

“He belongs with you; you belong to each other”. Paul’s words were shocking. They blatantly contravened all logic. They made no economic sense. There was no room for them in the Roman imperial system. After all, Onesimus, the slave, had escaped, taking with him some of his master’s property. Natural and legally enforceable expectations included public discredit, severe discipline, and even execution. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon’s in Colossae, was a nobody, sheer property to be disposed of as the owner saw fit and subject to tough legal dispositions.

Our topic today is **Let Mutual Love Continue: Relationships Old and New on the Journey**. The biblical story of Onesimus and Philemon invites us to consider the difficulties, barriers, prejudices and stereotypes that need to be overcome if mutual love is to be nurtured among the Christian traditions here represented. Before diving into the narrative, however, I must bring you greetings from my communities. Greetings from my local community, Casa Adobe, composed of several families and several single people from different countries and Christian traditions who share life and a common pot, accompany our neighbors in urban and community gardening and seek to relocate a few refugee families. Greetings also from INFEMIT, the Latin American Fellowship and the Community of Interdisciplinary Theological Studies, CETI, communities that seek to nourish committed theologizing and an integral outliving of the Gospel in Latin America and the world.

Let’s go back to the letter, in which Paul bold and lovingly addresses Philemon, celebrating the love that joins them in Christ and making this subversive call to a new form of belonging. “Receive Onesimus back. But not now as a slave, much less as a fugitive thief, but as a worthy brother”. The call is not a private matter kept between Paul and Philemon: It is first made public when Paul writes the letter in prison, in the presence of his companions, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. It is then made known to yet a broader audience when it is read by Philemon’s wife, Apphia, and son, Archippus, as well as by the entire church that meets in their house.

How dare Paul expect such out-of-the-norm behavior from Philemon? What grounds does he have to set the bar so high? Paul rests his entire case on the demands of Jesus’ Way, the way of love, of human dignity, of reconciled relationships, of belonging in the new community generated by Jesus’ life and ministry. Let’s review in further detail. Who are the characters in this story? Paul, a Christian leader of a

prominent Jewish family. Philemon, a gentile Christian convert. Onesimus, a young man who belonged to the lowest rung of the social scale. There was no one lower than an escaped slave, who probably could not even read and would now be catalogued as a criminal.

Although Paul has the credentials to demand obedience from Philemon, Paul does not impose his will but rather begs Philemon “in the name of love” in favor of Onesimus (8-9). Paul rests his request precisely on the *koinonía* that joins Onesimus with Paul, and, as in a chain, Onesimus with Philemon. He begins by expounding on the intimate relationship he has with Onesimus. He identifies Onesimus lovingly as his “son,” as one who “came to be my son while I was in prison,” with whom “goes my very heart” and as someone “very special to me.” Implicit in the letter is the fact that, instead of losing himself in the multitudes of the large city, Onesimus had sought out Paul although he was in prison. He had then been discipled by him, and the new fraternal bond between them had inspired in Onesimus enough trust that he had determined not to continue running away but rather to confront the consequences of his action, and return to his owner in spite of the risk of punishment.

It is worth noting Paul’s literary skill and his touch of humor when he employs a double play of words (11). *Onesimus* means useful. It is pretty obvious that a slave who steals and runs away is anything but useful, and that actually his return to could be beneficial to his owner. But Paul uses a synonym of useful, *euchrēstos*, a word whose pronunciation sounds a lot like the title *Christos*. In some way, this points to the fact that, given his new bond with Jesus Christ, the Christian Onesimus is double useful, not only for Paul but also for Philemon. He had been no more than socially rejected property; he now is a full “person.” He had been a useless slave; he is now a “dear brother in the Lord” (16).

The new bond established “in Christ” between Onesimus and Paul extends naturally to the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon and should be made visible in very practical ways: renewed value, economic freedom and, in sum, comforting reconciliation. Paul asks Philemon: “Receive him as you would receive me.” The call is not for Philemon to receive Onesimus and then treat him as could dictate his understandable anger or the Greco-Roman social code. It is not either a matter of forgiving, forgetting and assimilating Onesimus into the household as if nothing had happened. Love requires an even more radical step: Philemon must value Onesimus as he values Paul, his brother and companion, and treat him according to that renewed

vision of his value. Between the lines, the exhortation points to the freedom of the slave, and his integration into the family and the faith community as an equal.

At the same time, Paul is also very realistic and concrete. He encourages Philemon: "Charge (his debts) to my account." The days or months of a slave's absence meant financial loss for his or her owner. That loss would accumulate as a personal debt that the slave would later have to pay back. In the case of Onesimus, the debt would have increased because of what he had stolen. Paul seeks to dispel any hindrance to the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus and commits personally to freeing Philemon of his loss and Onesimus of his debt. This he does "of his own hand", which formalized his promise into a legal contract. These funds could be considered payment for the freedom of Onesimus, who would then become a freed slave and could even access roman citizenship. Paul reminds Philemon indirectly that he owes him even more: Since Paul had led Philemon to Christ, he owes Paul his very life. Implicit remains the natural connection between Philemon and Onesimus: they are both debtors. They can both be liberated from their debt by the love of God made tangible by the love of their sisters and brothers.

