

Fraternal Love Put to the Test: The Case of the Letter to Philemon

O amor fraterno posto à prova: o caso da carta a Filêmom

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Abstract

This article on the Letter to Philemon focuses on the significant topic of slavery/freedom in the Greco-Roman world and the theological themes of fraternal love and authentic freedom in Jesus Christ. First, it presents a brief exposition of the letter's occasion, place and date of composition, its sender, co-sender and addressees. Second, it displays and highlights the text's exquisite epistolary and rhetorical composition and persuasive force. Third, it reveals the richness of this missive's paradoxical and implicit theology, most especially Paul's ethics, anthropology and ecclesiology. In his final considerations, the author offers some concluding reflections on the importance of fraternal love, Christian fraternity and the centrality of the ministry of reconciliation for the Apostle Paul both in Philemon (reconciliation between master and slave, now brothers in the Lord) and in Second Corinthians (reconciliation between the Corinthians and God, as well as between the opposing factions in their church), most especially in 2Cor 5:18-21.

Resumo

Este artigo sobre a Carta a Filêmon foca no tópico significativo da escravidão/liberdade no mundo greco-romano e nos temas teológicos do amor fraterno e da liberdade autêntica em Jesus Cristo. Primeiro, apresenta uma breve exposição da ocasião, local e data de composição da carta, seu remetente, co-remetente e destinatários. Segundo, exhibe e destaca a requintada composição epistolar e retórica do texto e sua força persuasiva. Terceiro, revela a riqueza da teologia paradoxal e implícita desta missiva, mais especialmente a ética, a antropologia e a eclesiologia de Paulo. Em suas considerações finais, o autor oferece algumas reflexões conclusivas sobre a importância do amor fraterno, da fraternidade cristã e da centralidade do ministério da reconciliação para o apóstolo Paulo tanto em Filemom (reconciliação entre senhor e escravo, agora irmãos no Senhor) quanto em Segunda Coríntios (reconciliação entre os coríntios e Deus, bem como entre as facções opostas em sua igreja), mais especialmente em 2Co 5:18-21.

Keywords

Pauline ethics.
Pauline anthropology.
Pauline ecclesiology.
Greco-Roman rhetoric.
Greco-Roman slavery.

Palavras-chave

Ética paulina.
Antropologia paulina.
Eclesiologia paulina.
Retórica greco-romana.
Escravidão greco-romana.

Introduction

Given its centrality to our faith as Christians, the question of fraternal love expressed in authentic freedom and responsibility can only attract our complete attention and consideration. This is especially true with regard to one of the shortest books of the Bible, the Letter to Philemon, a finely chiseled jewel ensconced at the end of the Pauline corpus. Having first examined this epistle in a chapter of my introductory work on the Pauline corpus (Brodeur, 2010), I would now like to return to it in greater detail with the express intention of focusing on the significant biblical themes of slavery/freedom, Christian love and authentic fraternity among believers in Jesus Christ. First, I will treat the letter's occasion, place and date of composition, its sender, co-sender and addressees. Second, I will present and extol its exquisite epistolary and rhetorical composition. Third, I will tease out this missive's paradoxical and implicit theology. And lastly, I will offer some concluding reflections on fraternal love, Christian fraternity and the essential ministry of reconciliation in the church.

Occasion, Place and Date of Composition, Sender, Co-Sender and Addressees

Why did the Apostle Paul write this brief letter, too often mistakenly called a mere note? According to the traditional opinion, the Epistle to Philemon is a letter of recommendation on behalf of Onesimus, a fugitive slave¹. Many scholars today, however, propose different opinions and hypothesize other occasions². For example, according to A. Patzia, Onesimus

¹ In his commentary to the Letter to Philemon, J.A. Fitzmyer presents a list of modern interpreters who accept the hypothesis of the *servus fugitivus*, a list which constitutes the majority position among scholars: Barclay, Caird, Collange, Fitzmyer, Getty, Harrison, Llewelyn, Lightfoot, Michaelis, Martin, Nordling, O'Brien, Peretto, Petersen, Robertson, Saunders, Soards, Stuhlmacher and Suhl. Cf. *Id.*, *The Letter to Philemon*, 17. My predecessor at the Gregorian University, U. Vanni, also accepts the traditional hypothesis: *Id.*, *L'ebbrezza nello Spirito*, 204. In my opinion, this simple and credible hypothesis is still the most plausible.

