

# Saints Philemon and Apphia

November 22

SAINTS PHILEMON AND APPHIA were an important husband and wife team serving the Church in the apostolic era. They were probably brought to faith in Christ by Saint Paul himself. Then they offered their home, in Colossae in western Asia Minor, to be a house-church. This was one of the churches that was honored to receive an epistle from Saint Paul (the Epistle to the Colossians). Philemon and Apphia also were owners of a slave named Onesimus. This slave apparently escaped from them, and made his way to Rome, where he met the great Apostle Paul. At this time Paul was under house arrest in the capital. Onesimus responded so wholeheartedly to Paul's preaching that Paul later described him as one "whom I have begotten while in my chains" (Philemon, v. 10). After his conversion, he stayed with Paul, ministering to his needs.

Paul then wrote a beautiful letter to Philemon and Apphia, discreetly but firmly suggesting to them that in light of this transformation in the life of Onesimus, they should receive him back - not as a returned slave, but as a free brother in Christ. This letter, called the Epistle to Philemon, is in the New Testament. It is perhaps the most personal of all the New Testament epistles.

The letter to Philemon reveals much about the tender feelings that Saint Paul had for him, and for his wife also:

*Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy, our brother, to Philemon, our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother ... (vv. 1-7).*

*Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you (vv. 21-22).*

Church Tradition says that Philemon was later made a traveling bishop and that he ministered in Gaza for a time as the first bishop of this area. As one of the hymns honoring Saint Philemon says, "The profound darkness of the Gazans was dispelled by the light of your words." His faithful wife, Apphia, remained in the house-church in Colossae, along with Archippus, who was probably their son.

Sometime later, after Philemon had returned home, he and his family met their glorious end as martyrs for Christ. This is described vividly by Saint Nikolai of Zicha:

At the time of a feast of the pagan goddess Artemis, all the faithful in Colossae were gathered, as was their custom, at prayer in the house of Philemon and Apphia. The pagans came to hear of this gathering, rushed in on them and seized all the Christians. They flogged Archippus, Philemon, and Apphia as their leaders, then buried them up to the waist in the ground, and stoned them. Philemon and Apphia died of this, but they took Archippus out of the hole barely alive and left him for the children to play with. They took knives and stabbed him all over, and thus this fellow-soldier of Paul's in the battle made a good end of his earthly road."

Saints Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus are also honored by the Church on February 19.

*Stikheron, at Vespers, Tone 2*

With faith, let us praise the wise hierarch Archippus, along with revered Apphia, singing the praises of Philemon with Onesimus, who, as holy preachers of God and precious teachers, rooted out by their words the deception of polytheism, having planted the knowledge of truth in all who, with piety, are always honoring their memory.

(Taken from “Marriage as a Path to Holiness” by David and Mary Ford)