot convey the Ritual's meaning; they might as well be speaking in Hungarian. Proper respect for the Ritual begins with the people that perform, or discharge it, setting the tone for the rest of the Chapter Brothers' conduct.

Brothers should respect the President's authority, and stand when addressing the Chapter. Profanity should never be tolerated, and those that do not address the Chapter or individual Brothers with respect, should be asked to leave.



Again, like a religious service, the Brothers should dress formally. At a minimum, they should wear an ironed shirt and pants, a pair of dress shoes and a smart tie. To wear shorts or sneakers, removes the formal element, and as with the clothes, so goes the efficacy of the Council.

Okay; how many Brothers have I alienated so far? It is hard enough to get Chapters to even have Councils under Ritual, so why am I making it “harder” on Brothers by attempting to impose old-fashioned rules on them? The fact is that the Ritual is the Sun around which the Order orbits. It gives us the Order its purpose and meaning. Indeed, fifty years ago, Wilbur M. “Curly” Walden, National Secretary Emeritus, wrote an article for *The Garnet and White* entitled *Why Alpha Chi Rho Has a Ritual*. In it, Brother Walden stated that the Ritual is what “*differentiates between a mere social club with a temporary membership from the Fraternity with a membership for life.*”

Holding Councils under Ritual provides a formal structure for holding a meeting and teaches Brothers how to properly communicate with others in a formal setting. In this day and age, there are few places during a man’s formal education that he will actually learn how “*to stand on his feet, use good English in presenting his proposal logically,*” as Brother Walden puts it. These are key lessons, that do not seem to be being learned by the men that our universities and colleges now produce, and as a result, they suffer in the business world. Just ask any Human Resources professional; there are plenty of studies to back it up. The irony, of course, is that in these days of improved communication with the Internet, we have almost lost some of the time-honored skills of public speaking, or even just communicating at a professional level, face-to-face.

If we are truly to “Be Men”, and truly to understand what Alpha Chi Rho stands for, Brothers must hold as many of their Chapter meetings as Councils under Ritual, and accord it, and their Brothers, the respect they deserve. Proper etiquette, is a key element to the success of Council meetings. If a Chapter’s meetings in Council are carried-out with respect and dignity, they teach Brothers lessons that will carry them through life. Lessons that are as useful in business as they are at home.

Notwithstanding the above, I welcome your thoughts on what I have written, or, for that matter, any matter pertaining to the Order, its history or the Ritual. Please drop me a line and tell me if you think I am off my rocker; I would love to hear from you. My email is fsmercaldo@gmail.com, and my cellphone is 610-529-5818. I wish you and yours the best for the holidays, and a prosperous New Year.

