

## **23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Cycle C, 9.8.19

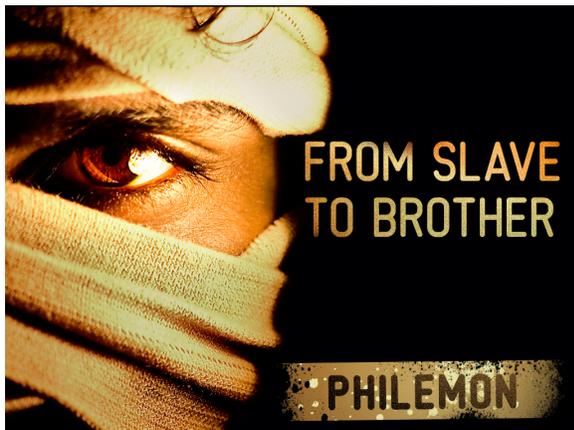
Wisdom 9:13-18; Philemon 1-25;

Luke 14:25-33

### **FINDING WISDOM FOR THE CRISES WE FACE**

St. Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest epistle and the only truly personal letter in the Christian scriptures addressed from one individual to another. Yet its 335 words offer us insight into the gospel and food for thought regarding the troubling and complex social issues we face as individuals, as Church and society. It's worth our attention and reflection. While the details of the situation and characters involved in Paul's letter to Philemon are sketchy, there are some things we can ascertain.

Philemon was obviously a person of means since he had slaves and since his home was large enough to provide a place where the Christians could meet for prayer and fellowship. Paul mentions the "Church that meets at your home." Onesimus, whose name means "useful" – an appropriately common name for slaves in that time – ran away from his master, perhaps having stolen something from him, since Paul offers to pay for any losses Philemon incurred because of the slave.



Paul meets this runaway slave; they may have been cellmates in prison and Onesimus helped Paul in some way. Paul

calls him "my child" which could indicate that Paul baptized the slave. Suddenly a new relationship is established with this slave; now he is a brother in Christ, infused with the Holy Spirit, no longer just a piece of property, but a child of God in the full stature of Christ. So now Paul is in a moral quandary. What does he do? Legally, Onesimus had no rights according to Roman law. His whole existence depended upon his owner. The Roman Empire at the time had some 60 million slaves and the laws concerning them were very strict. Had he been caught, Onesimus may have lived the rest of his days with an "F" branded on his forehead, for *fugitivus* – fugitive.

Locked in prison, Paul can hardly take on the entire institution of slavery which was an accepted practice and norm in the first century, and he had to recognize Philemon's legal rights as a slave owner. Paul didn't have the authority to command the man to take the slave back and forgive him. Paul's dilemma forced him to operate in a different manner; he had to change the heart of one person since he couldn't change the laws governing all people. He urges his fellow Christian to change his heart and his attitude. Paul sought to transform their relationship from one of ownership to partnership, from legality to love.

The tone of Paul's letter is a tender invitation to compassion and understanding. There is nothing heavy-handed in his use of authority. He is fully respectful of Philemon's rights and responsibilities. He appeals to him on a different level – from the mind and heart of Christ, using gentle persuasion rather than the heavy hand of one who throws his weight and power around. *Receive him back*, Paul urges his fellow Christian, as

*more than a slave, but as a brother in the flesh, and now, a brother in the Lord.*

As I reflect on Paul's dilemma, I can't help but think about the many moral quandaries facing us in our world today, including the issue of immigration. The news reports of children in detention centers separated from their families have opened the eyes of many people and broken our hearts as we witness such innocent suffering.



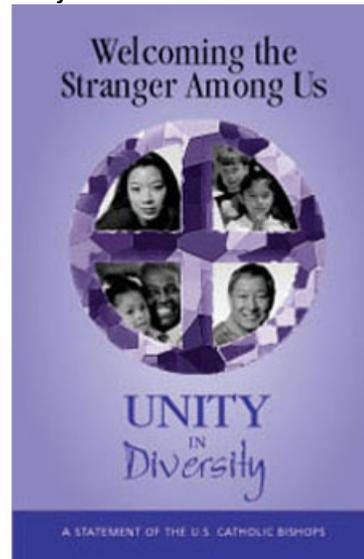
The U.S. bishops' pastoral statement *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* is firmly grounded in the Church's social teaching. Understanding and appreciating Catholic social teaching offers us guidance for our own moral development as we wrestle with these issues, and helps us to put our faith into action.

