

New Brighton, Saturday 18th March 2023

The Epistles of the Captivity: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians & Philemon

1 Introduction

“Ora et Labora”

The motto of the Benedictine order would perfectly summarize St Paul's situation, while he was a prisoner during years 60-62 in Rome. After being arrested in Jerusalem, he finally appealed to the justice of the emperor, as he was a Roman citizen. He boarded a ship and went to Rome, as we know from the conclusion of the Acts of the Apostles¹

And he remained two whole years in his own hired lodging, and he received all that came in to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, without prohibition.²

These last verses of the Acts tell us about the situation of St Paul, when he arrived in Rome. He was more forced to stay in a designated house, than in prison, as testifies the fact he could receive anyone coming to him, and that he had to pay for his lodging. His last stay in the company of St Peter in the Mamertine Prison was more severe, under the persecution of emperor Nero.

St Paul could not visit anymore the Christian communities, which must have been a real penance for this very active apostle, but, accepting his miseries for the glory of Christ, he prayed, meditated and wrote to these communities. He reminded them the message of the Gospel he preached them, this only message from Jesus which transformed and transfigured his own life. It's always the same thought, but always more developed, meditated and detailed.

The four epistles we're studying today were written during that time: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the short letter to Philemon. Some modern scholars might say that the epistle to the Philippians was probably written before, but this is not the traditional way we are following, and against that theory, we need to acknowledge a real similitude of content within the three epistles: St Paul is clearly at the maturity of his theological development, and the thought of Jesus who “humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross”³ is present all along. They look like each other in a so close way, that it seems difficult to deny they were not written together in a short period of time.

¹ Acts, XXVII-XXVIII.

² Acts, XXVIII, 30-31.

³ Philip., II, 8.

On a second hand, St Paul doesn't show himself anymore as the terrible polemist he was previously, such as in the epistles to the Galatians and Romans. He seems to be more the wise ancient, who, as a good father aware of his duties, is sharing his experience: no more strong warnings or even threats, but a deep theological and spiritual meditation, which shows the mystery of Christ, and the unicity of God's redeeming plan, fulfilled by the Sacrifice of Jesus-Christ, Son of God.

Lastly, before entering in the texts of the epistles, we ought to notice that St Paul himself placed an accent upon the chains he's attached to in each of his writings:

"So that my bands are made manifest in Christ, in all the court, and in all other places."⁴

"For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, for you Gentiles [...] For which I am an ambassador in a chain, so that therein I may be bold to speak according as I ought."⁵

"Praying withal for us also, that God may open unto us a door of speech to speak the mystery of Christ (for which also I am bound;) [...] The salutation of Paul with my own hand. Be mindful of my bands. Grace be with you. Amen."⁶

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus [...] For charity sake I rather beseech, whereas thou art such a one, as Paul an old man, and now a prisoner also of Jesus Christ."⁷

2 The Epistle to the Ephesians: The Gospel of the Redemption

Christ, Creator and Redeemer, Head of the Church, reveals to mankind the mystery of God, and leads him to holiness, through His divine Love in the divine Light.

2.1 Origin, authenticity, style and structure

It has been said that this letter wasn't probably written by St Paul, or to the Ephesians. These modern scholars based their opinion upon some verses of that epistle which could let the reader think that St Paul might not know the people he's writing to. However, although this letter most probably spread-out from Ephesus to the other Christians communities around, we can't follow these allegations which are contradicting the constant tradition and teaching of the Church.

The second reason these scholars refused to say St Paul is the author, is a parallel in the structure and words we can see between Ephesians and Colossians. The letter to the Ephesians

⁴ Philip., I, 13, but also, I, 7 & 17.

⁵ Eph., III, 1 & VI, 20.

⁶ Col., IV, 3 & 18.

⁷ Philem., I, 1 & 9.

contains 115 verses, but 73 of them can also be found in a very similar way in the letter to the Colossians. Therefore, the letter to the Ephesians could only be a development of the letter to the Colossians. But this can't be sure enough to deny the authenticity of the letter as being from St Paul. We find in it most of the common themes of St Paul, as well as lots of parallels with the other epistles, gospels, or even the 1st Letter of St Peter.

The style of the letter remains as usual, with long sentences, but also some very short and imperative. The apostle mixes his both backgrounds, Jewish and Greek, to reveal always more about the mystery of salvation. The style of the letter serves the prayer, the praise and thanksgiving of the Apostle.

