

September 28, 2003  
Feast of the Prophet Baruch

#### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Philemon lived in Colossae, a city in southwest Phrygia, near Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13) in the Lycus Valley. His wife's name was Apphia (Philemon 2). Onesimus was his slave.

Although the Acts of the Apostles does not mention a visit to Colossae by the apostle Paul, he certainly evangelized Philemon, at either Colossae or perhaps Ephesus, sometime during those three years (A.D. 52-55) that Paul spent as a missionary in the latter city (Acts 20:31). Anyway, Philemon became a Christian.

We would not know any of these things except for a letter that Paul wrote to Philemon from prison at Caesarea, sometime between 58 and 60 (Acts 24:27). While there, Paul had received a surprise visit from Onesimus, Philemon's slave, who had fled from his master and had come all the way to Caesarea to seek out the apostle.

It is not entirely clear what Onesimus expected of Paul, whom he had likely met some five or so years earlier, in the company of Philemon. His approach to Paul, right there in a jail guarded by Roman soldiers, was rather bold. In the Roman Empire, runaway slaves were branded on the forehead by a hot iron with the letter "F" for \*fugitivus\*.

Nor had Paul given any explicit indication that he opposed the institution of slavery; on the contrary, he had urged each man, including the slave, to maintain the social position he held at the time of his conversion (1 Corinthians 7:21-24). Paul's attitude toward slavery was perfectly clear: "Exhort bondservants to be obedient toward their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back" (Titus 2:9). So what did Onesimus expect?

Whatever he expected, Paul did what Paul did best. He evangelized and baptized the runaway slave right there in the prison (Philemon 10), surrounded by an impressive company of the Church's finest: Mark, Luke, and several others (23-24; Colossians 4:7-14).

But now Paul had a problem: What was he to do with Onesimus?

What approach should he take with his friend Philemon, who might be rather upset about the flight of a slave? After all, Onesimus was a lawbreaker, to whom Roman Law extended no mercy. Would Philemon show mercy?

In fact, Paul was not the only person in antiquity to face a problem of this sort. A few years later, Pliny the Younger (62-113) received the runaway servant of a friend, to whom he wrote a letter explaining the matter (\*Epistolae\* 9.21). Pliny exercised the greatest diplomacy in the affair, stressing the repentance of the fugitive, urging clemency for his offense, gently interceding by diplomacy instead of applying pressure based on mutual friendship.

Paul's approach to Philemon is similar in each of these respects, but he also appeals to more explicit Christian motives. After all, Philemon and Onesimus are now brothers by baptism. He subtly addresses Philemon's sense of compassion. In an epistle of only 25 verses, Paul mentions five times that he is writing from prison! He calls Onesimus "my child" (10), perhaps suggesting that he might take personally any harm that came to the runaway. Paul stresses his solidarity with the slave (12,17). He reminds Philemon what a generous person Philemon is (5-7!), a reputation that he must now live up to. He almost makes it sound as though Philemon had sent the slave to take care of the apostle (13). Still, Paul leaves the matter to Philemon's conscience (21).

When Onesimus returned to Philemon, he was accompanied by Tychicus, "a beloved brother, faithful minister, and fellow servant in the Lord" (Colossians 4:7-9). The two travelers were carrying three letters: a personal letter to Philemon, in which all these matters were expressed; a communal letter to the Colossian church; another letter to the church at Laodicea (probably to be identified with the work known in most manuscripts as "The Epistle to the Ephesians"). These letters were to be shared as appropriate (4:16). From the Muratorian Fragment we know that the Epistle to Philemon was contained in the earliest collections of Paul's epistles.

As for Onesimus himself, he was probably a very young fellow at the time of his flight, and Philemon certainly set him free on his return. He remained an active missionary in the region, and decades later Ignatius of Antioch knew him as the bishop of Ephesus (\*Ignatius to the Ephesians\* 1.3; 2.1; 6.2).

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