

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Philemon of Colossae

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: November 22

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IN BRIEF

Saint Philemon of Colossae

Christian of Colossae to whom Saint Paul wrote the letter about the slave Onesimus.

Feast day	November 22
Died	1st century, Colossae, according to tradition
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	1st century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Philemon for Forgiveness and Welcome

Novena to Saint Philemon

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Philemon of Colossae

Saint Philemon was a Christian of Colossae, in Asia Minor, to whom Saint Paul addressed the shortest of his letters, the Letter to Philemon. It concerns Onesimus, a slave of Philemon who had run away and whom Paul, after leading him to baptism, sent back to his master, asking him to welcome him "as a beloved brother." The Roman Martyrology commemorates Philemon and his wife Apphia on November 22.

Who was Saint Philemon?

Everything we know for certain about Philemon comes from the letter Paul wrote to him and, indirectly, from the Letter to the Colossians. He was a well-to-do Christian who owned slaves, and a Christian community met in his home: Paul greets "the church in your house." He probably lived in Colossae, a small town in Phrygia, in present-day Turkey, since Onesimus is introduced to the Colossians as "one of you" (Colossians 4:9).

Paul calls him "beloved" and his "fellow worker." He suggests that Philemon owed him his conversion: "you owe me even your own self," he writes (verse 19). Their meeting may have taken place in Ephesus, where the Apostle stayed for a long time and from where the Gospel spread throughout the province of Asia. The Church of Colossae itself had been founded by Epaphras, a disciple of Paul.

Key dates

- **The 50s AD**: Converted to the Christian faith, probably by Saint Paul.
- **Afterward**: The Christian community of Colossae gathers in his house.
- **The 50s or early 60s AD**: Receives Paul's letter, written in captivity, perhaps in Ephesus or in Rome.

- **Date unknown**: Dies; according to later traditions, he was martyred at Colossae with Apphia.

The Letter to Philemon

The Letter to Philemon has only twenty-five verses, which makes it the shortest of Paul's letters in the New Testament and one of the most personal. Paul wrote it from prison, together with Timothy. He addressed it to Philemon, but also to "Apphia our sister," to Archippus, "our fellow soldier," and to the whole church that met in his house. Apphia is traditionally considered Philemon's wife, and Archippus is sometimes thought to have been their son, though this is not certain.

Paul begins by giving thanks for Philemon's faith and love, through which the hearts of the saints have been refreshed. Then he comes to the purpose of his letter.

Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, had run away, perhaps after wronging his master. He found his way to Paul, who led him to the faith: Paul calls him "my child, whom I have begotten in my chains." The Apostle would have liked to keep him at his side, but he did not want to do anything without Philemon's consent. So he sent him back, playing on the meaning of the name Onesimus, which means "useful": once useless, he had now become useful to both of them.

"As a beloved brother"

The heart of the letter is a request full of tact. Paul does not give orders; he appeals in the name of love. He asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (verse 16), and even to receive him as he would receive Paul himself.

If Onesimus has caused any loss, Paul offers to pay it himself, and writes this with his own hand. He closes by saying he is confident that Philemon will do "even more" than he asks.

Paul does not directly attack the institution of slavery, which shaped the whole of ancient society. But by making master and slave brothers in Christ, he set down a principle that undermines it from within. Many readers, since the Fathers of the Church, have seen this letter as a small masterpiece of Christian humanity.

What tradition tells us

We do not know how Philemon responded, but the very fact that the letter was preserved suggests that he granted Paul's request. In the second century, Saint Ignatius of Antioch mentions a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus; some have suggested he was the slave of the letter, but there is no proof.

Eastern traditions expanded Philemon's story. They count him among the seventy-two disciples, make him bishop of Colossae, and tell that he was stoned with Apphia, Archippus and Onesimus during a pagan festival. These late accounts cannot be verified. The Roman Martyrology simply commemorates, on November 22, Saints Philemon and Apphia, Christians of Colossae, whose faith and love Paul praises.

Why is Saint Philemon a model for Christians today?

Philemon is the Christian who opened his home to the Church and who was asked to open his heart as well, to the one who had wronged him. His story invites us to see in every person, whatever their status, a brother or sister for whom Christ died, and to forgive in the name of love rather than demand what we are owed.

We can pray to him for families who welcome others, for communities that gather in homes, and for all who need to be reconciled. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Philemon and the novena to Saint Philemon.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Philemon in art

- **The scroll**: Eastern icons show him holding a scroll, a reminder of the letter Paul sent him.
- **With his companions**: he is sometimes shown together with Apphia, Archippus and Onesimus, who are honored with him in Eastern tradition.
- **A rare figure in Western art**: because so little is known of him, he appears mostly in Eastern icons and in illustrations of the letter.

Where to pray to Saint Philemon

- **Colossae** (Turkey): the ancient site of the town, near Honaz, still largely unexcavated.
- In any church on November 22, the day of his commemoration in the Roman Martyrology.
- At home, by reading the Letter to Philemon, one of the shortest books of the Bible.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Philemon for Forgiveness and Welcome

Saint Philemon, the Christian of Colossae to whom Saint Paul wrote, opened his home to the Church and was asked to open his heart to Onesimus, the slave who had wronged him. No ancient prayer in his name is in common use, so here is a prayer inspired by Paul's letter, to ask for the grace of welcome and forgiveness.