The bishops articulated three principles of Catholic social teaching. The first principle is: ***People have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families.*** Under this principle the Church teaches that the native does not have superior rights over the immigrant. Before God all are equal; the earth was given by God to all.

When a person cannot achieve a meaningful life in his or her own land, that person has the right to move. The second principle states: ***A country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration.*** We understand that people

migrate because they are desperate and the opportunity for a safe and secure life does not exist in their own land. Here, however, Catholic social teaching is realistic: While people have the right to move, no country has the duty to receive so many immigrants that its social and economic life are jeopardized.

The third principle of Catholic social teaching on immigration is where the scriptures and our faith are brought to bear: ***A country must regulate its borders with justice and mercy.*** A country's regulation of borders and control of immigration must be governed by concern for all people and by mercy and justice.

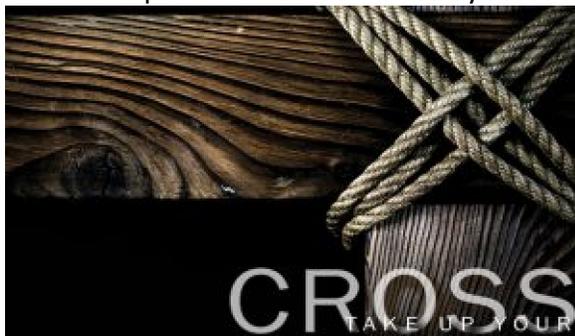


A nation may not simply decide that it wants to provide for its own people and no others. A sincere commitment to the needs of all must prevail. In our modern world where communication and travel are much easier, the burden of emergencies can't be placed solely on nations immediately adjacent to the crises. Justice dictates that the world community contribute resources toward shelter, food, medical services, and basic welfare. These three Catholic social principles don't resolve the present debate in our country, but they give us guidance in

forming our own conscience as we assess current turmoil and political rhetoric.

Paul's short letter to his fellow Christian offers us – as a society and as individuals – a different way to respond. One author proposed a distinction that I find helpful. He speaks about the “Dominant Narrative,” that is, the standard way of doing things, versus an “Alternative Narrative,” or a new way of interacting and being. In Paul and Philemon's moral dilemma, the “dominant narrative” or standard way of operating would have seen compassionate treatment of a slave as unthinkable. There could only have been harsh repercussions for the runaway slave. But the fact that a slave might be converted to the Lord Jesus really posed a great challenge to early Christianity. What should be done with such a slave, if he transgressed? Can he still be punished severely, cursed and discriminated against?

This is the way that needed to be challenged. Using an “alternative narrative,” Paul took the initiative by proposing a more equal society, where slave and master were now brothers in the Lord. Paul wanted Philemon to make that change freely, not out of obligation, but from his heart, knowing it was the right thing to do. As Catholic Christians, no matter what our political persuasion, we follow the path marked out for us by Jesus.



It has never been an easy path. The challenge of today's gospel tells us to make our priorities those of Jesus who resisted the “dominant narrative” of his time and culture, even though it led to the Cross -- the cross which he invites us to pick up and carry.

We know from our own history that it took centuries before slavery was recognized as immoral, and the rise of neo-Nazi and white supremacy movements demonstrates both here and in Europe that we haven't moved far enough toward equality among all people.



The “dominant narrative” was and still is difficult to topple. Moral development and social consciousness don't happen at once, but only by changing one heart at a time. In our church and in our world, in our homes and in our communities, it's a temptation to take the easy way out, avoiding dialogue when it comes to difficult issues, but Paul's manner – as we witness in this brief but poignant epistle – his care, and the love he showed for all people, regardless of their status, continues to recommend his example to our leaders and to all of us.

*John Kasper, OSFS*