We can find two main parts in this epistle:

- A dogmatic part (Chapt. I-III): knowledge of Christ within the Church. St Paul explains God's plan of salvation, which made all the elects being his sons of adoption. All are called to life with His Grace. This divine plan is God's mystery, that St Paul admires while kneeling and adoring the Father, thanking him on behalf of mankind.
- A moral part (Chapt. IV-VI): life in Christ within the Church. Because of the Baptism they received, the faithful is called to unity with Christ, especially through the practice of the virtues of purity, loyalty, for those living in marriage, but also for the children. These virtues remain the essence of Christian life.

2.2 Doctrine of the Epistle

We are all united in Christ, Who is the head of the Church. This idea of unity is central in the epistle, and following the words of Dom Delatte, we could say:

"The letter to the Ephesians can be summarised in one word: unity. The unity made in our Lord Jesus Christ and us by incorporation into the Lord Jesus; the unity made between God and us; the unity made in us: the Church, a living and divine entity, offered to God by its head. This is the realisation of the divine thought: it is the fulfilment of the wish of Our Lord in his last prayer to his Father."⁸

We are united in Christ: this is the universality of the Church, throughout both space and time. Christ being the principle of this unity, we can see the Church within past, present and future, across time, space, people, and individuals.

2.2.1 Christ, centre of the Church

Christ calls the new chosen people to the life of the grace. The first chapter of the epistle opens with a beautiful prayer, which also offers a summary of the content to follow:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with spiritual blessings in heavenly places, in Christ: as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and

⁸ Dom Delatte, commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians. Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator

unspotted in his sight in charity. Who hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children through Jesus Christ unto himself: according to the purpose of his will: unto the praise of the glory of his grace, in which he hath graced us in his beloved son. In whom we have redemption through his blood, the remission of sins, according to the riches of his grace, which hath superabounded in us in all wisdom and prudence, that he might make known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he hath purposed in him, in the dispensation of the fulness of times, to re-establish all things in Christ, that are in heaven and on earth, in him. In whom we also are called by lot, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things according to the counsel of his will. That we may be unto the praise of his glory, we who before hoped Christ.”⁹

St Paul seems to repeat himself from the epistle to the Romans. But in Romans, he insisted more about justification with the virtue of Faith, here, he drags our attention upon the merciful love of the Lord, which is victorious against sin and death.

Because of his death, Jesus reconciled God and us. He truly died for the Church,¹⁰ He is the unique mediator and principle of reconciliation with the Father.¹¹ All the other subjects of the epistle are seen under this: from wisdom to marriage, reconciliation to spiritual battle, all matters are under the same prism: Christ being the Head of the Church.

“It is even more important to notice that only in these two Letters is the title "head" given to Jesus Christ. And this title is used on two levels. In the first sense, Christ is understood as head of the Church.¹² This means two things: first of all that he is the governor, the leader, the person in charge who guides the Christian community as its leader and Lord¹³. The other meaning is then that, as head, he innervates and vivifies all the members of the body that he controls.¹⁴ That is, he is not only one who commands but also one who is organically connected with us, from whom comes the power to act in an upright way.”¹⁵

2.2.2 The Mystery of the Church (I-II & IV)

As he will write in Colossians, St Paul speaks here about the Church, but as one single entity, not as he used to do before, talking about local churches. St Paul is more focused upon the universal Church. We can easily notice this in the difference of the use of singular¹⁶, and not the plural¹⁷, when he speaks about it.

⁹ Eph., I, 3-10.

¹⁰ Eph., II, 1-10 & V

¹¹ Eph., IV

¹² cf. Col., II, 18-19 and Eph., IV, 15-16

¹³ cf. Col., I, 18: "He is the head of the body, the Church."

¹⁴ . In fact, according to Col., II, 19, it is necessary "[to hold] fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, [is] nourished and knit together".

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, General Audience 14th January 2009, The Theological vision of the Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians.

¹⁶ Rom., XVI, 1; 5; I Cor., I, 2; II Cor., V, 1.

¹⁷ Rom., XVI, 4; I Cor., VII, 4; 17; XI, 16; II Cor., VIII, 1; Gal, I, 2.