² In the history of interpretation of the letter's occasion at least 8 hypotheses have been proposed: 1. Onesimus, a runaway slave; 2. Onesimus, sent by Archippus; 3. Onesimus, *amicus Domini*; 4. Onesimus, sent by the church of Pergamon; 5. Onesimus, a blood brother of Philemon and not a slave; 6. Onesimus, a slave "apprentice" of Philemon; 7. Philemon sent Onesimus to become Paul's patron; 8. Plea for his co-worker. Cf. A. PITTA, *Lettera a Filemone*, p. 41-48.

would not necessarily have been a *servus fugitivus*, but a slave who was aware of his rights and who turned to Paul in order that the latter might use his good offices for him, becoming his guarantor with Philemon, his master³. Given the great variety of hypotheses proposed by scholars today and the lack of agreement among them, I continue to accept the traditional theory: the Apostle to the Gentiles wrote his beloved brother in the Lord, Philemon so as to defend and return the latter's runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul had "fathered" while in chains. By running away from his master, Onesimus had committed a very serious crime and was thus liable to severe punishment by his lawful owner. If someone found a runaway slave, by law he had to inform the closest magistrate. The slave would then be returned to his master, whom he would continue to serve. However, far more severe punishments could be legally inflicted. For example, the runaway could be sold to a new master, or he could be whipped, mutilated, tortured, thrown to wild animals or even crucified. In addition, it was also a grave crime for anyone in the first century to protect and shelter a runaway slave. According to Roman law, doing so was considered to be stealing someone else's lawful property (Fitzmyer, 2000, p. 28). Hence this short Pauline letter treats a very serious and significant matter indeed.

As for the place and date of the letter's dictation, commentators have traditionally opted for the city of Rome where the Apostle would have written to Philemon while under house arrest. The missive could thus be dated approximately to A.D. 61-63. This traditional hypothesis would be supported by the allusion to the age of the Apostle who describes himself as *πρεσβύτης* (old, elderly) (v. 9), and the fact that this is also the position of the traditional thesis.

Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians, including Rom 13:1-7, before he was ever subjected to the experience of Roman chains that is reflected in Philemon. After writing Romans, Paul then had Roman chains placed on him. He

³ For a careful and detailed examination of the argument, cf. PATZIA, "Philemon, Letter to", *DPL*, p. 703-707 (with a rich bibliography). We could read in this way vv. 18-19, where Paul comes down to dealing with eminently practical questions concerning the interpersonal relations between slave and master. In this letter, however, this mediation is accompanied and sustained by common faith in accordance with which agreement is always peaceful and possible (cf. v. 20); in fact, it is certainly and happily concluded (cf. v. 21).

endured this custody at least long enough for him to become the spiritual father of Onesimus. And it was in this context that he wrote to Philemon (Cassidy, 2001, p. 84)

Other exegetes who follow a different chronology of Paul's life and missionary journeys propose the city of Ephesus and consequently date the letter to about 54-57. Brown who goes for A.D. 56 (1997); Fitzmyer who prefers 55-57 (2000) and Harrington who points to 55 (1997). Few scholars today continue to opt for Caesarea Maritima, the Roman port closest to Jerusalem, between 57-59, yet this possibility cannot be completely excluded. Since there is nothing decisive in the various reconstructions, in the end the date and place of composition remain uncertain and unresolved. We can also note a thought-provoking detail: if the slave Onesimus was freed and can be identified with the bishop of Ephesus of that name (of whom Ignatius of Antioch speaks in his Letter to the Ephesians), the preservation of this brief and concise personal letter in the New Testament canon could be due to the identity of the protagonist. Since I prefer to follow the traditional dating of Paul's life, I opt for Ephesus for the place of composition, sometime between 54-57. Given this range of dates, Paul could have written it either at the end of his second or sometime during his third missionary journey.

The *praescriptum* begins with the personal name Παῦλος at the start of v. 1. The Apostle to the Gentiles in flesh and blood is undoubtedly the sole letter sender, thus ensuring that this missive finds its place among the seven undisputed Pauline epistles. The salutation also reveals the name of Paul's "brother," Timothy, who is also mentioned as a letter co-sender elsewhere in the Pauline corpus (cf. Phil 1,1; Col 1:1; 1Thess 1:1; 2Thess 1:1). Timothy is clearly a fellow Christian, one also born of a common rebirth by the power of the Gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As such both Paul and Timothy share the same identity and fate as adopted sons of God and brothers of Jesus Christ, their Lord and redeemer. As J.A. Fitzmyer rightly affirms in his commentary on this letter, "*adelphos* and *adelphe*, "brother" and "sister," became the equivalent of *Cristianos* and *Christianē*" (Fitzmyer, 2000, p. 85).

