

Fr. John Sassani
Homily Given on September 5, 2010
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Liturgical Year C

I was 8 years old during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I have mostly vague recollections of it, but there are two things I remember very clearly. The first was my fear that my father would have to go to war. The second was something my mother said during that time. The context, of course, was the possibility of a Communist attack on the US. We were talking at supper, talking about the crisis and the “godless communists”. And my mother said, “If I have to die for my faith in Christ, well, that’s what I’d have to do.” I was astounded.

Christ is calling his disciples to prioritize their lives around him. My mother did just that – and said as much during the Cuban Missile Crisis. She built on a foundation that her family laid; I built on a foundation that my family laid. One of my mother’s dearest possessions was our – her family’s – importance in her life – and hers in our lives. But Christ had also captured her imagination in such a way that Christ took priority over us.

In today’s second reading from Sacred Scripture, Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul give us another example of this. The letter of St. Paul to Philemon is the shortest letter of St. Paul that we have – less than 500 words! It is a personal letter. Philemon was a member of the church at Colossae, and St. Paul sent this personal letter to Philemon at the same time as his letter to the Colossians as a community.

Philemon was a church leader who owned a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus escaped and fled to Rome; coincidentally, he met Paul while Paul was in prison. Philemon legally could have had Onesimus whipped, imprisoned, or crucified for escaping. Paul though writes and asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back – not as an escaped slave, not as a slave, but as a brother in the Lord.

Paul here is not advocating for the abolishment of slavery. He is advocating for an idea that would lead to it: that in Christ, we are one (Galatians 3:26-28: For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.)

This idea, born of faith in Christ, changed the relationship between slaves and masters. Eventually, it changed the institution of slavery itself. Ideas – Gospel ideas – what St. Paul calls *having the mind of Christ*, is crucial. My mother reordered her natural priorities as she put on the mind of Christ.

This begs the question: What ideas of ours need to be reformed by Christ and brought into harmony with his mind and heart? What needs to be reformed so that we can let our faith influence how we treat one another, the choices we make, the things we endure and suffer, and the unequivocal stands we have to take?

Christ came to change the world: heart by heart, mind by mind, idea by idea. He speaks now every day by prayer. He speaks every day in the Sacred Scriptures – to influence, develop, or change our ideas. As we gather for the Eucharist today, let’s give him the freedom to do that.