St Paul places Christ at the Head of the Church because of the Redemption. He underlines the place of the Father, who established Christ as the Head. In Colossians, we will see that Christ is the Head also because of the Creation.

“And he hath subjected all things under his feet, and hath made him head over all the church, which is his body, and the fulness of him who is filled all in all.”¹⁸

Christ brings a complete, total grace to the world, and the Church. We can easily link here with the prologue of the Gospel of St John: “And of his fulness we all have received, and grace for grace.”¹⁹

Chapter II offers us the Mystery of the Church as the place of reconciliation, which makes us move from death to life, from exclusion to communion: it’s where men are reconciled with the Father, and also with the other members of the church community.

We were	We are
Dead because of our sins	Living with God
Slaves because of our flesh	Risen with Christ
Subjected to the prince of this world	Sitting in heaven
Far away, expelled	Brought together with the Precious Blood
One against each other	Reconciled through the Cross
Foreigners	Companions of the Saints

Church is the new Israel, uniting the two chosen people, introducing all saved people into the same communion with Christ, in the life of the Spirit, with the Father. The Church cannot be only an option. The dogma *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*, no salvation outside the Church gets its full approval in this beautiful chapter V, when St Paul proclaims the Church being the Perfect Bride of Christ. Any man made anew by Christ can only be saved and live from salvation because and through the life within the Church.

2.2.3 The mystery of God (III)

The Epistle unveils the mystery of the Redemption, God’s Love plan to save mankind. A concealed mystery²⁰ which is revealed by Jesus: to save all human race, no matter their origin and social condition, for them to be deified and looking like the Son in the unity of the mystical body. This Love plan is completely free: it’s the free gift of the divine grace.

This mystery is unveiled with the revelation of the mystery of God’s life: the Holy Trinity. The plan of salvation is from God the Father. The Son revealed it and fulfilled it, accomplishing the Father’s Will. The work of the Son is continued by the Holy Ghost, who marks us with His seal, to allow us the benefits of the Redemption.

¹⁸ Eph., I, 22-23.

¹⁹ Jn., I, 16.

²⁰ Eph., III, 2-7. Cf. also Col., I, 26.

2.2.4 The requirement of Christian life

Because we received everything from Christ, we ought to live a life in accordance with the grace God gave us: He made us His sons of adoption. As per consequence, we ought to let the virtues to grow in our soul, firstly the virtue of Charity, which is the principle and foundation of the unity. Charity implies almsgiving and service, forgiveness and brotherly correction.²¹

Unity never erases diversity of vocations, because it never means uniformity. Gifts and charisms take part in common good, which is the unity of the Body. However, this unity is not obtained at any cost. As St Paul previously said in 1st Corinthians, he warns here again against childish behaviour or misconduct. Christian life is both a personal oath and a vocation within the Christian community of the Church. They cannot be taken apart. We could dare to say that in no other place of the Scriptures, the dogma of the Communion of the Saints has been so well expressed!

2.2.5 Teaching about marriage

It's for an obvious reason the Church chose this excerpt of Ephesians, Chapter V, for the wedding mass. Charity of Christ must be our model, and He did it perfectly, giving His Life for the world and the sanctification of the Church. From this holy model, St Paul make a brief summary of the theology about marriage, which is the sign of the Love of Christ for His Church.

This parallel between the Love of Christ for the Church and the mutual love of husband and wife, helps us to understand the indissolubility of the Sacrament, and the submission, and not slavery, of the wife to the husband. They are not absolutely equals, but complementary.

Christian Marriage can only be a sacrament because it is the sign of the love of Christ for the Church. Husband and wife are offered this model, so that their mutual love becomes the sign of the Love of God for His people, the Love of Christ for His Church.

2.2.6 Life in Society (VI, 1-9)

St Paul reminds us of the constant value of the ten commandments, and especially addressed the children about obedience to the parents²², but also the parents about their duties to bring up properly the children God entrusted to their care.²³ Authority and obedience are ruled with the model of Christ, because anyone is called to salvation.

2.2.7 Spiritual battle (VI, 10-17)

The virtue of Hope promises us salvation but doesn't take of us the spiritual battle. In the last verses of the epistle, St Paul reminds us of the opposition between the Church and the world, and mainly the one ruling it. Following the words of Isaiah, St Paul presents us the armour of the Christian, whose force only comes from God.

We could here ask the following question: Jesus saved us once for all. Why should be still endure trials and persecutions, since He has been victorious?