Among the four addressees mentioned by the letter sender, pride of place goes first to Philemon, the paterfamilias of this domestic church. “Philemon, our beloved one (or dear friend),” is certainly the head of the household and thus the missive’s principal addressee.

Paul next cites “Appia, our sister”, most probably Philemon’s wife and then “Archippus our fellow soldier,” most probably their son. Archippus was a disciple of Epaphras, the evangelist of the Lycus valley where they lived. Archippus is also named and praised by Paul in Col 4:17. Given that the Letter to Philemon focuses on the defense of Onesimus, it does not seem at all out of the way to suppose that Appia and Archippus were linked to Philemon by close bonds of kinship: that would serve to be the reason for Paul’s taking the opportunity to make particular mention of persons belonging to the same nuclear family. By mentioning Philemon’s wife and son by name, the Apostle clearly sought to arouse in his letter’s principal addressee deep emotions of loving affection disposing him even more to give Paul’s very personal letter a favorable hearing (vv. 1-2).

Lastly, Paul concludes his list of addressees by adding “to the church in your house.” This refers to all those who believe in Christ and thus belong to the *domus ecclesia* hosted by Philemon, i.e. both the members of his household and extended family, including his slaves, as well as other Colossian Christians who came to Philemon’s house and worshipped together in his house church.

In addition to the letter’s salutation, the opening verse of the letter’s *postscriptum* states that Epaphras (Cf. Col 1:7; 4:12), Paul’s “fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus” (v. 23) who originates from Colossae, an ancient city located in south-west Phrygia, is included in the final greetings, together with the Apostle’s four close collaborators Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke (vv. 23-24). By also mentioning these close associates and fellow workers by name, perhaps the letter writer also meant to suggest to Philemon that many people dear to them both were concerned for the positive outcome of the Apostle’s request as articulated in his short missive. The connection of Colossae with Archippus, Epaphras and Onesimus (Cf. Col 4:9), the subject of and reason for

the letter, has raised the distinct possibility of Colossae as Philemon's place of residence (Sacchi, 1995, p. 152; Vanni, 1996, p. 552; Schelkle, 1990, p. 132-133; Patzia, 2005, p. 703-707). The hypothesis that Archippus had been Onesimus' owner, which was advanced by J. Knox in a paper that, in its time, caused a sensation on account of the eccentricity of its reconstruction which was not sufficiently supported by evidence, remains interesting nonetheless (Patzia, 2005, p. 703-707).

Literary Composition

The epistolary form of the Letter to Philemon is as follows.

1. prescript (vv. 1-3)
2. introduction/thanksgiving (vv. 4-10)
3. letter body (vv. 11-22)
4. postscript (vv. 23-25)

The atmosphere of human warmth and fraternal love which breathes in the heart of this text is heightened by the parts which make up what we may call its literary frame. As we noted above in the first section, these verses—both those relating to the initial greeting (vv. 1-3) and those relating to the final closing (vv. 23-25)—are neither marginal nor of secondary importance. Philemon, the father of his family and also head of the Christian community that gathers in his home, is surrounded—indeed embraced—by an aura of intense and enveloping affectivity. All the characters help to surround the three principal characters (Paul, Onesimus and Philemon) forming the choral part of what Paul — interpreting the voice, thoughts and emotional reactions of Onesimus — expresses in the first person. The absurdity of the social reality of the time of Paul is that Onesimus, the party most directly and closely interested in the message, has no voice at all in the matter⁴. In fact, he is without juridical personality and so also deprived of the right to speech. Paul overturns the relationship between the roles, conferring maximum importance on the character who is most marginalized and ostracized, placing him at the center of interest as befitting the protagonist of any good story.

⁴ In the recitative system of Greek tragedy, although being πρωταγωνιστής (= principal actor), he would be classed as κωφὸν πρόσωπον (= non-speaking character). Today, we would call him a “bit-player”.

Paul expresses himself in a persuasive manner: this is the *captatio benevolentiae* (vv. 4-9) with which he praises his main addressee before formulating his own *desiderata*. In order to better convince Philemon, he makes use of the tools of classical rhetoric (Church, 1978, p. 17-38). The sentiments evoked⁵: love, friendship, benevolence, emotion and generosity enter into the broad categories of *ethos* (Lausberg, 2002, § 60)⁶ and of *pathos* (Lausberg, 2002, § 70)⁷ (where the author appeals to the emotions of those who hear or read his text). Naturally, there remains the proper consideration due to the main object that forms the central body of the discourse, the *teaching* (Lausberg, 2002, § 67)⁸ (where the author appeals to the intellect): without doubt, however, he would have taken account of whether the minds of his addressees were appropriately prepared in order to facilitate proper persuasion. The Apostle was aware of all this: it is for this reason that he devotes such an extended space both to the preliminaries of the *exordium* and to the *peroratio* (seven verses for the first sub-unit, four for the second), compared with the explanation of his reasons (eight verses). The subdivision is as follows. His brief introduction concludes with a succinct thesis statement in v. 10, followed by numerous proofs presented in the appeal to reason (object, vv. 11-18).

