

Onesimus: From Slave to Brother in Christ (23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Philemon 9-10, 12-17—Paul and Onesimus

[⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required,] ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, *Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus*— ¹⁰ *I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.* ¹¹ [(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.] ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. ¹⁵ *Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever,* ¹⁶ *no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother; especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.* ¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. (Philemon 9-17)

1. Prison Epistle: one of the “captivity epistles” (4 letters: Eph, Phil, Col, Philem) (9)
 - a. Caesarea Maritima (cf. Acts 23:23-33; ca. 50s)
 - b. Rome (cf. Acts 28:16; ca. 60s)
 - c. Ephesus?
2. Philemon: perhaps residing in the city of Colossae (cf. Onesimus in Col 4:9)
3. Shortest Letter: shortest of all the letters attributed to Paul (335 words)
4. Onesimus: probably a “slave” (Greek *doulos*) whom Paul has evangelized and perhaps even baptized while in prison (16, 9; cf. 1 Cor 4:15)
5. Slavery in the First-Century: spectrum of socio-economic states¹

For some of their trustworthy slaves they appoint to manage their farms, others they make masters of their ships, others their business agent, others they make household stewards, and some even money-lenders (Plutarch, *Moralia* 4A).²

The whole surface of [the slaves’] skin was painted with livid welts. Their striped backs were merely shaded, not covered, by the tattered patchwork they wore: some had thrown on a tiny cloth that just covered their loins, but all were clad in such a way that you could discern them clearly through their rags. Their foreheads were branded, their heads half-shaved,

¹ Peter Hunt, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 17-30.

² In Moyer V. Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World: A Narrative Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic 2010), 192.

and their feet chained (Apuleius, *Metamorphosis* 9.12).³

8. Domestic Slaves: perform the chores and menial labor of a household.⁴

9. Jewish Attitudes toward Slavery:

They [the Essenes] neither bring wives into the community *nor do they own slaves* (Greek *doulōn*), since they believe that the latter practice *contributes to injustice* (Greek *adikian pherein*) and that the former opens the way to a source of dissension. Instead they live by themselves and *perform menial tasks for one another*. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.20; trans. LCL)⁵

The man whom you call a slave (Greek *doulos*), my friend, is a hired person, himself too a man (Greek *anthrōpos*), ultimately your kinsman, further of the same nation... reduced to the guise which he now adopts by actual need... Deal with him as your hired servant (Greek *misthōtos*), both in what you give and what you take. (Philo, *Special Laws* 2.83; trans. LCL)

If another man's slave... takes refuge with you to obtain protection in fear of his master's threats or through consciousness of some misdeed, or because without having committed any offence, he has found his master generally cruel and merciless, do not disregard his plea. (Philo, *On the Virtues* 124; trans. LCL; cf. Deut 23:15-16)

Living Tradition

Pope St. Gregory the Great (ca. 600 A.D.): Since our Redeemer, the Creator of every creature, in His loving-kindness vouchsafed to assume human flesh for this purpose, that by the grace of His divinity He might break the bonds of the slavery in which we were formerly held, and restore us to freedom, *it is a salutary deed to restore by the benefaction of manumission to the state of liberty in which they were born, men whom nature originally begot free* but whom the law of nations subjected to the state of slavery. (Gregory the Great, *Manumission of Roman Slaves* Montana and Thomas, 6.12; quoted in *Pastoral Care*, p. 252)

Pope Eugene IV (1435 A.D.): [The colonists] have deprived the natives of their property or turned it to their own use, and have subjected some of the inhabitants of said islands

³ Hubbard, *Christianity in the Greco-Roman World*, 193.

⁴ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2006), 39-70.

⁵ See Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

to *perpetual slavery*... Therefore We exhort... one and all, temporal princes, lords, captains, armed men, barons, soldiers, nobles, communities and all others of every kind among the Christian faithful of whatever state, grade, or condition, that they themselves desist from the aforementioned deeds, cause those subject to them to desist from them, and restrain them rigorously. And no less do we order and command all and each of the faithful of each sex that, within the space of fifteen days of the publication of these letters... *that they restore to their earlier liberty all and each person of either sex* who were once residents of said Canary Islands... who have been made subject to slavery. *These people are to be totally and perpetually free and are to be let go without the exaction of any money. If this is not done, when the fifteen days have passed, they incur the sentence of excommunication ipso facto.* (Pope Eugene IV, *Sicut Dudum*, quoted in Joel Panzer, *The Popes and Slavery*, 77-78).

Catechism: The seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that for any reason—selfish or ideological, commercial, or totalitarian—lead to the *enslavement of human beings*, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity. *It is a sin against the dignity of persons and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit.* St. Paul directed a Christian master to treat his Christian slave “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, ... both in the flesh and in the Lord.” (CCC 2414; cf. Philem 16)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

1. What do you think of Paul’s instructions to Philemon regarding Onesimus the slave? What exactly do you think Paul expects Philemon to do?

For Further Reading

1. Dennis Hamm, S.J. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.
2. Peter Gorday, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2000.
3. Catherine Hezser. *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.