

Freely Chosen Slavery

In taking him as a spiritual son, Paul changed the life of Onesimus forever. Something similar can happen with us if, like the Apostle, we place ourselves entirely in God's hands.



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Around the year 61 of the Christian Era, the Apostle of the Gentiles was imprisoned in Rome. His body was in chains, but his soul was free, and did not stop evangelizing. During this period of imprisonment, he wrote at least four of his epistles: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

The latter two of these were taken by Tychicus to the city of Colossae, located about 20 km from Laodicea, in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). One was a letter addressed to the entire community, and the other a short message for a Christian especially beloved by the Apostle: Philemon.

On his journey to Colossae, Tychicus was not alone. As the Apostle wrote: “and with him Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here” (Col 4:9).

Spiritual son of the Apostle

A fugitive slave from the house of Philemon, Onesimus had sought refuge with St. Paul in Rome. Instead of seeking religious asylum in some pagan temple, as was common at the time, he chose to flee in the

right direction and found protection in the heart of the Apostle.

Baptized by St. Paul in prison, he became the Apostle's spiritual son at the same time as he was raised to the dignity of a child of God. Previously a slave of the world and of Philemon, Onesimus now served the Apostle as if he were serving Christ Himself.

Recalling the plight of many slaves of this pagan epoch, St. John Chrysostom writes: “How many masters lay inebriated in bed, while the slaves exhibited sobriety! Who should be called a slave? The sober one or the drunkard? The slave of a man, or one enslaved by vices?”¹ Certainly, slavery to the passions and sin is the worst kind.

However, Philemon was neither a drunkard and still less a pagan. On the contrary, St. Paul himself described him as “our beloved fellow worker” (Phlm 1:1). In Greek, the name Philemon means *beloved*; in this instance, beloved by God and the Apostle, who paid another tribute to him in this same letter: “For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the

saints have been refreshed through you” (Phlm 1:7).

In light of this praise, it may be presumed that Philemon was not a bad master. The Holy Church's inclusion of him in the catalogue of Saints also speaks to his credit. The Roman Martyrology includes him on November 22, together with his wife St. Apphia, and on March 20, we find their son, St. Archippus. Mother and son are also mentioned in the Apostle's letter: “Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house” (Phlm 1:2).

Accordingly, perhaps Onesimus had not been very diligent in his work.

Supplication as an old man and prisoner

In the subsequent verses, St. Paul seeks both to win the trust of his interlocutor and to prepare the ground for the request he will make on behalf of the one he has liberated from the slavery of sin. He wishes to show Philemon the new and true bond of slavery acquired by his slave, no longer in the civil, but rather in the religious realm.

“... as Paul an old man, and now a prisoner also of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son, whom I have begotten in my bands, Onesimus” (Phlm 1:9-10). A beautiful feature of this letter, the shortest written by St. Paul, are the two reasons he presents to Philemon to obtain what he asks of him: that of being an old man and a prisoner.

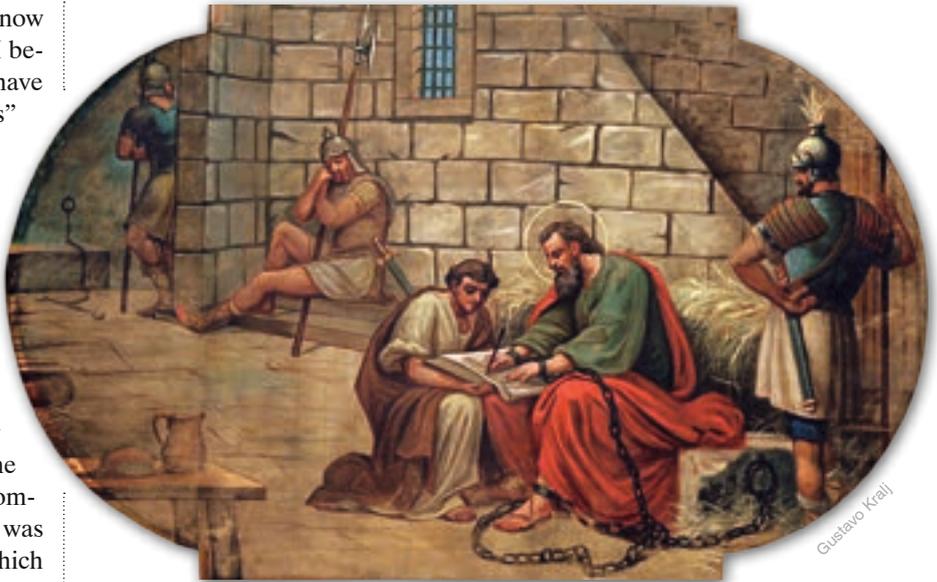
If on this occasion St. Paul intercedes for a slave, it is because he himself had voluntarily become a slave long before, at the time of his conversion. The complete giving of himself to Christ was the reason for the persecution which the world unleashed against Paul.