prescript	vv. 1-3	(3 vv.)
A. introduction	vv. 4-10	(7 vv.) <i>ethos</i> (ἦθος, <i>mores</i>)
B. object	vv. 11-18	(8 vv.) <i>docere</i> (διδάσκειν)
A'. peroration	vv. 19-22	(4 vv.) <i>pathos</i> πάθος (<i>affectus concitati</i>)
postscript	vv. 23-25	(3 vv.)

The *ethos* (A) of the exordium represents the first rung of emotional intensity, while the *pathos* (A') of the peroration the second one; between

⁵ These and other factors, such as, for example, the asymmetrical and disturbed constructions, the introduction of rhetorical figures aimed at emphasis, the employment of rhythmical and para-musical effects, tending to astonish, to delight and to attract, constitute the requirements of the “Asian” style, beginning in the first century B.C. with Theodore of Gadara (Palestine) and widespread chiefly in Asia Minor.

⁶ “il grado di emozione più moderata che assume un tono durevole e può venir interpretato anche come carattere si chiama *éthos* (*affectus mites atque composti*)”.

⁷ “il grado di emozione più violenta”.

⁸ “Chi cerca servendosi di mezzi intellettuali (§ 65) di persuadere l'arbitro della situazione della giustezza del punto di vista dell'oratore, parte dal presupposto che la persuasione intellettuale sia un importante impulso d'azione, forse sufficiente dall'oratore, dipendente dall'arbitro della situazione (§5). L'influenza intellettuale sull'arbitro della situazione, che l'oratore intende esercitare, si chiama *docere* (διδάσκειν)”.

these two comes the appeal to the intellect, the *teaching* (B): in this way, we have the emotional and intellectual realization of the *persuasio* with its concentric composition.

	prescript	vv. 1-3		affectivity (initial greetings)
A.	introduction	vv. 4-10	<i>ethos</i>	more moderate emotion
B.	object	vv. 11-18	<i>teaching</i>	intellect
A.'	peroration	vv. 19-22	<i>pathos</i>	more violent emotion
	postscript	vv. 23-25		affectivity (Final greetings)

Concentric composition of the Letter to Philemon

(Note the centrality of the word εὐαγγελίου, (“gospel”))

- A. Prescript: vv. 1-3
- B. introduction/thanksgiving: vv. 4-10
- Body: (vv. 11-22)
 - Object (vv. 11-18)
 - C. Onesimus (slave) vv. 11-12
 - D. ὃν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακοῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, v. 13
 - C'. Onesimus (no longer slave but freedman), vv. 14-18
 - B'. Peroration: vv. 19-22
- A'. Postscript: vv. 23-25

Epistolary-Rhetorical *dispositio* of the Letter to Philemon (Cf. Pitta, 1994, p. 93-108; Sacchi, 1995, p. 149-156)⁹

- praescriptum* (vv. 1-3)
- exordium/thanksgiving* (vv. 4-10)
 1. *captatio benevolentiae* (vv. 4-7)
 2. *insinuatio* (vv. 8-9)
 3. *propositio* (v. 10) thesis, i.e. Paul’s request to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus
- Letter body (vv. 11-22)
 - probatio* (vv. 11-18)
 1. Onesimus’ usefulness to Paul and Philemon (v. 11-12)
 2. Onesimus’ service for the gospel (vv. 13-14)
 3. Onesimus’ new situation: brotherhood in Christ beyond slavery (vv. 15-16)
 4. Request for hospitality (v. 17-18)
 - peroratio* (vv. 19-22)
- postscriptum* (vv. 23-25)

⁹ This is the epistolary-rhetorical composition of the Letter to Philemon according to A. Pitta in his recent commentary (cf. Pitta, 2021, p. 49): “1. Prescritto (vv. 1-3); 2. Ringraziamento/esordio (v. 4-9); 3. Corpo epistolare (vv. 10-20); a. Tesi (v. 10); b. perorazione (vv. 19-20); 4. Poscritto con esortazioni finali (vv. 21-25).”

