

The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 9:13-18B
<i>Response</i>	In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14 AND 17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philemon 9-10, 12-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Let your face shine upon your servant; and teach me your laws.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 14:25-33

The 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the letters of St. Paul, but it takes us to a unique epistle of Paul, and that is the letter to Philemon, which you'll sometimes hear pronounce in a variety of ways. You'll hear it fai-lee-muhn, you'll hear it, fil-e-mon, you'll hear it as filet mignon, whatever it might be, however you pronounce it, the letter to Philemon is a very, very important epistle, but it's also unique in the sense that it is the shortest of the undisputed Pauline letters. It's only 335 words. So this is basically an ancient equivalent of a text message between Paul and Philemon, who was a Christian, but also was the owner of a slave named Onesimus, who had escaped from Philemon and then ended up, through circumstances unknown to us, in prison with St. Paul himself.

So in this reading for today, we're going to look at something that is a very significant issue, also a very complex issue, and one that's too big for us to deal with adequately. So I'm going to give some resources and that's the whole question of slavery in antiquity and in early Christianity in particular. But before we get into that topic, we want to look at the selection for the Church's lectionary today. And although Philemon is such a short letter, the Church still just gives us a piece of the letter. It doesn't give us the entire letter from Paul to Philemon. So I just want to look at Philemon, there's no chapters because there's only one chapter, verses 9-10 and then 12-17. Those are the key verses that the Church chooses for the lectionary. But what I want to do is just... I'm going to... Since this is short, I want to add a couple verses at the beginning, just the opening line of the letter, and then I'm going to continue through a couple of the verses that the Church skips in the lectionary, just because they help flesh out the context of the letter. So I'll just

begin with the opening verses and then I'll let you know when we get to the lectionary reading. So Philemon 1 and following says this:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Phile'mon our beloved fellow worker and Apph'ia our sister and
Archip'pus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you
and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

Now, if you skip down, the lectionary skips down to verse eight and nine, which is where really the readings begin here:

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required...

here's where the lectionary begins:

yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.

Now this next verse, the lectionary skips, but I want to highlight it for you. He says:

(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

I'll pause there one second. The reason that's an interesting verse is because Onesimus's name in Greek means useful. Okay. So Paul's making a pun here on the name of Onesimus. It continues in verse 12:

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 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; but I preferred to do nothing

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, 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. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

That's the end of the reading for today. Okay. There's so much going on in this epistle that I just can't do it justice. So if you do want to look into it in more depth, I want to recommend before I even go, a commentary, this is a commentary by a very prominent, important American Catholic biblical scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer, a Jesuit who wrote a... It's about a 113 page commentary on the letter to Philemon. So 113 pages on these 330-something words, but it'll give you a lot more of the background, the context of the letter, and help flesh it out for you in a way that I just can't do right now, but I can give you a few points. And so let's just highlight a few things.

The first thing is that we want to notice here that this is one of Paul's prison epistles. So we've talked about other epistles like Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians that are written by Paul while he is in prison, while he's in chains. And so Philemon belongs to that category of the captivity epistles or the prison epistles. And because of that, scholars have different guesses about where he might be writing this letter to Philemon from, some have suggested Caesarea Maritima, because we know from Acts, he was in prison there for a long time. Others have suggested Rome, because we know from Acts that he was also a prisoner in Rome, still other scholars have suggested that this may more likely be written from Ephesus, if Paul was in prison there, and there's some debate about whether he was or not. If he was, that would be a likely place because most scholars think, and again, we're just guessing here, we can't know for sure, that Philemon is perhaps a resident of the nearby city of Colossae. So the letters to the Ephesians and letters to the Colossians were written to these two cities that weren't that far away, and if Paul was in Ephesus at the time and writing to Colossae, it would make sense of why at the end of the letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions Onesimus, okay, as being one of the people that he gives in these... He'll often give lists of names of people that he sends greetings from. So for example, in Colossians 4:8-9, he's speaking about Tychicus, who he's sending to the people of Colossae, and he says:

I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves.