Prayer to Saint Philemon

Saint Philemon, beloved friend and fellow worker of Saint Paul, you opened your house so that the Church could gather there to pray. Teach me to make my home a place of welcome, faith and peace.

Saint Paul gave thanks for your love, which refreshed the hearts of the saints. Make me generous and attentive to those around me, so that they find comfort and not burden in my presence.

You were asked to receive Onesimus no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. Help me to see in every person, whatever their place in the world, a brother or sister for whom Christ died.

When I have been wronged, give me the grace to forgive, and not to demand what I am owed. When I have done wrong, give me the courage to return and ask forgiveness, as Onesimus did.

Saint Philemon, with Saint Apphia, pray for families, for communities that meet in homes, and for all who need to be reconciled. I entrust to you this intention: (name it in silence).

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Philemon is commemorated with Saint Apphia on November 22 in the Roman Martyrology. You can pray to him:

- when you need to forgive someone who has hurt you or caused you loss;
- before a difficult conversation aimed at reconciliation;

- for families who open their home to guests, to the poor or to prayer groups;
- for small Christian communities and house churches;
- for an end to every form of slavery and human trafficking today.

Pray with the Letter to Philemon

The best way to pray with Saint Philemon is to read the letter Paul wrote to him. It takes only a few minutes. Read it slowly, then stop on verse 16, where Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother." Ask yourself who, in your life, the Lord is asking you to receive in this way.

To pray with him over nine days, follow the novena to Saint Philemon. You can also read the life of Saint Philemon.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Philemon

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the Letter of Saint Paul to Philemon. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on November 22, the day the Roman Martyrology commemorates Saints Philemon and Apphia, begin it on November 14. It can also be prayed at any time, especially when you are seeking the grace to forgive or to be reconciled.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The Letter to Philemon is only twenty-five verses long: you may like to read it once at the beginning of the novena, then return to it each day. The small act suggested for each day helps you live what you have prayed.

Day 1: Called to faith

Philemon owed his faith to Saint Paul; Paul even tells him, "you owe me even your own self." Every Christian has received the faith through others. Faith is a gift handed on, and it creates bonds of gratitude.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who brought me to faith. Make me grateful, and make me in turn a witness for others.

Today: Pray by name for the person who first spoke to you of God.

Day 2: A house open to the Church

Paul greets "the church in your house." In Philemon's home, the first Christians of Colossae gathered to pray and break bread. A Christian home is meant to be open, a place where faith is lived and shared.

Prayer: Lord, make my home a place of prayer, welcome and peace.

Today: Pray together with your family or housemates, even briefly, or invite someone to share a meal.

Day 3: Love that refreshes hearts

Paul gives thanks for Philemon's faith and love, which have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Some people leave us lighter and more hopeful after we meet them. Love has this power to give rest to others.

Prayer: Lord, let my presence bring comfort and encouragement to those I meet.

Today: Offer a word of encouragement to someone who is tired or discouraged.

Day 4: The one who ran away

Onesimus fled from his master, perhaps after doing him wrong. Yet his flight led him to Paul and to Christ. God can bring good even out of our failures and our wanderings.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the ways in which I have run away from you and from others. Bring me back to you.

Today: Examine your conscience and, if you can, go to the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Day 5: Once useless, now useful

Paul plays on the name Onesimus, which means "useful": once useless, he has now become useful. Grace does not leave us as we were. No one is beyond the power of Christ to renew.

Prayer: Lord, renew me by your grace, and help me never to give up on anyone.

Today: Give a second chance to someone you have written off.

Day 6: Asking rather than commanding

Paul could have given orders, but he chose to appeal in the name of love. He respected Philemon's freedom. True authority persuades with gentleness and leaves room for the other to choose the good.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to ask with gentleness and to respect the freedom of others.

Today: Replace a demand with a kind request.

Day 7: More than a slave, a brother

Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother." In Christ, social rank no longer defines who we are. Every person has the dignity of a child of God.

Prayer: Lord, help me to see every person as a brother or sister for whom you died.

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

Day 8: "Charge it to me"

If Onesimus has caused any loss, Paul offers to pay it himself, writing it with his own hand. Paul stands between the two men, as Christ stands between us and the Father, taking our debt upon himself.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you paid our debt on the cross. Make me a peacemaker who helps others to be reconciled.

Today: Help two people who are at odds to take a step toward each other, or take that step yourself.

Day 9: Even more than asked

Paul ends his letter confident that Philemon will do even more than he asks. We do not know Philemon's answer, but the letter was kept and treasured. Forgiveness given generously goes beyond what justice requires.

Prayer: Lord, give me a generous heart that forgives fully and loves beyond measure.

Today: Forgive someone fully, without keeping account of the wrong.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Philemon, friend of Saint Paul, you opened your home to the Church and were asked to open your heart to a brother who had wronged you. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Obtain for me a welcoming home, a forgiving heart and the joy of reconciliation. With Saint Apphia and Saint Onesimus, pray for families, for divided communities and for all who suffer in slavery today. Amen.*

This novena is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer. You can also pray the prayer to Saint Philemon.

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