The Letter's Paradoxical and Implicit Theology

The Letter to Philemon can be considered an important text for understanding Paul's thinking on the question of slavery and on the way to tackle it in concrete reality. He writes this epistle while he is in prison: "Paul, a prisoner for/of Christ Jesus" (v. 1a). The Apostle has been deprived of his physical freedom but not of his liberty in the spiritual world. Despite his critical situation—Will he be found guilty or not guilty? Will he live or will he die? — the apostle shares in the suffering of Onesimus from a position of serenity and equilibrium. The latter bears the weight of his situation as a slave, crushed—on account of unjust human laws—under the weight of another man's abusive power. Onesimus probably could not understand the reason for such an unjust and unequal situation between individuals, and, at first sight, the fact that he sought help from an old man shut up in chains could cause surprise: clearly, we have here an exceptional person, who is immersed in a higher dimension and from whom there emanates a particular attraction. Perhaps Onesimus has heard about this extraordinary man and so he is aware of this. Paul's spiritual energy allows him to dominate not only his own difficult situation but also that of his protégé, forgetting himself, overcoming, that is, his own egoism and selfish interests which could lead him to concentrate on obtaining his own freedom rather than that of his young son. That prison was not a light matter for Paul is obvious, but, in the present case, this is clear from the persistence with which concepts relating to imprisonment occur¹⁰. And yet, not on his own behalf but to come to the aid of another, Paul overcomes the laws of Roman society in which he finds himself undergoing the most severe restrictions without breaking them. He taps into a new code of law that is better authorized and longer lasting and legitimate, under which it is possible to attain a supreme *manumissio*, a

¹⁰ Cf. Δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (vv. 1.9); ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς (v. 10.13); συναιχμάλωτος (v. 23). Note the rhetorical figure of paronomasia: δέσμιος (prisoner) and δεσμός (chain). Δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ either his experience of prison ("prisoner for Christ Jesus", objective genitive) or his subjection to Christ Jesus ("prisoner of Christ Jesus", subjective genitive). ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς could describe either his detention in prison for the sake of the Gospel (literal sense) or his subjection to the Lord and the Gospel (figurative sense). Cf. "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil 3:12).

liberation, a spiritual emancipation which is the divine adoption of sons and daughters in a Christian sense: υιοθσία (Cf. Gal 4:5).

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave (οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον) but more than a slave (ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον), a beloved brother (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν)—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (vv. 15-16).

This is the paradox: though himself in chains, the Apostle Paul – the Roman citizen and free man¹¹ *par excellence* – has freed the slave Onesimus, begetting him on the spiritual plane as a son of God and claiming him as his own adopted son, a new believer in Christ, their common redeemer and liberator (cf. v. 10). We assume that Onesimus was baptized by Paul: by virtue of the water of regeneration he has been born a new man.¹² With a renewed name, Onesimus/Useful has indeed become useful for both to Philemon and Paul (cf. v. 11), a new creation in Christ and rich in promises for all. This is a miracle which only the Spirit of God can perform.¹³

The missionary from Tarsus distinguishes neatly between temporary, even if prolonged, privation of physical liberty because of Christ: his temporary situation as a prisoner, and absence of liberty, which degrades a man as the tool of other men: Onesimus' enduring condition as a slave. In the Apostle's own experience, his chains have been redeemed, thus acquiring a special freeing power with strong resonance in the life of the Holy Spirit¹⁴. The weight of his earthly suffering is shifted onto the passion and death of Christ and his saving message (Cf. Gal 2:20); his imprisonment is raised to a symbol of those fetters which keep a man from soaring on high. But precisely

¹¹ Cf. vv. 8-9 where Paul describes his “great boldness in Christ” (πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν). “His boldness-*parrēsia* is a result, almost an external expression of the freedom which Paul lives from within. And, for him, this interior freedom is not an indifferent position of balance between various possible choices but the ability to follow the imperative of love. Wherever a space opens up for the realisation of love, Paul sees there a free task” (Vanni, Ugo. *L'ebbrezza nello Spirito*, Roma: Apostolato della Preghiera, 2008, p. 200).

¹² “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” (Gal 6,15); “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5,17). Cf. Eph 2:15; 4:4; Col 3:10.

¹³ “Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard” (Gal 3:5).