Having set aside any economic impediment, Paul concludes his persuasive advocacy with the words: "Refresh my heart." He insists that the steps Philemon takes in relation to Onesimus will directly impact Paul's well-being. As an ambassador of Christ, the Reconciler, and following his example, Paul stretches as a bridge between the conflicting parties, over and above every ethnic and social difference, in order to open up a path for mutual encounter and forgiveness. He expresses the hope that, out of love for Christ and for Paul, Philemon will do "even more" in favor of Onesimus than Paul has requested.

Natural questions are: What might Paul have meant when he said "you'll do even more than I have asked"? And why might Paul not have attacked slavery more ostensibly? A possible response is that, given the social and political conditions of the day, and the fragility of the Jesus movement, it would have been fruitless to publicly demand the abolition of slavery. For that reason, instead of launching an openly revolutionary declaration that could have awoken intense persecution and left thousands unprotected, Paul promotes a change from inside the new community, a revolution from the bottom up, which alters the relationships between owners and slaves and acts as an inevitable seed of more systemic changes. What Paul is advocating for is not simply the freedom of Onesimus, the slave. He is demanding an entire shift in

social relations, a total subversion of the honor code, and an radical change in the slave-owner relationship. The stereotypical cultural expectations regarding slaves and freed slaves had to be broken; and the call was not primarily to a political revolution that might someday, in the long run, affect roman law, but rather a call which appealed to a more transcendent and present reality: the freedom, equality and mutuality of the Good News. Actually, the demands of the Gospel would so alter relations in the new community that these would necessarily impact social patterns and even the institution of slavery itself.

As we know, the first communities of Jesus-followers met in family homes and, breaking all social protocol, their gatherings included people of diverse social stance, free people, freed slaves, slaves (Romans 16). In addition, instead of investing their offerings in the construction and maintenance of buildings, they destined them to the support of missionaries, the freedom of slaves, and the care of widows and orphans. Both biblical and other historical accounts portray this as a community that laughs at humanly constructed borders and imperially imposed exclusions and constructs subversive belonging from the bottom up. A community that far transcends its local expressions, subverts the worldly logics of power and dependency, lives an alternate economic morality, and repositions all its members as equals at the foot of the cross. Imagine, for example, what it meant for the “mother church” in Jerusalem to step down from her stand to receive monetary support from the “mission church” in Asia Minor and to release precedence when the followers of Jesus in Antioch are granted the privileged name of “Christian” even before they were? Or for the council in Jerusalem to heed to counsel of the newer Christians spread out across the Greco-Roman world regarding what the way of Jesus really consisted of? Release privilege, recognize the contribution of other people –even of those who look at the world differently than I do, and especially the people the world considers useless.

We arrive at the final words (23-25). But before formulating the greetings expected in any epistle, Paul makes a request that demonstrates his daring hope. Although he is writing from prison, he asks Philemon to prepare lodging for him because he is counting on visiting that faith community in the near future. The announcement of his imminent visit would also put some pressure on Philemon, who would have to account for his actions in relation to Onesimus to his mentor. Philemon and Paul were old friends, but Christ’s love demanded that their circle expand

constantly. Contradicting all economic barriers and cultural stereotypes, the love of the Supreme Community-of-love demanded the embrace of a new friend.

Paul is aware that the call he has placed before Philemon and his community is not a simple one. He knows well the debates of a spirit tempted to live according to the expectations of the social and political context and according to greedy, selfish and personal impulses and ambitions for personal benefit and exclusion of others. For that reason, he pleads that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself in order to make peace, to establish right relations, to free and give full life to all people, that that grace take root in the heart of that faith community; "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

Now, frequently and erroneously, we think of slavery as an overcome matter of the past. However, today there are more slaves in the world than in any other era: 27 million people are held against their will. In our Latin America, under the veneer of progress, girls and boys, women and men are being exploited in forced labor, internal and international trafficking, involuntary recruitment for military forces, child labor in dangerous conditions like mines or manipulating chemicals or heavy machinery. Millions more work in inhuman conditions, with no benefits of security. And scores upon scores of women work double or triple shift at home and beyond and receive far less pay than their male counterparts. The challenge for God's people today is the same as the one Paul voiced to Philemon and the community of Jesus' followers in Colossa. We too need to plead that God shed his grace upon us. So we may open our eyes and unearth the slavery hidden in our homes, our neighborhoods, our cities and countries. So that we may engage in radical commitment for the eradication of the causes of slavery: poverty, exclusion and discrimination. So that with courage we may confront people, institutions and systems that oppress even if that demands economic investment and risks to our personal security. So that we may live with integrity as alternative communities, guided by the law of love, acceptance and restorative reconciliation far beyond any doctrinal prejudice, cultural tradition, privileged or excluded position. Only by grace will mutual love remain in our pilgrimage of following Jesus in the power of the Spirit for the glory of God, Creator and Sustainer of all.