So it seems there that Onesimus, if that's the same Onesimus, which it likely is, was from Colossae itself, and so we can hypothesize that his owner, Philemon was also a Colossian, he was one of those people who lived in the city of Colossae. So in any case, if that's correct, then Paul may be writing this letter from Ephesus to Colossae, to Philemon in Colossae about Onesimus, who was a slave of Philemon who had escaped and somehow made his way to wherever Paul is in prison and is now with Paul during his imprisonment. What's interesting about this letter, as I've already mentioned, is that it's not only one of the prison epistles. It's also the shortest of all the letters attributed to Paul. So although the letter is short, as you can already see just from the reading, Paul's doing a lot rhetorically in it. He's saying a lot about his identity, about the identity of Onesimus, the slave who has now become a Christian, about the obligations of Philemon, the slave owner, right? And what the implications of this entire context of Onesimus escaping from slavery and then being sent back to Philemon would look like from a Christian perspective and from the perspective of the apostle Paul.

All right. So those are just a few introductory points. One last thing here is, as far as Onesimus goes, we don't know a ton about him, but we can infer from the letter in verse nine, that he has become a Christian during his time with Paul in prison. Because if you see here in verse 10, he says:

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.

Now it sounds a little bit strange to talk that way, unless you know Paul's other letters. So for example, Paul will use this language of becoming a father to someone in the letter to the Corinthians. So if you want to understand what he's talking about, you can go to 1 Corinthians 4 and you'll see a parallel example of language there. So Paul says to the Corinthians, which was a church that he founded in chapter four, verse 15:

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Most scholars think that what Paul means here is that he became a father to the Corinthians by giving them life, namely the life of the gospel through preaching the gospel to them, and then also through baptizing them, as he says that he has done at the beginning of the letter to the Corinthians. So the most plausible explanation of what Paul means here is that he encountered Onesimus, who was not a Christian at the time, and he has evangelized him and perhaps also likely baptized him so that through the proclamation of the gospel and the baptism of Onesimus, Paul has become the spiritual father to Onesimus while he was in prison, which is a powerful witness in itself—like Paul can't stop preaching the gospel and baptizing people, even when he's in chains, even when he is in prison, he's still always an apostle to the nations, an apostle to the Gentiles. He seizes every opportunity to give the life of the Christian faith...to give the new life in Christ to those with whom he comes into contact.

So that's all we really know about Onesimus. He appears to be an escaped slave, a *doulos* in Greek, who's encountered Paul in prison. Paul's preached the gospel to him, probably baptized him and thereby become a father to Onesimus while he was in prison. And now what Paul's doing is he's sending Onesimus back to Philemon and he is in that context, having certain stipulations and he's implying that Philemon would release Onesimus from slavery, or at least that's a reasonable interpretation. We'll get there in just a second, as we'll see at the end of the... Well, actually, maybe we should do that now. Let's do that now and then we'll come back and back up and see slavery, some of the issues with slavery and what it was like in the first century. So let's just finish up the interpretation of the letter.

If you keep going through in verse 12, this isn't in the lectionary, but I think it's important. Paul says:

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.

So he's expressing this new bond that he has with Onesimus as his spiritual son. And he says:

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; 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.

All right. So the first thing you'll notice, what Paul's doing here rhetorically is he's identifying Onesimus, not as a slave, but as his son, as a spiritual son in Christ, and then expressing his desire that Onesimus might serve him. And there's an irony here. He doesn't mean become his slave in the flesh. He means become his servant in the gospel. In other words, that he might assist Paul in the proclamation and the ministry of the gospel. However, Paul has decided to send him back to Philemon so that the good that Philemon might do is not by compulsion, but by his own free will.