¹⁴ Cf. δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (vv. 1.9); ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (v. 13); ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (v. 23).

by virtue of his sharing (κοινωνία) with the suffering Christ and adhesion to his redeeming message, his very imprisonment is transcended and becomes the reason for sharing in the divine plan of salvation, as well as a guarantee of overcoming the anguish and agony of the world. Only thus could the man Paul overcome his imperfection, correct his weakness, neutralize his sins as a persecutor of the Lord's church and not be overwhelmed by it. From a close examination of the text, we see that Paul's mind was so convinced by the cause of the Gospel that even his chains, in themselves a shameful and hated symbol from which any sane person would flee, were transformed into what we might call a sacred symbol. The complement specifiers relating to Jesus Christ and the Gospel are so closely bound up with the concept of imprisonment as to form syntagmas laden with rich nuances, difficult to translate literally and yet comprehensible with a logical leap. Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (v. 1)—Paul is both a prisoner *for* Christ Jesus as well as a prisoner *of* Christ Jesus. At the time in which he was employed in drafting his letter to Philemon. In his apostolic service of his Lord, Paul did not take any notice of the pangs of hunger or of his thirst or of his sorrow at being bound to his chains. With the help of God's grace, his spirit turned away from his own physical needs and wretched situation and instead considered those of his new son and son of God, Onesimus. That was edifying for those around him and it is still so for us today who, at a distance of so many centuries, read and recall and reflect on his caring and compassionate words.

After having treated the question of Paul's imprisonment, we next turn to the problem of slavery in the Greco-Roman world. The word δοῦλος (slave) indicates the subjection of the individual in his entirety, disregarding any motivation other than that of greed, arrogance and egoism. It is a word which inspires great horror on account of the enormous crime perpetrated by some human beings against other human beings. Aware of the terrible significance of this word, as if it were a kind of curse, Paul utters it twice, articulating the syllables in their bareness (cf. v. 16a: οὐκέτι ὡς δούλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν): it is a word from which to keep one's distance. The first time, δοῦλος is preceded by an adverb which negates it οὐκέτι (= no longer) and the second time by a preposition which goes beyond it ὑπὲρ = beyond).

There follows a pause, as if to draw breath in the wake of such an admission, but, immediately, we reach the word full of love which overcomes every obstacle: ἀδελφόν (brother) accompanied by a verbal adjective full of affection and love: ἀγαπητόν (beloved). “[...] no longer as a slave (οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον) but more than a slave (ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον), a beloved brother (ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν) ...” (v. 16). Given the importance of these significant theological themes, let us now consider both terms, ἀδελφόν (brother) and ἀγαπητόν (beloved) more closely.

First, the slave Onesimus has now become a brother. The word ἀδελφός sounds a consoling note right from the beginning of the letter to comfort Paul in his hours of imprisonment (cf. vv. 1.7.16.20)¹⁵; it reaches its height in v. 16, where this ideal, associated with complements of great depth such as (καὶ) ἐν σαρκί (in the flesh) on the human level, and (καὶ) ἐν Κυρίῳ (in the Lord), provides to Philemon, the Christian paterfamilias, and to all of us, the bipolar guide within which this ideal can be realized. Paul is aware of the powerful force of the bond of brotherhood, and he makes use of it when he appeals to Philemon in the peroration (cf. v. 20). In all probability, the substantive ἀδελφός forms the second *Leitmotiv*¹⁶ of the whole letter, with the binomial prisoner-slave constituting the first. The concept of brotherhood is basic to Christian doctrine. The slave Onesimus, alone and isolated as he was, a poor leaf swept by the gusts of the autumn gales, fated to perish, finds himself enrolled as a full member of the Christian family (redemption-justification-reconciliation), whose members on earth are represented by his

¹⁵ In v. 1, the pair Timothy and Paul; in v. 7, Philemon and Paul; in v. 16, Onesimus and Philemon; in v. 20, Philemon and Paul. Note that in the text the kinship relationship between Paul and Onesimus is that of father-son (v. 10) and not primarily that of brothers. The fraternal love between Paul and Timothy (cf. v. 1), close collaborators in the cause of Jesus Christ, is also reflected in the brotherly bond that connects Paul and Philemon (cf. vv. 7, 20). Perhaps the two loving pairs of brothers, Paul-Timothy and Paul-Philemon, serve as examples to be followed by the new brotherly pair Philemon-Onesimus. Just as Paul and Timothy worked together, along with many other believers, during the course of Paul’s second missionary journey, and just as Paul and Philemon have shared in faith, love and close friendship, so too with Philemon and Onesimus. Now reunited by their shared faith in Christ and made co-workers for the sake of the Gospel at Colossae, they too can also labor together as a team, along with other brothers and sisters in the Lord, for the growth and wellbeing of their common house church.