But even the condition of slave became a reason for glory for the Apostle, as St. Ambrose boasts: “How many lords have those who have fled from the one and only Lord! However, we will not flee from Him. Who would flee from this Lord, whom we follow bound in chains, but voluntary chains that liberate rather than bind? They are chains of prisoners who take glory in saying: ‘Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy.’ It is more glorious to be bound by Him, than to be liberated and set free by others.”²

“I am sending him back to you”

Onesimus went on to serve St. Paul in prison, for it was by his hands that he obtained true liberty. He who refused to serve his owner according to the law of those times, now dedicated himself with complete diligence to helping Paul. This is what the Apostle says in his letter, playing on the Greek meaning of the name Onesimus (useful, profitable): “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me” (Phlm 1:11).

St. Paul then shows how he himself treats those who voluntarily be-



St. Paul in prison, with one who is probably Onesimus at his side - St. Paul's Basilica, Toronto (Canada)

come slaves of God by his hands: “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart” (Phlm 1:12). The Greek word used by the Apostle (σπλάγχνα – bowels) signifies the innermost aspect of the human being. It is therefore even more compelling than “heart”, and highlights the great value Onesimus attained with this new type of slavery.

The Apostle goes on, in his letter, to express his desire that Onesimus remain with him and serve him in the name of Philemon, who was also indebted to Paul in the spiritual sphere. But he returns him to his master without restraints.

Consequences of this spiritual fatherhood

This letter, which could aptly be described as the theology of slavery, shows the profound bond established between the disciple and his spiritual father and even refers to a touching consequence of this relationship.

In restoring Onesimus to Philemon, the holy Apostle became the guarantor of the debt of this new

“Who would flee from this Lord, whom we follow bound in chains, but voluntary chains that liberate?”

slave of God: “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it” (Phlm 1:17-19a).

This same spiritual fatherhood also confers upon the Apostle rights over Philemon: “to say nothing of your owing me even your own self” (Phlm 1:19b). Yet, Paul does not stand on his authority to give him an order (cf. Phlm 1:8), preferring to make an appeal to his disciple’s



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Saint Paul the Apostle -
St. Mary Major Basilica, Rome

The Apostle prompts us to choose between the slavery to vices and sins and voluntary slavery to God, which liberates us from the shackles of the devil

charity: “receive him as you would receive me.”

As if this did not suffice to obtain pardon for a fugitive slave, liable to harsh punishments according to Roman laws, the Saint assumes his debt, writing with his own hand: charge that to my account, I will repay it. Undoubtedly, the value of a missive from the Apostle to the Gentiles far surpassed any debt or material damages possibly caused by the absence of Onesimus.

The sure way to attain holiness

In the Letter to Philemon, the Apostle prompts us to choose between two slaveries: the slavery to vices and sins or voluntary slavery to God, which liberates us from the shackles of the devil. In this matter, there is no third option.

To those who wish to live according to the precepts of the world, the Apostle’s proposal seems absurd. But the freely accepted spiritual slavery that was taken on by Paul is the surest way to attain holiness. By it, a person aims to be emptied of all personal interests, in order to better serve the Creator, the Supreme Judge to whom we must all pay accounts for each act and every thought!

Onesimus made the better choice, imitating the one chosen to be the Mother of the Redeemer: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word” (Lk 1:38).

A beautiful and ancient tradition

The letter of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Ephesians, dated 107

AD, gave rise to a beautiful tradition according to which Onesimus had become Bishop of Ephesus: “I received, therefore, your whole multitude in the name of God, through Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love, and your bishop in the flesh, whom I pray you by Jesus Christ to love, and that you would all seek to be like him. And blessed be He who has granted unto you, being worthy, to obtain such an excellent bishop.”³

These words present us with something extremely uncommon for the customs of the time. Some decades after the episode narrated, one who had voluntarily become a slave of God through the hands of St. Paul received the lofty episcopal dignity, the prestige of which many seek by becoming slaves of the world...

Some scholars even attribute to St. Onesimus the merit of compiling St. Paul’s letters in Ephesus, which facilitated the formation of the Pauline canon of Sacred Scripture.

