

SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

Once every three years, the Church gives us at Sunday Mass an excerpt from St. Paul's one chapter Epistle to Philemon. This intensely personal letter is the shortest of St. Paul's Epistles. Paul does not write to command, but to persuade. St. Paul refers briefly to his authority as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, but, nonetheless, his purpose is less to command than to persuade. He does not tell Philemon exactly what Christian teaching directs in the situation that caused St. Paul to write. Rather, St. Paul reminds Philemon of what Christian teaching is, and allows Philemon, as a good Christian, to draw his own conclusions. I am very fond of this short Epistle, partly because it gives me the model I try to follow regarding the whole range of issues summed up by the phrase "social justice". Except where the Scriptures and Tradition speak perfectly clearly, which they do in some cases, I prefer to remind people of what Sacred Scriptures and Tradition do say, and then allow them to draw their own conclusions.

Now, let's take a look at the Epistle to Philemon.

From about 60 to 62 A.D., St. Paul was under house arrest in Rome. He was not in a prison, and people were free to visit him. From Rome he dispatched Epistles to the Churches of Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae, and today's Epistle to Philemon.

Philemon, a Christian and one of Paul's personal friends, was a slave owner. This was by no means unusual. While great slave plantations were somewhat rare in the Empire, largely confined to Italy and Greece, almost all mining and some entertainment was done by slave labor. More to the point, servants and domestic help were mostly slaves. Slaves were somewhat expensive to buy and maintain, and were beyond the reach of what we might call working class people; but slaves were not extremely expensive to buy and maintain. Just as 100 years ago Middle Class people would quite normally hire domestic servants ("Help", was the preferred American term, thought to sound more democratic than "servants"), and today Middle Class people pay for a variety of personal trainers, helpers, and assistants, so in the Roman Empire of the 60s A.D. Middle Class people had house slaves. This is important to bear in mind. In being a slave owner, Philemon was not doing anything that his society and culture would have considered remotely disturbing. Philemon and family (his wife may have been the Apphia and his grown son the Archippus mentioned in the Epistle) were entirely respectable in society, and prominent members of the Church of Colossae.

One of their slaves (they probably only had a few - again, the great slave plantations were mostly limited to Italy and Greece, with the New Testament showing us a world in which landowners exploited their land with a mix of hired labor and sharecropping) was named Onesimus. He was most likely born into slavery, since his name meant "Useful", the sort of name of that a slave owner might be likely to pick. Onesimus ran away, taking some money or property with him. Somehow, Onesimus ended up in Rome (where all roads lead, they used to say), and got in contact with St. Paul. St. Paul catechized and baptized Onesimus.

St. Paul wrote the Epistle to Philemon asking him to receive Onesimus back, but no longer as a mere slave, rather as a brother in Christ. More or less parenthetically, St. Paul also requested Philemon to make some arrangements for St. Paul's visit to Colossae, since Paul expected to be released at any time from his house arrest in Rome.

Onesimus was in a dangerous situation. Unless the owner requested otherwise (which was actually pretty common with skilled slaves), the punishment for slave desertion was death. Since Philemon was a good friend of St. Paul's and a good Christian, we may infer that he would not seek death for Onesimus. What Paul wanted for his new convert Onesimus was much more than survival, however. St. Paul wanted him to thrive and be happy. To that end St. Paul told Onesimus that he had to return to his master, and told Philemon that Paul himself would make restitution for the property (some coin, one suspects) that Onesimus took with him when he ran off.

St. Paul told Philemon that he had no interest in going against the law of the state. He was sending Onesimus back to him, with whatever restitution was required. That said, Paul challenged Philemon, with God's help, to rise above mere legal justice, and act with holy love, true Charity. St. Paul's basic message to Philemon was an admonition to forgive Onesimus completely, and forget that he ever ran away or stole some property. Going further, St. Paul hinted that Philemon should use the slave owner's legal rights to grant Onesimus his freedom, urging Philemon to take Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but, more than a slave, as a beloved brother", and expressing his confidence that Philemon "will do even more than I say".

St. Paul's point to Philemon is that, since he has received from Christ freedom from sin, guilt, fear, and ultimately death, he should share freedom with Onesimus. Onesimus too has now been freed by Christ from sin, guilt, fear, and ultimately death. Both freed by Christ, they are now brothers in the Lord. When Onesimus returns, he should be treated as a brother, and not a slave.

I take this Epistle of St. Paul's as a model for how to address what are called "Social Justice Issues". When we, clergy and concerned lay people, address sincere Christians about social justice concerns, it is important for us to recognize that, while their consciences may have blind spots created by social and cultural norms, their consciences are functional and active. They have not been slaves to greed, or passion, or various human lusts. They are the Philemons of our time and place, conscientious people who should be addressed in a way that respects them. The Philemons of our time and place are good Christians who sometimes have a certain status in society. As clergy and concerned lay people (who may well have some blind spots ourselves!), our task is to challenge them to think about the full implications of their Christianity, not to indulge in moralistic denunciation.

It is useful to return to the model of St. Paul writing to Philemon. He is entirely clear about what minimum the Gospel demands, that Philemon receive Onesimus back with mercy and compassion. He then gently suggests that Philemon think about the full implications of the Gospel's teaching, and consider freeing Onesimus from slavery.

I try to address the vexed issue of "capital punishment", for example, in an "Epistle to Philemon" way. Christians who support capital punishment are not heartless, nor are they ignoring the Bible or the Tradition of the Church. The Bible and Tradition both indicate that, as a last resort, the lawful authorities responsible for our political welfare have the right to execute dangerous wrongdoers. That there are dangerous wrongdoers is clear enough to anyone paying attention, and that isn't something to take lightly. Those of us who seek the abolition of capital punishment outside of abnormal circumstances, say when dealing with an international terrorist like Osama bin Laden, or with a crisis so extreme that the prison system is no longer functional, are not to denounce our fellow Christians who are not yet ready to do that, but to challenge them to think about the full implications of their Christianity.

In this respect, I admit that some who advocate abolishing the death penalty do so wrongly. They have no right to denounce it as inherently evil, since Scripture and Tradition both make it clear that, to use St. Paul's words in Romans, "The Prince does not wield the sword in vain". Dangerous, violent crime must be dealt with by lawful authority, with capital punishment as a last resort. What I hope to do is challenge my fellow Christians to think seriously about just what "last resort" means, until they come to the conclusion that only in quite abnormal situations is killing the wrongdoer truly a necessary last resort. Genuinely abnormal situations do arise in this valley of tears. I cited the real life one of international terrorists. Was there ever going to be a safe way to arrest, try, and incarcerate Osama bin Laden? I cited the almost fantasy one of a crisis so terrible that the prison system no longer functioned. If the lawful authorities had to choose between letting a dangerous, violent criminal go free and executing him, they would have to choose execution. "Epistle to Philemon" style, I want to operate in the real world. Except in those utterly abnormal situations, isn't there a real world way to combine the Biblical value of defense of society against dangerous, violent criminals with the Gospel values of respect for all human life and hope for the sinner? Let's think together about how we might do that.

That is an example of what I consider the "Epistle to Philemon" approach to dealing with social justice questions: be clear about the minimum that the Gospel requires, and gently suggest what the Gospel implies about going beyond that bare minimum.

Before concluding, I will briefly switch gears and suggest for our personal prayers an allegorical approach to the Epistle to Philemon. Let Philemon stand for God, and Onesimus for ourselves. We have disobeyed our Master and run from Him into sin. We deserve punishment. Instead, when we let Grace make us humble enough to turn back to Him, He forgives us completely and welcomes us back into His family.