¹⁶ “Leitmotiv: recurring and fundamental motive of an opera. Etym.: from the German *leiten* = to lead, guide, *Motiv* = motive, motif” (Marchese, 2002, p. 163).

new loving father Paul¹⁷, by the equally benevolent paterfamilias Philemon and by many other members of the *domus ecclesia* at Colossae, his new brothers and sisters who are similarly well disposed to the new Christian. What is more important, from now on Onesimus becomes part of a community and a world that is much bigger, one which, ideally, includes all believers in the Gospel who belong to all the local churches, past, present and to come: he is now really a son of God in Christ by means of the Holy Spirit. The awareness of this gives Onesimus the relief which lightens his existential anguish at knowing himself to be a slave, enlarges his lungs with an enlivening breath of refreshing air, which finally renders him capable of living as a free human being now able to hope in the future. Since Onesimus is now in Jesus Christ, he walks according to the Spirit and no longer according to the flesh (cf. Rom 8:5-13). This has been Paul's great miracle: through baptism, the creature who ran away and abandoned his master's home regains the use of the word freedom and returns to his home renewed and transformed as a responsible individual (cf. Gal 5:1). It is necessary to immerse oneself in the situation of the slave Onesimus, irrevocably deprived of all rights, crushed by the injustice of the unfair and discriminatory institutions of the Roman Empire: we can imagine with what joy he would have run to the house of his master-father (paterfamilias) and new brother, pressing to his breast Paul's missive, the "word-Word¹⁸" which represents for him the symbol of the new freedom in Christ which he has already experienced at the time of his baptism. This sacrament truly realized his first emancipation, so long hoped for and desired, of the rising to the true eternal life of the sons and daughters of God, the announcement of his own entry into a society seemingly tiny, such as the *domus ecclesia* of Philemon, but, at the same time, the prelude and symbol of a much vaster community of believers. The fellowship of all those who believe in Jesus the Redeemer, the Church of God. Hence, the epistle

¹⁷ For other examples when Paul refers to himself as father in relation to his new converts, cf. 1Cor 4:14-15, 17; Gal 4:19.

¹⁸ The Letter to Philemon is, at the same time, the word of the Apostle Paul and the Word of God.

which Onesimus bears also means for him the pledge (ἄραβῶν) of the promise of eternal salvation¹⁹.

Second, the runaway Onesimus has now become “beloved.” The letter sender now surprisingly describes the disobedient criminal as ἀγαπητόν, an adjective from the verb “to love,” ἀγαπάω. Yet this is the very same adjective that Paul used in the letter prescript (cf. v 1b) to describe his principal addressee and dear friend Philemon! Both master and slave are truly beloved both by Christ and by Paul. All that is a miracle to be ascribed to the evangelising work of the Apostle to the Gentiles, fruit of the love with which the Letter to Philemon is thoroughly permeated (cf. vv. 5.7.9.12.16.18.20)²⁰. “Love is the motivation of the free Paul” (Vanni, 2008, p. 200): the Apostle’s faith becomes love, and so he urges Philemon to exercise his faith unceasingly so as to become ever more the vehicle and minister of the Redeemer’s love, the only true source of authentic and lasting liberty (Vanni, 2008, p. 201-202)²¹. By employing this verbal adjective to also describe this slave, Paul—who has heard of Philemon’s love for all the saints and his faith toward the Lord Jesus (cf. v. 5)—is implicitly exhorting his own beloved brother Philemon to unconditionally and wholeheartedly love his beloved brother Onesimus as well. In the prescript of his Letter to the Romans, Paul calls his addressees, both Jewish and Gentile Christians, free, freedmen or slaves, “all God’s beloved in Rome” (Rom 1:7). By virtue of their shared faith in Jesus Christ, all the Christians in Philemon’s family and house church are also beloved by God and have become his sons and daughters, and thus also brothers and sisters of his only begotten Son. Where the Spirit of God abides, there is no longer a difference in status between free and slave or rich and poor, since all have become one in Jesus, God’s Son. “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might

¹⁹ Cf. “[God] putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Cor 1:22); “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor 5:5); “This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:14).

²⁰ The noun ἀγάπη (“love”) and its derivative adjective ἀγαπητός (“beloved”) appear 5x in Philemon (ἀγάπη in vv. 5, 7, 9 and ἀγαπητός in vv. 1, 16), but the verb ἀγαπάω is not found in the letter. Verses 12, 18 and 20 also convey warm affection and loving care with intense feeling and warm fraternal affection.