The spiritual slavery taught to Onesimus by the Apostle changed his life forever. And all those who read these magnificent lines written by St. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit can experience the same change. Today, this has been made much easier. Since Catholic theology has, over the course of time, defined the unique role of the Virgin Mary in the sanctification of souls, we can now have recourse to her infallible aid, not only as children, but we can become her slaves of love, following the teaching of the great Marian doctor, St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. ✧

¹ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM. *De Lazaro*, VI, 8: MG 48, 1039.

² ST. AMBROSE. Carta a sus fieles, 14, 96. In: GORDAY,

Peter; ODEN, Thomas C. (Ed.). *La Biblia comentada por los Padres de la Iglesia. Colosenses, 1-2 Tesalonicenses, 1-2 Timoteo, Tito*,

Filemón. Ciudad Nueva: Madrid, 2002, v.IX, p.450.

³ ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH. Carta aos Efésios, I, 3. In: PADRES APOS-

TÓLICOS. São Paulo: Paulus, 1995, p.82.

ST. LOUIS MARIE GRIGNION DE MONTFORT TEACHES

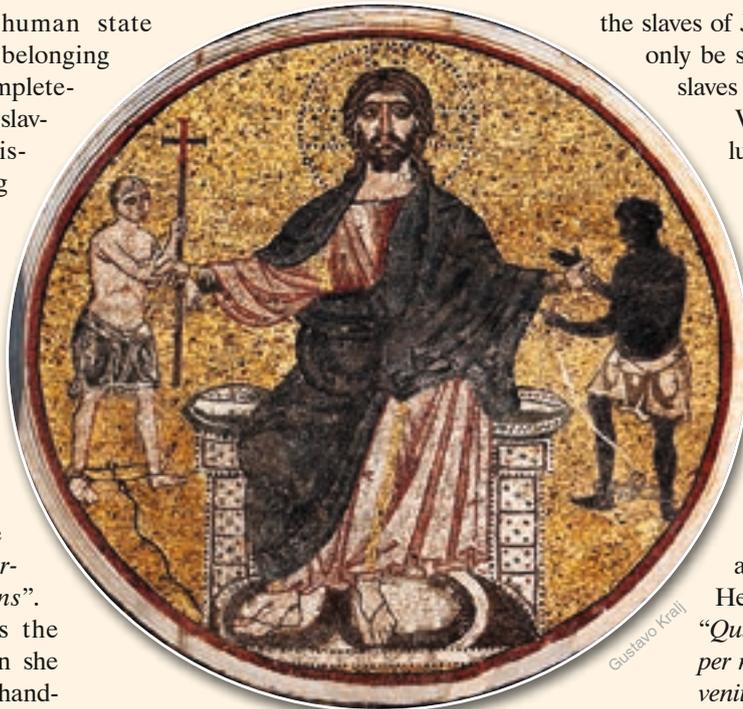
It is Our Duty to Belong to Christ

No other human state involves belonging more completely to another than slavery. Among Christian peoples, nothing makes a person belong more completely to Jesus and His holy Mother than voluntary slavery. Our Lord Himself gave us the example of this when out of love for us He took the form of a slave: “*formam servi accipiens*”. Our Lady gave us the same example when she called herself the handmaid or slave of the Lord.

The Apostle considered it an honour to be called “*servus Christi* – slave of Christ.” Several times in Holy Scripture, Christians are referred to as “*servi Christi* – slaves of Christ.” In accord with the observation made by a great man, the Latin word *servus* at one time signified only a slave because servants as we know them did not exist.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent leaves no doubt about our being slaves of Jesus Christ, using the unequivocal term “*mancipia Christi* – slaves of Christ.”

Granting this, I say that we must belong to Jesus and serve Him not just as hired servants but as willing slaves who, moved by generous love, commit themselves to His service after the manner of slaves for the honour of belonging to Him. Before we were baptized we were the slaves of the devil, but baptism made us



Christ liberating the slaves - Portal of the Convent of San Tommaso in Formis, Rome

the slaves of Jesus. Christians can only be slaves of the devil or slaves of Christ.

What I say in an absolute sense of our Lord, I say in a relative sense of our Blessed Lady. Jesus, in choosing her as His inseparable associate in His life, glory and power in Heaven and on earth, has given her by grace in His Kingdom all the same rights and privileges that He possesses by nature. “*Quidquid Deo convenit per naturam, Mariæ convenit per gratiam* – All that belongs to God by nature belongs to Mary by grace,” say the saints, and, according to them,

just as Jesus and Mary have the same will and the same power, they have also the same subjects, servants and slaves.

Following therefore the teaching of the Saints and of many great men we can call ourselves, and become, the loving slaves of our Blessed Lady in order to become more perfect slaves of Jesus.

*Excerpts from
“True Devotion to Mary”, by
St. Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort*