



LETTER TO PHILEMON

Philemon from Colossae has a slave named Onesimus: a typical name for a slave since Onesimus means “useful” (v. 11). Onesimus escapes and goes to Rome where he expects to disappear in the crowd. Accidentally, or luckily, he meets Paul whom he had known in his master’s house. At this point, Paul is imprisoned in Rome, but enjoys certain privileges enabling him to go out in the company of a policeman. Onesimus is converted and baptized; then Paul makes him go back to his former master with the letter of recommendation that we read here.

Paul asks that the slave be seen as a brother, and even suggests that the slave be freed (v. 21).

We have already seen the advice Paul gives to slaves in Colossians 3:22. In those first years of the Church, obtaining God’s life in Christ seemed such a tremendous privilege, providing such inner freedom, that being a slave or being free did not greatly matter (see 1 Cor 7:17).

At that time no one thought that a change of social structure was feasible: there were slaves and there would always be slaves. The Christians were few and without any influence. Thus, they were not concerned about reforming society, or about laws to eliminate slavery. Even before the time it became necessary to think about changing the laws, faith was already against treating slaves as “objects” or inferiors: because they were Christians, an increasing number of masters—in the Church—spontaneously renounced their rights and granted freedom to their slaves.

Many people think that the Christian community has nothing to say concerning their responsibilities to society. Here, on the contrary, we see how Paul involves the whole community in Philemon’s problem.

Col 4:10; Phil 1:7
 Rom 16:5; 1Cor 16:19
¹From Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy, to Philemon, our friend and fellow worker, ²to our dear sister Apphia, to Archippus, faithful companion in our soldiering, and to all the Church gathered in your house.

³Grace and peace be with you from God, the Father, and Jesus Christ, the Lord.

⁴I never cease to give thanks to my God when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵for I hear of your love and faith toward the Lord and all the holy ones. ⁶And I pray, that the sharing of your faith may make known all the good that is ours in Christ. ⁷I had great satisfaction and comfort on hearing of your charity, because the hearts of the saints have been cheered by you, brother.

⁸Because of this, although in Christ I have the freedom to command what you should do, ⁹yet I prefer to request you, in love. The one talking is Paul, the old man, now prisoner for Christ.

1Cor 4:15; Col 4:9
¹⁰And my request is on behalf of Onesimus, whose father I have become while I was in prison.

¹¹This Onesimus has not been helpful to you, but now he will be helpful, both to you and to me. ¹²In returning him to you, I am sending you my own heart. ¹³I would have liked to

keep him at my side, to serve me, on your behalf, while I am in prison for the gospel, ¹⁴but I did not want to do anything without your agreement, nor impose a good deed upon you without your free consent.

¹⁵Perhaps Onesimus has been parted from you for a while so that you may have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave. For he is a very dear brother to me, and he will be even dearer to you.

1Cor 7:22; 1Tim 6:2

¹⁷And so, because of our friendship, receive him, as if he were I myself.

¹⁸And if he has caused any harm, or owes you anything, charge it to me.

¹⁹I, Paul, write this and sign it with my own hand: I will pay it... without further mention of your debt to me, which is you yourself. ²⁰So, my brother, please do me this favor, for the Lord's sake. Give me this comfort in Christ.

²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing you will do even more than I ask. ²²And one more thing, get a lodging ready for me because, thanks to all your prayers, I hope to return to you.

²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings. ²⁴So do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my assistants.

Col 4:12
 Col 4:14

²⁵May the grace of the Lord Christ be with you. Amen!