Now, what is this goodness that Paul's referring to? Most interpreters think that Paul here is implying that he's sending Onesimus back to Philemon, so that Philemon might release Onesimus from slavery. And one reason for that is because the issue of escaped slaves in the first century was a very serious one. It was a very serious offense for a slave to run away from their master. And the punishment for escaping or trying to escape from the master could either be very severe physical punishment or in some Greco-Roman context, even death, like the master had the right to put the slave to death. So this is a very serious situation indeed.

Again, if you want a little more on this, there are two books I would recommend. One is *Slaves in the New Testament* by J. Albert Harrill, and then another one, which is hard to get because it's really expensive, is *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* by Catherine Hezser. Both of these books will take you through the ancient text and give you a lot more insight into the very serious situations that slaves...often horrific situations that slaves found themselves in in the first century.

Now, as we're going to see in a second in Jewish circles, there were some different attitudes about this based on the Torah, but this is the Gentile context. Remember Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles. So there's no reason to believe that either Philemon or Onesimus are Jews, the likelihood here is that they're Gentiles and they're following the universal practice of slavery in the first century AD. And so Paul here is urging Philemon to act in goodness toward Onesimus. How so? Well, if you look at the final verses, the implication appears to be that he would free him because he says:

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, 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.

Okay, so that's a really interesting point. Remember, from other videos that we've looked at, when Paul talks about the flesh, he doesn't just mean the body. He means this fallen world and everything that is in it. And then in the Lord means being in Christ as a member of the mystical body of Christ, as a member of the church. So here what some interpreters have argued is that when Paul says, "I want you to receive him back no longer as a slave, but as a brother, both in the flesh and in the Lord." He means I want you to receive him back as a brother, not only in Christ, but also as a brother in the flesh, in this fallen world, in this social structure. In other words, that he would manumit Onesimus, that he would free him from slavery, which masters of course would do and could do on occasion, not just in a Jewish context, but in Greco-Roman context.

In order to understand this, it's important to recall that in antiquity, there are different ways a person could become a slave. The most common ways were prisoners of war. So that was the first one you go in, you conquer a city, you conquer a country, and oftentimes all the males of that conquered city or that conquered country would not just be executed, they would be taken as prisoners of war and sold into slavery, they would become the slaves of the conquerors. A second way that you could become a slave would be through poverty. So if you had gotten into debt and you had no way to pay off your debts, you could enter it into debt slavery, where you would basically in the absence of any kind of systems of bankruptcy, you would become the servant of the person to whom you were indebted, either temporarily until you had paid off the debt, or sometimes it would last even longer, if the slave chose to remain in that state. Other ways to become a slave were to be born into slavery. So if your parents were a slave and you were born into the household, you too would be raised up as a slave. So there are lots of different economic, political and other domestic circumstances that could lead a person to become a slave. We're not exactly sure here what Onesimus' particular situation is, but Paul seems to entertain the possibility that Philemon has the power to free him so that he can become not just no longer a slave, but a brother, not just in the Lord, but also in the flesh.

Okay. Now with all that in mind, that's just a basic overview of the text. Oh, one last thing. Notice the subtlety of Paul's move here. He basically says, "I have the power to command you to do what I'd like you to do, but I'd prefer it if you did it freely. And oh, by the way, I'll be coming soon to visit." If you keep reading in the letter, that's going to be really clear, but he says:

So if you consider me [Paul] your partner, receive him [Onesimus] as you would receive me.

So this person that you would've treated as a slave, I actually want you to treat him the same way you treat me as an apostle, right? And there appears to be an implication here, and many interpreters suggested this, that Paul himself may have been the one who evangelized Philemon, right? Or even who baptized him and preached the gospel to him so that Philemon basically owes Paul his eternal life, everything. And so Paul's saying, "When you receive Onesimus treat him like you would treat me, right? Respect him like you would respect me, receive him like you would receive me." And he'll later on, unfortunately this isn't in the lectionary, but I'll read it anyway since it's so short. In the next verses he says:

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

In other words, his debt is my debt to you.

