

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time C

In a world so often marked with conflicts, tensions, and division, here a simple but profound sign of hope – *you can still buy Thank You cards*. In a rather surprising comment, St. John Paul said that building a true culture of life begins with one factor. You might think he'd say just laws, or persuasive speeches, or various services available to people to support the choice for life. While these have their place, John Paul said a culture of life begins with GRATITUDE ... the awareness that all that we have, all we are, all that we see, is a GIFT from God, given out of love. *Sincere gratitude makes us aware that we are stewards, not owners, of what we encounter in life, and we tend to take better care of things that we value as gifts from someone, given simply and purely out of love for us.*

The story of Philemon and Onesimus gives us a window into Jesus' words about renouncing all our possessions. A little background will help. Philemon was a well-to-do and fairly recent Christian convert, who probably learned about Jesus from Paul himself. In the social structures of the time, Onesimus was Philemon's slave, who had robbed his master and run away. Somehow, Paul encountered Onesimus while they were fellow prisoners in Rome – maybe Onesimus was arrested for this very theft – and Paul also converted him to Christianity. So both master and slave are fruits of Paul's ministry. Now Paul sends the servant back to the master. Why? In the Empire of his time, Paul recognizes that this is an inevitable legal reality – in Roman law, Philemon the master would have a claim on Onesimus the servant, and Onesimus would be going back either way. But Paul takes the opportunity to elevate this situation to something much greater by appealing to Philemon's new faith – *telling him that in Christ, this servant now also has a claim on his master*. Paul knew the small Christian community of the time did not have the influence to overturn the age-old injustice of human slavery, just as Mother Teresa could not eradicate the world's poverty. In the same way, we live in the midst of a secular culture that we cannot always change; but we can always be a positive influence rather than simply complain about things. So we learn from Paul and

St. Teresa of Kolkata as they both demonstrate a way to transform society from within, **changing how people live in the same reality around them, aware that their bond in Jesus Christ meant more than any other circumstance.** In heaven, there will be no slaves and masters, only sisters and brothers in one family ... **and the challenge of Christian community – in every age – is to anticipate that kind of charity already here and now.** Paul is gentle with his friend, but not particularly subtle – “Philemon, here is your chance to prove your faith is real ... I send back this man, your servant, but now as a brother, your equal in the faith. Which will he be to you now ... slave, or brother? Something you own as your possession, or someone you respect as your equal?”

What Philemon decided about Onesimus, we aren't told. But the lesson remains for us. While there are always some whom God calls literally and freely to surrender all possessions, even they cannot live with nothing at all. **Renunciation is not about being deprived of material things; it is about how we regard them in our lives.** We will leave Mass today and go back to the same home, the same belongings, the same people. So, like Philemon, we are asked to see the possessions and people in our lives in a new way ... accepting them back, not just as our possessions, **but as God's gifts.** This kind of renunciation – still having but without possessing – may require an even deeper conversion than simply no longer owning something. It goes beyond what is in our inventory, to reveal what is in our hearts.

Like the first Christians, we can't resolve all the problems and injustices in the world around us; but we can do the right thing in the moment and so plant seeds of Gospel change from within. **This week, send a Thank You card or two.** It is a small step, but it can help us recognize that all we have, all we are, and all we encounter, is a GIFT from God ... **for when we are grateful for a gift, we will take good care of it.**