

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Onesimus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 16

IN BRIEF

Saint Onesimus

Slave from Colossae baptized by Saint Paul, for whom the apostle wrote the Letter to Philemon.

Feast day	February 16
Born	1st century, Colossae (Phrygia, now in Turkey), according to the Letter to the Colossians
Died	Date unknown; martyrdom according to tradition, Rome, according to tradition
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	1st century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Onesimus

Saint Onesimus was a slave of the 1st century who became a Christian through Saint Paul. Paul sent him back to his master, Philemon, carrying a short letter that is now part of the New Testament. In it, the apostle asks that the runaway be welcomed "as a beloved brother." An ancient tradition later made Onesimus a bishop and a martyr. He is celebrated on February 16 in the West and on February 15 in the Eastern Churches.

Who was Saint Onesimus?

Onesimus belonged to Philemon, a Christian of Colossae, a town of Asia Minor in what is now Turkey. The local Christian community met in Philemon's house. For a reason the letter does not explain, perhaps after causing his master some loss, Onesimus ran away.

He made his way to Paul, who was then a prisoner. The letter does not say where Paul was held. Onesimus put himself at the apostle's service, heard the Gospel from him and was baptized. Paul speaks of him with great tenderness, calling him "my child, whom I have begotten in my chains" (Philemon 10).

Under Roman law, a fugitive slave had to be returned to his master and could face severe punishment. Paul did not want to keep Onesimus without Philemon's consent. So he sent him back to Colossae, carrying a letter.



Saint Onesimus in the Menologion of Basil II, a Byzantine manuscript of the 11th century.

Key dates in the life of Saint Onesimus

- **AD 50s-60s**: Onesimus flees Colossae, meets Paul in prison and is baptized.
- **Shortly after**: He returns to Colossae with Paul's Letter to Philemon; the Letter to the Colossians names him "the faithful and beloved brother."
- **Early 2nd century**: Saint Ignatius of Antioch praises an Onesimus, bishop of Ephesus, whom tradition identifies with him.
- **Date unknown**: According to tradition, martyrdom in Rome.

A unique letter in the New Testament

The Letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's writings. It is addressed to Philemon, but also to Apphia, to Archippus and to the church that meets in Philemon's house, and it is co-signed by Saint Timothy. It contains no long

doctrinal teaching and no general rule about slavery. It is a personal request, written with great delicacy.

Paul plays on the name Onesimus, which means "useful" in Greek. Once useless to his master, he is now useful to both of them (Philemon 11). Paul offers to repay anything Onesimus might owe: "If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me," he writes, adding in his own hand, "I will repay it" (Philemon 18-19). Above all, he asks Philemon to receive him "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (Philemon 16).

This little text does not abolish slavery, which Roman society took for granted. But at the heart of a relationship between master and slave, it sets a new brotherhood founded on baptism, which changes the way each one looks at the other.

"The faithful and beloved brother"

Onesimus appears a second time in the New Testament. At the end of the Letter to the Colossians, Paul announces that he is sending Tychicus to the community, "with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (Colossians 4:9). The former runaway is now presented as a messenger of the apostle, trusted to bring news to the Church of his own town.

Bishop and martyr?

Around the year 110, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, wrote to the Christians of Ephesus. In that letter he praises their bishop Onesimus, "a man of inexpressible love." Nothing proves that this bishop was the former slave, but tradition believed it. The care taken to preserve Paul's short note, which deals with a private matter, might be explained by the role Onesimus later played in the Church.

Tradition also reports that he died a martyr in Rome, stoned after being tortured. These details cannot be verified, and the Church presents them as a tradition rather than as established history.



Saint Paul and Onesimus, after an old illustration.

Why is Saint Onesimus invoked for reconciliation and for those in bondage?

The Church has not given Saint Onesimus an official patronage. Yet his story makes him a natural intercessor in several situations:

- **Victims of slavery and human trafficking**: he lived as a man without rights, and Scripture tells of his conversion and his new dignity as a brother in Christ.
- **People who have run away or feel lost**: his flight became the road on which he met Christ.

- **Reconciliation**: his return to Philemon is one of the first stories of forgiveness between Christians separated by a wrong.
- **Relationships at work**: Paul's letter invites masters and servants, employers and employees, to see one another first as brothers and sisters.

Onesimus is one of the few saints whose conversion, as a socially powerless man, is told in Scripture itself. His story says that no one is too small to become a brother in Christ, and that faith calls us to rethink our relationships, even in work and dependence.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Onesimus in art

Images of Saint Onesimus are rare. In Byzantine art, such as the Menologion of Basil II, he appears in scenes of his martyrdom. In Western illustrations he is usually shown as a young man at the side of Saint Paul in prison, sometimes while the apostle writes or dictates the Letter to Philemon. When he is shown as a bishop, he may carry the vestments and book of the bishops of the early Church.

Where to pray to Saint Onesimus

No major shrine is dedicated to Saint Onesimus. The site of ancient Colossae, near the town of Honaz in southwestern Turkey, is still a largely unexcavated mound, but it recalls the town where Philemon's house church met. Ephesus, where tradition places his ministry as bishop, is visited by many Christian pilgrims. The simplest way to honor him is to read the Letter to Philemon, which takes only a few minutes, and to pray with it on his feast day, February 16.

To pray with him, you can use the prayer to Saint Onesimus or the novena to Saint Onesimus.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Onesimus for Reconciliation

No ancient prayer to Saint Onesimus has come into common use, but the Letter to Philemon, written for him by Saint Paul, gives us words to pray with: brotherhood, forgiveness, a new beginning. Below you will find a short passage of that letter, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A word from the Letter to Philemon

> *"Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother."*

Source: Letter of Saint Paul to Philemon, verses 15-16. Translation by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Onesimus for reconciliation

Saint Onesimus, you fled your master's house and found Christ on the road, through the chains of Saint Paul: pray for all who are lost, who run away, or who no longer know where to turn. May they meet someone who will speak to them of God.

You came back to Colossae carrying a letter of peace: help me to take the first step toward those I have wronged, and to welcome those who return to me asking for forgiveness. Give me the humility to receive them, not as debtors, but as brothers and sisters.

You were a man without rights, and you became a beloved brother: I entrust to you the victims of slavery and human trafficking, migrant workers and all who are treated as objects. May they find freedom, justice and people ready to defend them.

Your name means "useful": make my life useful to God and to others, in my work and in my family.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Onesimus is celebrated on February 16 in the Latin Church and on February 15 in the Eastern Churches. You can pray to him before a difficult reconciliation, for a family member who has broken off contact, for someone who has left home, or on February 8, the feast of Saint Josephine Bakhita and the World Day of Prayer and Reflection against Human Trafficking. It also fits well after reading the Letter to Philemon, which takes only a few minutes.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Onesimus, and discover the life of Saint Onesimus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Onesimus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, drawn from the Letter to Philemon and the Letter to the Colossians. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on February 7; it ends on February 15, the day before the feast of Saint Onesimus on February 16. It can also be prayed at any time of year, especially when you are seeking reconciliation or praying for people who are not free.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps you live the prayer during the day. The Letter to Philemon has only twenty-five verses: you may want to read it once at the start of the novena, then return to one verse each day.

Day 1: A man without rights

Onesimus was a slave in Colossae, the property of another man. He had no say over his work, his time or his future. Yet God had a plan for him, as he has for every person, whatever place society gives them.

Prayer: Lord, you see the people the world forgets. Teach me to see them too, and to respect the dignity of every person I meet.

Today: Learn the name of someone who serves you without being noticed (a cleaner, a cashier, a delivery driver) and thank them.

Day 2: The flight

For a reason we do not know, Onesimus ran away. Perhaps he had done wrong, perhaps he was afraid. His flight was not yet a good choice, but God would use it to bring him to Paul.

Prayer: Lord, you can bring good even out of my mistakes. I entrust to you the paths on which I have strayed, and the people I know who are running away.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has left home or broken off contact with their family.

Day 3: The meeting with Paul

The runaway found Paul, himself a prisoner. Two men in chains met, and one gave the other the Gospel. Grace often reaches us through people who are themselves poor and weak.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the people who spoke to me of you. Make me, in my turn, a witness for someone else.

Today: Thank, in person or in prayer, the one who first helped you to believe.

Day 4: Born again

Paul calls Onesimus "my child, whom I have begotten in my chains" (Philemon 10). Through baptism, the slave became a son of God and a brother of the apostle. Nothing in his past could take that away.

Prayer: Father, thank you for the gift of my baptism. Renew in me the joy of being your child.

Today: Find out the date of your baptism, or bless yourself slowly with holy water.

Day 5: From useless to useful

Onesimus means "useful." Paul writes that he had once been useless to Philemon, but is now useful to both of them (Philemon 11). Christ does not throw anyone away; he gives each person a role in his work.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel useless or rejected, remind me that you have a place for me. Show me how I can serve today.

Today: Offer a concrete service to a colleague, a neighbor or a member of your family.

Day 6: Going back

Paul did not keep Onesimus, though he would have liked to. He sent him back to Colossae, and Onesimus agreed to return to the master he had fled. It takes courage to face the consequences of our actions and to repair what we have broken.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to take the first step toward those I have hurt, and the humility to ask for forgiveness.

Today: Write a message, make a call or prepare a word of apology to someone you have wronged.

Day 7: "Charge it to me"

Paul offered to pay whatever Onesimus owed: "charge it to me," he wrote (Philemon 18). In this the apostle imitates Christ, who took our debts upon himself. To love is sometimes to carry what belongs to another.

Prayer: Jesus, you paid the price of my sins. Make me generous enough to bear a part of my brothers' and sisters' burdens.

Today: Help someone in a practical way with a burden that is not yours: a task, a debt, a worry.

Day 8: A beloved brother

Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (Philemon 16). Faith changes the way we look at one another: before any title or position, we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from contempt and prejudice. Help me to welcome every person as a brother or sister.

Today: Pray for the victims of slavery and human trafficking, or support an organization that defends them.

Day 9: A faithful servant of the Church

The Letter to the Colossians calls Onesimus "the faithful and beloved brother" (Colossians 4:9). Tradition says that he became a bishop and gave his life for Christ. The runaway slave ended his life as a shepherd of God's people.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Onesimus, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Make me faithful to the end, wherever you send me. Amen.

Today: Read the whole Letter to Philemon slowly, and thank God for one person with whom you have been reconciled.

Closing prayer

Saint Onesimus, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. You knew slavery, flight, conversion and return; you were welcomed as a brother and served the Church with love. Pray for all who are not free, for families divided by a wrong, and for all who are looking for a way home. Obtain for us the grace to forgive and to be forgiven, and to live as brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Onesimus and the prayer to Saint Onesimus.

Credits and sources

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