²¹ Eph., III, 3-6.

²² Eph., VI, 5-9.

²³ Eph., VI, 1-4.

St Paul answers, as St John also did, that the Church is living within the world, and in some parts, God is unknown or willingly ignored. From this part can come one threat, the other one coming unfortunately from the inside of the church, from her sinful members, always subjected to their wicked nature. We will be constantly under the trial of the fidelity to the grace of our Baptism. This last threat can be the more dangerous, as it is more insidious than the other one, more obvious, and therefore easier to notice and be careful about it.

We will not be able to face the demonic strength if we do not convert ourselves, if we do not purify our heart. It's only when we will be living of the Charity of Christ that we will understand this mystery of iniquity.

3 The Epistle to the Philippians: the Gospel of Joy

3.1 Origin, authenticity, style and structure

The epistle is written to the first community the Apostle brought Faith in Europe during his second missionary trip, around year 50-52, of even before that date. Unfortunately, due to persecutions, St Paul had to shorten his stay, as said in 1st Thessalonians:

“But having suffered many things before, and been shamefully treated (as you know) at Philippi, we had confidence in our God, to speak unto you the gospel of God in much carefulness.”²⁴

But the seed of the Gospel was planted in a young and fervent Christian community, mostly coming from the darkness of paganism.

This epistle reflects in a peculiar way the feeling of fatherhood from the Apostle for this community. As the old man he is, prisoner in chains, he introduces himself here as a instrument of peace, as there is no heresies or practical errors to address, like the ones he previously corrected with the Corinthians. St Paul desires to increase the virtue of Charity between the members, to stop divisions and rivalries which damages this holy bond.

St Paul also expresses the joy he had to hear about the good from the community of Philippi, and encourages them to carry on.

This epistle is the second St Paul wrote during his captivity in Rome, around year 62-63, as testifies the firsts verses of the epistle:

“And many of the brethren in the Lord, growing confident by my bands, are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear. Some indeed, even out of envy and contention; but some also for good will preach Christ. Some out of charity, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. And some out of contention preach Christ not sincerely: supposing that they raise affliction to my bands. But what then? So that by all means, whether by

²⁴ I Thess., II, 2.

occasion, or by truth, Christ be preached: in this also I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.”²⁵

These verses should be enough to deny other modern ideas about the epistle being written much earlier, because it would impose us to invent an earlier captivity of the apostle, a third one, which we would not be able to prove with any evidence.

Several modern scholars wanted to read this epistle as a succession of different little messages, all gathered in one. The argument was because of the numerous changes of style and tone. But this seems to be only a superficial reason, as the unity of the epistle is truly present with the constant confidence in God the Apostle expresses, and which becomes a hymn of praises and thanksgiving.

St Paul starts his letter with his usual prayer and blessings. His captivity didn't slow down the progress of the Faith, and it makes him joyful.²⁶ A Christian must remain firm with his Faith, without any concession to human respect against the holy deposit of the Faith. In order that this battle always becomes a victory for the Church, he urges to unity and the practice of humility, Christ being here the perfect model, who humiliate Himself, before being glorified by the Father.²⁷ Following Him, Philippians could truly become beacons of Light and Faith.²⁸ St Paul concludes this first part announcing a possible trip to visit them later.²⁹

But suddenly tone is changed: St Paul harshly makes critics about his opponents. He rejects their privileges, the same he had, refusing to come back, arguing that he belongs to Christ only. Therefore, he invites the Philippians to do the same³⁰, by forgetting childish rivalries, but living in joy, abandon and thanksgiving.³¹ Then he concludes his letter with his usual greetings and blessings.

3.2 Doctrine and Spirituality

More than the thirteen other epistles of St Paul, the epistle the Philippians develops the real and deep affection the Apostle had for this community. At the difference of the epistle to the Ephesians, which looks like a summary of the Faith, this letter seems more to be a thanksgiving for the fruits received within the community, with caring advices about the future. As the other letters written in Captivity, unity with Christ is central, but here, St Paul is more insistent about joy and humility.

3.2.1 The Hymn to Christ.

Dom Delatte said this beautiful excerpt, which is read on Palm Sunday, for the opening of Holy Week, should be read while kneeling. It seems that the divine liturgy anticipated this wish, asking the faithful to kneel down at the Name of Jesus, when it is read on that day:

²⁵ Philip., I, 14-18.

²⁶ Philip., I, 12-26.

²⁷ Philip., II, 5-11.

²⁸ Philip., II, 12-18.

²⁹ Philip., II, 19-30.

³⁰ Philip., III.

³¹ Philip., IV, 1-6.

“Brethren: Have this in mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, though He was by nature God, did not consider being equal to God a thing to be clung to, but emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave and being made like unto men. And appearing in the form of man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even to death on a cross. Therefore God also has exalted Him and has bestowed upon Him the Name that is above every name, so that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bend of those in heaven, on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.”³²

St Paul exposes for us the full doctrine of the mystery of the redeeming Incarnation. He completes with this excerpt his full explanation about the mystery of salvation, the mystery of justification and Redemption. The universal misery into which we were, is put under contrast with the humility of Christ and His Mercy. St Paul’s words are to be linked with the epistle to the Romans, when he spoke about the triumph of divine Love, triumph of the Grace, triumph of humility, which all went through the death upon the Cross. To heal from the tragedy of the original sin, the blood of Christ was needed.³³ As he did in Romans, St Paul links again with the Second Adam, the suffering servant, who opened for us the doors of paradise.

3.2.2 Justification with the Faith; the power of the Gospel

In like manner he did when he wrote to the Romans and Galatians, St Paul opposes human justice from the Law, and divine justice received because of the Faith in Christ.³⁴ St Paul will never cease to repeat that this Faith is a free gift.³⁵ Because of that, he urges the Philippians to trust and humility.

For a Christian, even death is to be united with Christ. As it was for the Master, death must be for us a victory over world and sin. This victory is insured by the virtue of Hope.

3.2.3 Joy

Joy is one of the main themes of the epistle. St Paul is not only overwhelmed with joy all along,³⁶ he nearly makes a commandment of it.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice. Let your modesty be known to all men. The Lord is nigh.”³⁷

You may recognise here the first words of the epistle for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, also called *Gaudete Sunday*, Sunday of Joy.

This joy is coming from the sacrifice, which is accepted because of the Love of God, linking the Christian to the Calvary, before being united with God by the Resurrection. This joy is from the divine mercy of the Lord, which takes us to complete and true abandon, accompanied

³² Philip., II, 5-11. Epistle for Palm Sunday.

³³ Cf also Hb., IX, 22.

³⁴ Philip., III, 6-9.

³⁵ Philip., I, 11, 29.

³⁶ Philip., I, 4, 18, etc...

³⁷ Philip., IV, 4-5.

with Hope and the near comeback of the Lord. Joy is the consequence of a simple life, all dedicated to the Saviour, a life all rooted in the virtues.

“And the peace of God, which surpasseth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. For the rest, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever modest, whatsoever just, whatsoever holy, whatsoever lovely, whatsoever of good fame, if there be any virtue, if any praise of discipline, think on these things. The things which you have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, these do ye, and the God of peace shall be with you. Now I rejoice in the Lord exceedingly, that now at length your thought for me hath flourished again, as you did also think; but you were busied.”³⁸

Joy will alloy Christians to be seized by Jesus, like St Paul was, and comfort them in the crossing of the sufferings during this life on earth.

3.2.4 Service, confidence and prayer

St Paul insists also about the eschatological expectation of the day the Lord will come. This expectation is to be made with a true confidence in God’s Mercy, because “our conversation is in heaven.”³⁹

While we’re waiting, prayer is one of our duties. St Paul offers it to us as a way to serve God and the others. Prayer is the first and main bond of the Communion of the Saints.

One of the services St Paul mentions is the Priesthood, but we will link that theme with our next conference about the pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus.

4 The Epistle to the Colossians: the Gospel of the Light

Light coming down from Heaven is pulling us off the empire of darkness.

4.1 Origin, authenticity, style and structure

Although he never visited their city, St Paul wrote to the Colossians, probably around year 61, before his letter to the Ephesians, which developed the ideas of this epistle to the Colossians. It’s most probably the first letter St Paul wrote from his prison in Rome.

From his disciples, St Paul heard about some troubles a heresy was causing in Colossae, and sent them this letter, where he exposed again the Catholic Faith. The heresy St Paul is fighting is called Gnosticism; it was trying to mix Christianity and paganism, wanting to diminish the place of Christ in the Redemption. St Paul affirms again the doctrine of Jesus-Christ, Lord of the living and the dead, image of the invisible God, Creator and Redeemer.