I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.

So the rhetorical moves that Paul's making in this letter in order to move Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother, not just in Christ, but in the flesh are really powerful. And he ends the letter by saying:

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

So he just keeps urging him and urging him on to treat Onesimus as he should be treated:

At the same time,

Verse 22

prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you

So it's a beautiful, powerful epistle. On the one hand, it is window into the stark reality of slavery in the first century A.D. On the other hand, we already see here, the beginnings of the seeds that are planted by the gospel, which will eventually flower in the history of church to recognizing the dignity of human persons who have through whatever circumstances become slaves of others.

Now, with all that said, what about slavery in the first century? What is Paul describing here? What is he assuming? Now when we read this letter, most of us, especially in the west, especially in the United States, if we think of slavery, we think of it primarily in terms of antebellum slavery in the south of the United States or colonial slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries... 17th, 18th, 19th centuries. But it's important to recognize that in the first century AD, although there are certainly parallels, the context of slavery in the first century is just a complex phenomenon. And so let me just highlight a few things about it to keep in mind as you're reading on and reflecting the letter of Paul to Philemon regarding Onesimus. The first thing is that in antiquity, there was a vast spectrum of economic statuses for people who were called slaves or *doulos*. So for example, Plutarch in his *Moralia*, he's a Greco-Roman writer. He tells us, he talks about the fact that some slaves are in the highest echelons of society. He writes this about slave owners:

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.²

² Plutarch, *Moralia* 4A.

So some slaves who are serving the most elite figures in ancient Greco-Roman world actually had positions of relative economic power and influence. Now that doesn't mean they were free to do whatever they wanted. On the other hand, the vast majority of slaves did not find themselves in those upper echelons of society. They were under the category of what many scholars will refer to as chattel slavery, where they are working the land, they're working the fields, they're working in mines or in prison camps in situations akin to the kind of labor that would be used, that animals would be used to carry out. So for example, Apuleius, another Greek writer, describes these kind of slaves as follows...and the kind of abuse they suffered in those situations:

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, and their feet chained.³

So you'll see there's this spectrum, you have elite slaves serving kings and emperors and rulers and high courts, all the way down to chattel slaves, prisoners of war, who were treated no better than animals. And then in the midst of that vast spectrum, you also have what have been referred to as domestic slaves, and a large number of slaves belong to this category. These were people who, either through being born into slavery or through economic hardship of going into debt or poverty, have found themselves performing the chores and the activity, the labor used to sustain a household, a domestic household. That I suspect is probably the kind of slave that Onesimus is. He's probably a household slave, a domestic slave for Philemon who has escaped from Philemon for whatever reason, we don't know why, and now fled to where Paul is in prison.

With that in mind, we could get into a whole discussion...we could do a whole series of lectures just on the moral questions raised by slavery in antiquity, how it was similar to, how it was different from modern examples of slavery? For our

³ Apuleius, *Metamorphosis* 9.12.

purposes here, I just would like to end this particular video by highlighting a few interesting facts that are often unknown to people. The first one is this, is that although slavery was a universally accepted economic, political, and domestic reality in the ancient world, both in Jewish and in Greco-Roman circles, it is also the case that in certain Jewish writers, we have evidence from the first century of Jewish attitudes that are more critical of the institution of slavery, and also recognize the injustice that is intrinsic to the institution of slavery. So let me give you a few examples here from a couple of writers that I often refer to: Josephus, a famous first century Jewish historian, and Philo, who is a first century Jewish philosopher living in Alexandria and also a contemporary of Jesus and Paul. So he's very close to Paul and Jesus. This is what Josephus says, the first point is this, it's interesting. He tells us that there were certain Jews...although many Jews did in fact practice slavery and own slaves — although there is a debate about exactly how many in the first century. Josephus tells us that certain Jewish groups, like the Essenes, were very critical of slavery and refused to own them. Here's a quote from Josephus:

They [the Essenes] neither bring wives into the community *nor do they own slaves* (Greek *doulōn*),

The same word used for Onesimus

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.

In other words, they don't get married because they want to avoid conflict and they don't have slaves because they think it's unjust. Remember, the Essenes were celibate.

Instead they live by themselves and *perform menial tasks for one another*.⁴

Instead, they live by themselves and they perform menial tasks for one another. So here you see Josephus saying that the Essenes don't have domestic slaves because even domestic slavery they believe to be a source of injustice, *adikia*. So very

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.20; trans. LCL.

interesting, you see there a Jewish critic of slavery. You also see something similar in the first century writer, Philo of Alexandria. In his *Special Laws*, his section on special laws Philo recognizes the Old Testament allows for what we would call debt slavery, so that if a person goes into debt and they can't pay off their debts, they will become the slave of the person to whom they're indebted. At the same time, however, unlike certain Greek writers who basically said that slaves are no better than animals, Philo says that according to the Mosaic Law, a person who has found themselves in debt slavery still has to be treated like a human being. Listen to Philo's words. He writes:

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...

In other words, he finds himself a slave now because of his economic situation, poverty and debt. Philo says:

Deal with him as your hired servant (Greek *misthōtos*), both in what you give and what you take.⁵

So the Greek word there is *misthōtos*, right? It means somebody who gets paid a wage. So Philo is saying that even if a person is a slave, a *doulos*, if you're a Jew, you need to treat him as a *misthōtos*, as an employee (would be a contemporary English equivalent to that), as a hired worker, not just as a slave because he is a man, right? He's not a beast, he's a man. So there you see an interesting, again, a critique from within Judaism recognizing the human dignity of slaves, even though the practice of slavery is still something that's present in the Hebrew Bible and apparently continues at the time of Philo. And what Philo shows us here is that the reason he's having to emphasize that is because there's some people who think that slaves aren't human beings and they don't deserve to be treated by human beings as human beings. Finally, one last interesting point, and this is very appropo to Philemon. Philo, in another writing actually takes up the issue of an escaped slave, a slave who flees from his master. And this is what he says:

⁵ 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.⁶

Now, this is fascinating because what we see here is Philo describing a very similar situation to what we have in the letter to Philemon. We have an escaped slave who, in Onesimus' case, appears to maybe have done something wrong. And the reason we think that he might have maybe stolen something or whatever is because Paul talks about if he's done any misdeed, charge it to my account and I'll repay the debt. So we don't know whether he stole something in the escape or what. We don't know the full situation, but Philo, Paul's contemporary Jewish writer here is saying, "If this situation happens and a slave comes to you and says that they've either done something wrong or the master's going to be cruel and mistreat them." So they don't want to go back and suffer some kind of severe punishment, whether it's severe flogging or even death, Philo says "don't disregard the plea of the slave." And he actually bases that, this is important, on Deuteronomy 23, because there is a line in the book of Deuteronomy, in the law of Moses, Deuteronomy 23:15 that says:

You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you; he shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place which he shall choose within one of your towns, where it pleases him best; you shall not oppress him.

So Philo here is interpreting the law of Deuteronomy as saying if some... it seems to envision a foreign slave escaping to your territory, you don't send him back to the master. You allow them to live freely in the land. Okay. So Philo takes that and he applies it to his contemporary situation. So I would suggest in closing, or at least about this section, then I have a couple more points, that sometimes people will say, "Ah, the reason Paul is encouraging Philemon to free Onesimus is because he's a Christian, right?" Because Paul recognizes that in Christ, there's neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus, Galatians 3:28. And that's

⁶ Philo, *On the Virtues* 124; trans. LCL; cf. Deut 23:15-16.

absolutely correct. That's absolutely true. But I would also urge people to remember that it's Paul's identity as a Jew that also seems to have provided a foundation for his recognition of the dignity of Onesimus as a person and his recommendation to Philemon to receive him back no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ, right?