²¹ “Paul moves wholly in an orbit of love. This path of love, practised with a radical and total involvement of his whole self, is, for him, the highest expression of his freedom”.

be the firstborn within a large family” (Rom 8:29). Thanks to Paul’s apostolic ministry, Onesimus too has also been conformed to the image of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

Final Considerations: Reflections on Fraternal Love, Christian Fraternity and the Ministry of Reconciliation

The figure of Onesimus is not only the protagonist of an event that is limited to his individual experience: he is also the main character in a much broader context. On the one hand, he is the point of meeting and contact between Paul and Philemon, on the other hand, he is the discriminating factor between two conceptions of life. With the “Onesimus event”, Philemon is put to the test with regard to his behavior as a Christian and head of his *domus ecclesia*. Paul feels it, he knows it: indeed, having praised him for his love and his faith in Jesus (cf. v. 5), he next beseeches the Lord that Philemon’s good intentions be translated into practice, into good works. On his side, as far as possible, Paul has done his part; now it is Philemon’s job to bring things to a conclusion and do the rest. Onesimus is, thus, the touchstone, the watershed, the dividing line between two worlds, between two opposed ways of thinking: that which is according to the flesh, that is, the closed and egoistic thinking of the world which privileges the way of “having” (Fromm, 1976), and that which is according to the Spirit, that is, altruistic and selfless, animated by the Spirit of love, harbinger of the heavenly community, which values things according to the category of “being”, where there is a place of freedom for all. Striking for their allusiveness are the words used at the beginning (cf. v. 3), where Paul invokes God as “Father” and the “Lord” Jesus Christ. Is this a presentiment and preannouncement of a spiritual fatherhood such as Paul will declare himself to have in relation to Onesimus whom he has brought to the faith, the important new information that Paul wants to communicate to Philemon as head of his house church and the “patron”-owner and “lord” of his slave? Did the Apostle, perhaps, want to alert his beloved brother and primary addressee by declaring that only one can truly be called Lord and Master, namely Jesus Christ?

We can rightly claim that Paul's letter is based from beginning to end on the counterpoint slavery-freedom at the service of fraternal love in Christ. On several occasions, the Apostle insists on this important point (cf. vv. 9.14): human responsibility is a firm point of his moral theology. "Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say" (v. 21). How best to interpret such an implicit request between two brothers in the Lord about another runaway/redeemed brother who is also Philemon's property? The Christian master's decision vis-à-vis his Christian slave and newfound brother will surely derive from an act of free will and fraternal charity on his part. Given his celebrated and well-known love for all the holy ones and his faith toward the Lord Jesus (cf. 4), will this paterfamilias not also love his slave/brother Onesimus even more and so manumit him? If Philemon owes Paul even his own self, how could Philemon possibly refuse his imprisoned and beloved brother's request to unconditionally love Paul's newly-begotten son and so refresh and console Paul's heart in Christ?

Lastly, a closing thought on the Letter to Philemon as an extraordinary example of fraternal charity on the part of the Apostle Paul and Timothy. I noted above in the first paragraph, the important role of both as letter sender and co-sender in their brief message to the paterfamilias and his family, both nuclear and extended, in Colossae. If we accept the hypothesis that Onesimus fled from his master and then requested help from Paul during his house arrest, then the slave would have committed a serious crime that needed to be addressed by Philemon. If Paul is sending his newly-fathered son back to his beloved friend, is he not thus performing, along with Timothy, a good deed meant to reconcile a slave to his master, to Philemon's extended family and also to all in his house church who worship together? Both Paul and Timothy are also the sender and co-sender of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, a very significant Pauline text in which the Apostle to the Gentiles reflects on their roles and vocation as ministers of the Gospel. 2Cor 5:11-21 presents a profound and very personal reflection on the Christian ministry of reconciliation. Could Onesimus not be considered an example of "a

new creation” (2Cor 5:17) realized by God in Christ through Paul’s own ministry in chains?

¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor 5:18-21).

In Second Corinthians, Paul and Timothy sincerely appealed to the Corinthians on behalf of Christ himself that they be reconciled to God and to one another, a community divided by many competing internal factions. In Philemon, could there not be a similar appeal to the paterfamilias and all the members of his house church, perhaps also divided into factions on account of the *servus fugitivus* Onesimus? Most probably some would have wanted the slave’s just condemnation, yet others may have hoped for his safe return and happy meeting with their paterfamilias. Is the Letter to Philemon not also an example of appeal for the Colossians to be reconciled to God and to one another in Christ? Is it not also an exhortation brilliantly written in the spirit of authentic freedom and genuine fraternal love for a real reconciliation among all the brothers and sisters of the church at Colossae? A rapprochement which must first begin with a brotherly reunion between a forgiving master praised for his love for all the saints and his faith toward the Lord Jesus (cf. v. 5) and the forgiven letter carrier, Onesimus, at last reborn, pardoned and redeemed in Christ and now fully useful to and beloved by both Philemon and Paul (cf. v. 11)?

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Trabalho submetido em 03/07/2024.
Aceito em 29/09/2024.

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