³⁸ Philip., IV, 7-10.

³⁹ Philip., III, 20.

After the usual greetings, St Paul starts his letter with a prayer, immediately followed by a praise to the Lord Jesus-Christ.⁴⁰ He continues with the reminder about his own battle for Faith, and warns the Colossians about Gnosticism,⁴¹ inviting them to live in communion with Jesus, risen from the dead.⁴² He finally concludes with his usual greetings and blessing.⁴³

One of the most interesting things about this epistle is that there are no other references to the other texts of the Bible, at the difference of the other writings of the Apostle. But all the main themes, common to St Paul's teaching are present: theological virtues, justification through Faith, reconciliation and peace with God being given by the Blood of Christ dying on the Cross, Christ being the Head of the Church, His mystical body.

4.2 Doctrine and Spirituality

St Paul delivers again a great teaching about Christ, and His Mystery of redeeming mediation.

4.2.1 The Mystery of God

A non-human wisdom revealed it to us: Christ's wisdom, who preached us the Gospel. We are no longer pagans, but participant to Christ's Life, sharing a part of His knowledge about God's mystery, his mystery. There is no other Revelation than with Him, because He is that Revelation.⁴⁴

4.2.2 Role played by the virtue of Faith

Faith in Christ insures us the promise to be forgiven for our sins, and reconciled with God. But this Faith is to be lived with Charity, which is the full communion with the Lord. Faith must be untouched, unstained by any other possible theories: all false doctrines are to be avoided, condemned and banned.

4.2.3 The Tradition

We need to be able to make a difference between the real Tradition, inherited from God, and maintained by the Church, and the human tradition, which is mostly personal teaching of certain self-proclaimed and so-called doctors. God only knows about God, and the Son, and those the Son revealed them to.

This Revelation is the main idea of the epistle. It's the Mystery of the Redemption, centre of the whole teaching of the Apostle, that he constantly preached throughout his life, since his conversion upon Damascus' way.

⁴⁰ Col., I, 9-20.

⁴¹ Col., I, 21-29 - II.

⁴² Col, III, 1 - IV, 6.

⁴³ Col., IV, 7-18.

⁴⁴ Col., II, 9.

4.2.4 The primacy of Christ

Christ is the first and only mediator. True Son of God, He is the only Saviour, who possesses the plenitude of the Grace, and who can pour it over us. He is the only one who gathered in His person all the promised perfections which were announced in the prophecies of the Old Testament.⁴⁵

But Christ is also the first-born, and new Adam. Being God, this new Adam is also the Creator. True God and true Man, being the first in the order of Creation, He is also the first the order of Redemption.

4.2.5 Role and importance of the Church

The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, and is the principle of sanctification for its members. Being His body, the Church continues the sacrifice of the Redemption, following the example of Her Master. We find here this well-known sentence of the Apostle, which explain the sufferings we endure while we're upon earth:

“I Paul am made a minister. Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the church.”⁴⁶

Nothing is really missing in the Passion, but if we refuse to take our part in it, our personal love for God will be missing in that Passion. Jesus remains like in agony until the end of the world. Jesus died, once for all, but He expects us to join Him in his holy sufferings with ours.

4.2.6 The Baptism

The Sacrament of Baptism, coming from the Calvary, is giving us the forgiveness for our sins. The Holy Cross made a clear separation from the old world, the old man, the sin... replacing everything with the Life in the Spirit, the Grace. All these are obtained with the Baptism, birth to this new life brought with the Sacrifice at Calvary.

With the Baptism, we were crucified with Jesus,⁴⁷ and we died like he did, to all things of old and sin. The sacrament gave us the true liberty⁴⁸ of the sons of God. Being separated from Him, will bring us again death and slavery of the sin.

“Buried with him in baptism, in whom also you are risen again by the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him up from the dead.”⁴⁹

4.2.7 The Redemption

Christ fulfilled the salvation of the world upon the Cross, the Father is forgiving, the Holy Ghost gives us the Grace: The mystery of Redemption is truly the work of the Holy Trinity.

⁴⁵ Col., I, 15. Cf. Wis., VII, 26 & Hb., V, 3.

⁴⁶ Col., I, 23-24.