So in closing then, what are the implications of this passage for us today and in the living tradition? Well, the first thing I would want to say here is that although on the one hand, it's absolutely true that Paul does not call in this first century context for the abolition of slavery as an institution, he does clearly urge for the manumission of Onesimus the person, and the recognition of Onesimus's dignity, not just as a human being, but as a brother in Christ. And it's going to be this text that provides one of the most important texts that becomes a foundation for the eventual Christian critique of the injustices of slavery and eventually the Christian call for the abolition of slavery. Now does that take time? Yes it does. But, at the same time, it's important to recognize that you see this development within the teaching of the church, over the course of the centuries.

So I don't have time to go into it here in a lot of depth, but I would want to highlight if you want to look into this a little more depth, there's a book called *The Popes and Slavery* by Joel Panzer. It's an excellent overview of how starting already in the sixth century with Pope Gregory the Great, we see the successors of Peter, the bishops of Rome, repeatedly calling out the evils of slavery and calling for the manumission and the release of slaves, especially once you move into the colonial period and you see the just absolute proliferation of chattel slavery, where people are being kidnapped...oh, that's the other way you end up getting put in slavery in the ancient world, is through kidnapping. I forgot to mention that. It's very important because it's basically the ancient equivalent of contemporary human trafficking, right? A lot of times people who are caught up in human trafficking are kidnapped and then sold into slavery, right? In our own day. Now it's interesting that we call it trafficking instead of slavery when in fact it is just the modern equivalent of slavery.

So prisoners of war, domestic slaves, debt slaves, but also kidnapping were key elements that led to slavery. And of course, a lot of the chattel slavery in the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries were the result of kidnapping people from different countries or different ethnicities and then selling them into slavery in

other areas of the world as the slave trade proliferated. So what Panzer shows in this book is that already in the patristic period, you have the Pope pointing out the evils of slavery, like Pope Gregory the Great, and then in the colonial period, the popes are not just calling for an end to it, but also excommunicating people who engage in it. And of course, as we know from church history, as is so often the case, the popes write these letters and no one listens. So I'll close with a couple of quotes on that from two popes and then the Catechism of the Catholic church. The first one is from Pope St. Gregory the Great. This in the sixth century, listen to the holy father's words here about slavery:

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.*⁷

So that's Gregory the Great in the sixth century going against Aristotle, by the way, who said that some men by nature were born slaves and saying, "No, no, no. All men are born free. And it is a salutary deed to manumit slaves, to release them from whatever form of slavery they might find themselves in." Fast forward to the 15th century in the time of colonial slave trade. Pope Eugene IV, in the 1435 AD, listen to his words about the practice of slavery. These are really powerful and this is 1435. This is long before the American Civil War. Listen to the Holy Father's words:

[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

He is speaking hear of the Canary Islands

⁷ Gregory the Great, Manumission of Roman Slaves Montana and Thomas, 6.12; quoted in *Pastoral Care*, p. 252.

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.⁸

Of course, that bull like many other papal bulls dealing with slavery just went unheeded. And so we see the injustice and the evil of slavery that was perpetrated throughout the new world, persisting all the way down into modern times. In closing them, what does this mean for us today? Well, I do think that it's significant that in the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic church in the paragraph on slavery, paragraph 2414, the Church's teaching on slavery and on the evil of slavery is formulated not without reference to the letter to Philemon. So I'll close with these words from the 92 catechism. What does the Church say about slavery today? Listen:

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.”

And that is the teaching of the Church. That is the flowering of the seed that was planted when Paul first wrote this tiny little letter to Philemon.

⁸ Pope Eugene IV, *Sicut Dudum*, quoted in Joel Panzer, *The Popes and Slavery*, 77-78.