

SS. PHILEMON AND APPIA.

PHILEMON, a citizen of Colossæ in Phrygia, a man of quality and very rich, had been converted either by St. Paul, when he preached at Ephesus, or by his disciple Epaphras, who first announced the gospel at Colossæ. So great was the progress he had made in virtue in a short time, that his house was become like a church, by the devotion and piety of those who composed it, and the religious exercises which were constantly performed in it: the assemblies of the faithful seem also to have been kept there. Onesimus, a slave, far from profiting by the good example before his eyes, became even the more wicked. He robbed his master, and fled to Rome, where God permitted him to find out St. Paul, who was then prisoner the first time in that city, in the year 62. That apostle, who was all to all to gain the whole world to Jesus Christ, received this slave with the tenderness of a father, showing so much the greater compassion as his wounds were the deeper. Habits of theft are most difficult to be cured: Onesimus was probably engaged in other evil courses, such crimes seldom go alone. Perhaps only distress had brought him to St. Paul. Yet the spirit of sincere charity and piety, with which the apostle treated him, wrought an entire change of his heart, so that its whole frame was renewed, and the stream of all his appetites so turned, that of a passionate, false, self-interested man, he was now humble, meek, patient, devout, and full of charity. True conversions are very rare, because nothing under a total and thorough change will suffice. Neither tears, nor good desires, nor intentions, nor the relinquishment of some sins, nor the performance of some good works will avail any thing, but a new creature; a word that comprehends more in it than words

can express, and which can only be understood by those who feel it within themselves. Such was the conversion of Onesimus, when he was instructed in the faith, and baptized by St. Paul. The apostle desired to detain him that he might do him those services which the convert could have wished himself to have rendered to his spiritual master. But he would not do it without the consent of him to whom he belonged; nor deprive Philemon of the merit of a good work, to which he was persuaded it would be his great pleasure to concur: in justice the slave owed a satisfaction and restitution to his master. St. Paul, therefore, sent Onesimus back with an excellent epistle to Philemon, in which he writes with an inimitable tenderness and power of persuasion, yet with authority and dignity. He styles himself prisoner of Jesus Christ, the more feelingly to touch the heart of Philemon and to move him to regard his prayer. He joins Timothy, well known to Philemon, with himself, and calls Philemon his beloved, and his assistant, who shared with him the fruit and labour of the apostleship, to which the other contributed all the succours in his power. Appia, his pious and worthy wife, the apostle calls his dear sister, on account of her faith and virtue. He would also interest in his petition the whole Church of Colossæ. Archippus who governed it for Ephras, then in chains at Rome, and the domestic church or faithful house of Philemon. He wishes them grace and peace. This was his ordinary salutation. And what could he ask of God greater for them than grace, which is the source and principle of Christian virtue, and peace, which is its fruit and recompense? To praise a man to his face is a most delicate and difficult task: this he does by thanking God for Philemon, which is the only manner of praising another worthy of a Christian, who knows that all good

is the gift of God. Thus the apostle commends his faith, and charity, and liberality to all as a member of Christ, and declares his own affection by the strongest token, that of always remembering him, and commending him to God in all his prayers: than which no one can give a more certain mark of his sincere friendship. He uses the tender epithet of brother; and says, that the saints have found comfort by him in the assistance he afforded to all the afflicted brethren, whose interests were common among them. At last he comes to the point, but proposes it with authority, modestly putting Philemon in mind that, as an apostle, he could command him in Christ: but is content to pray him, mentioning whatever could render his entreaties more tender; as his name which expressed a great deal, his age and his chains: he intercedes for one whom he calls his own bowels, and his son begotten in his chains: he speaks of his theft and flight in soft terms, and mentions how serviceable he had himself found him. He entreats and begs for his own sake, and prays that the obligations which Philemon had to him for the eternal salvation of his own soul, and his all, might acquit Onesimus of his debt and injustice. He concludes, conjuring him by their strict union and brotherhood in Christ. Philemon, upon such a recommendation, with joy granted Onesimus his liberty, forgave him his crimes, and all satisfaction, and shortly after sent him back to St. Paul to serve him at Rome: but the apostle wanted not his corporal services, and made him a worthy fellow labourer in the gospel. Both Latins and Greeks honour SS. Philemon and Appia on this or the following day. Some Greeks say Philemon died a martyr.