⁴⁷ Col., II, 20.

⁴⁸ Col., II, 8.

⁴⁹ Col., II, 12.

“And you, when you were dead in your sins, and the uncircumcision of your flesh; he hath quickened together with him, forgiving you all offences: blotting out the handwriting of the decree that was against us, which was contrary to us. And he hath taken the same out of the way, fastening it to the cross: and despoiling the principalities and powers, he hath exposed them confidently in open shew, triumphing over them in himself.”⁵⁰

In his merciful bounty, the Father wanted us to receive the justification by the Sacrifice of His Son. Our freedom was obtained by the death of the Son only, but this was the fulfilment of the decree from the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

4.2.8 The true mortification

The true Christian ascetism is to be link with the paschal mystery, which forces us to look for things from high.⁵¹ St Paul answers here against the Gnosticism, which despised anything coming from the creation, and paid no attention to physical actions.

St Paul establish his doctrine upon the sacrifice itself of the Lord, who suffered so much to expiate all sins, both in his mind and body.⁵²

But a real mortification is always accomplished with purity and charity. It is lived with the new life in Christ, which produce so many good fruits in us.

4.2.9 Peace

Amongst these fruits, one is to be noticed: Peace. Redemption gave us peace:

- Peace with God: everything is well ordered. If we live in Charity, which links us to God, we will live at peace.
- Peace with our neighbour: Because we live in Charity, peace is given between brothers.
- Peace with ourselves: Peace is not a virtue in itself, but a fruit of the life in Charity. Peace also participates in the growth of the virtue of Charity, and offers us the true liberty.

5 The Epistle to Philemon

This very short letter is probably one of the less known of the Apostle. It testifies about the Charity and perseverance of St Paul, who transformed a private matter into a public and universal teaching.

⁵⁰ Col., II, 13-15.

⁵¹ Col., III.

⁵² Col., III, 5-18.

5.1 Occasion, place and date of writing

Initially, this was a private matter, as we said. Philemon was an important figure of the city of Colossae. As per the custom of that time, he had slaves so serve him, and particularly one, Onesimus,⁵³ who didn't seem to have a good reputation. They both converted after meeting St Paul while he was travelling in the area.

From Rome, where he was in chains, around year 61, St Paul entrusted that letter to this slave, Onesimus, to be delivered to his master in Colossae. St Paul desired to give the evidence that Onesimus wasn't any longer this poor reputation person he used to be, and therefore was worthy of the care of his master. He was now a good and solid convert.

Even if the letter is very short, only 25 verses and one chapter, it's written with the usual words of blessing and greetings at the beginning and the end.

5.2 Doctrine about slavery

Although St Paul had no desire to change everything in the society, or to spread revolution, as some people would like to read in this letter, he would like to recall masters and servants that both are called to the same holiness, with the practice of the same virtues. Before fighting for the abolition of slavery, St Paul desires to transform the pagan society into a Christian one: this is the only condition for the rules of that society being changed for good.

Therefore, instead of requesting the freedom for the slaves, he reminds a Christian master what are the rules he's submitted: true brotherhood, social peace and justice, but also the untouchable dignity of human being, before God and mankind.

St Paul reminds that we were all set free from sin by the sacrifice of Jesus, because sin is the true slavery. The other kinds are just figures of this terrible one.

6 Conclusion

All along his captivity, St Paul meditated about the mystery of salvation that Our Lord fulfilled for us. This captivity, as we said wasn't that strict, as would be the second one, before his martyrdom. St Paul remains the tireless pastor and father of the communities he established.

One of the main thoughts we may withdraw from these epistles of the captivity is that no disciple is greater than the Master. They will also know and endure persecutions and sufferings, because the life of union with Christ always goes through the Cross.

From these epistles, we received a summary of the teaching about the Redemption and the Church, mystical body of Christ who is her head. Moral was also strongly reaffirmed, St Paul preaching the summit of spiritual life by union with Christ, until, if needed the sacrifice to become a true witness of Christ.

⁵³ Philem., I, 10.

These epistles also announces the pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus, who were established as pastors and bishops by the Apostle himself.

The redeeming Incarnation of Christ remains the first criteria which must lead all our action, moral or pastoral. These three epistles that we will study next time, are like the last will, the testament of St Paul to the future generations, to us, who are living 2000 years later. But his teaching remains forever.