



A Saint for Africa - A Saint for Our Time

From Slavery to Freedom

Josephine Bakhita was born in Darfur, Sudan in 1869. Kidnapped at the age of seven, she was sold and resold five times in the markets of El Obeid and Khartoum. She experienced all the humiliations, sufferings and deprivations of slavery.

In 1883, she was bought by Callisto Legnani, Italian consul in Khartoum. For the first time she was treated with care, rather than being beaten.

Two years later he took Bakhita to Italy and gave her to his friend Augusto Michieli. She became Nanny to Augusto's daughter Mimmina. While preparing to go to Sudan to run a Hotel on the Red Sea coast the Micheili's left both Mimmina and Bakhita in the care of the Canossian Sisters at a convent in Venice. When the time came to travel Bakhita refused to go. During the ensuing court case, the judge concluded that since slavery was illegal in Italy, she had actually been free since 1885. Bakhita, now twenty years old, found herself in control of her own destiny. She chose to remain with the Canossian Sisters. She was baptized and confirmed in 1890, taking the name Josephine.

She became a Novice in 1893 and made her profession as a Sister three years later. In 1902, she was transferred to the city of Schio, where she lived until her death. Her gentleness, calmness, and good humoured nature earned her the affectionate title of *Nostra Madre Moretta* ("Our Black Mother") among the local people.

Following a long illness Bakhita died on February 8, 1947. She was named a saint of the Church on October 1st 2000. During her canonization Mass in St. Peter's Square, Pope John Paul drew out the full meaning of her life in the following words:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, ... it gives wisdom to the simple. (Ps 19: 8) These words from today's Responsorial Psalm resound powerfully in the life of Sr Josephine Bakhita. Abducted and sold into slavery she suffered much at the hands of cruel masters. But she came to understand the profound truth that God, and not man, is the true Master of every human being, of every human life. This experience became a source of great wisdom for this humble daughter of Africa. In today's world, countless women continue to be victimised, even in developed modern societies. We find a shining advocate of genuine emancipation. **The history of her life inspires not passive acceptance but the firm resolve to work effectively to free girls and women from oppression and violence, and to return them to their dignity in the full exercise of their rights."**

St Josephine Bakhita (1868-1947)

Feast day 8th February



St Josephine Bakhita

A Life Transformed

As a slave Bakhita endured a saga of trauma, abuse and torture. She had many masters and suffered much. Yet, as a Sister in the Convent at Schio she was renowned for her calmness and good humour – a profound transformation had taken place.

In His Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI explains the reason for this transformation,

"Bakhita came to know a totally different kind of "master... the living God, Jesus Christ... she had known only masters who despised and maltreated her, or at best considered her a useful slave. Now, however, she heard that there is a 'master' above all masters, the Lord of all lords, and that this Lord is good, goodness in person....Now she had "hope" —no longer simply the modest hope of finding masters who would be less cruel, but the great hope: "I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good." Through the knowledge of this hope she was "redeemed", no longer a slave, but a free child of God." Spe Salvi 3

Prayer to

St. Josephine Bakhita

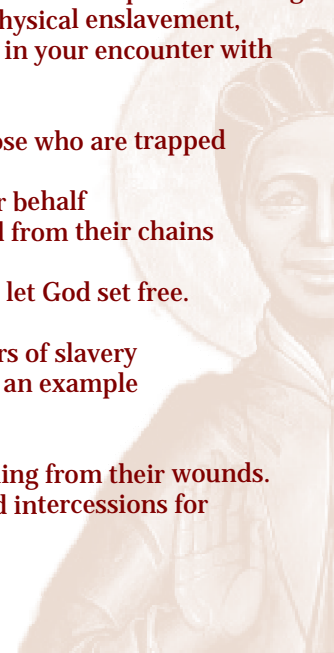
St. Josephine Bakhita, you were sold into slavery as a child and endured untold hardship and suffering. Once liberated from your physical enslavement, you found true redemption in your encounter with Christ and his Church.

O, St. Bakhita, assist all those who are trapped in a state of slavery. Intercede with God on their behalf so that they will be released from their chains of captivity. Those whom man enslaves, let God set free.

Provide comfort to survivors of slavery and let them look to you as an example of hope and faith.

Help all survivors find healing from their wounds. We ask for your prayers and intercessions for those enslaved among us.

Amen.



A Saint for Our Time and a Saint of Sudan

One of the shocking realities of our age is the fact that today more people are enslaved through human trafficking than there were during the entire 400 years of the transatlantic slave trade. Worldwide it is estimated that twenty seven million people are enslaved through trafficking. Their freedom has been taken away and their inherent human dignity denied.

St Bakhita is an example of endurance, determination and hope against adversity – an example of true freedom for those enslaved through trafficking or abusive relationships. She is a sign that trauma and the scars of abuse caused by enslavement can be healed and that the dignity of a fully human life can be regained.

Pope John Paul II referred to her as “Our Universal Sister” - an example of faith and forgiveness to us all and a source of hope for those who are in any form of slavery or who need to find peace, forgiveness and reconciliation in their lives. A missionary described St Bakhita’s relevance today by saying - "Bakhita taught us the path of liberation. The path she followed and that lead her from slavery to freedom still has to be walked by so many people that are subject to a variety of forms of slavery."

Bakhita is also the patron saint of her homeland Sudan and has become a symbol of faith and unity for Sudanese Christians. On the occasion of her beatification, Pope John Paul II praised her for "leaving us a message of reconciliation and evangelic forgiveness in a world so much divided and hurt by hatred and violence. She, that was the victim of the worst injuries of all times, namely slavery, herself declared:

'If I was to meet those slave raiders that abducted me and those who tortured me, I'd kneel down to them to kiss their hands, because, if it had not been for them, I would not have become a Christian and religious woman'.

Reconciliation and forgiveness are essential to the future of both Sudan and Southern Sudan. The divisions, mistrust and animosities that caused the South to become an independent state remain and, even within the new State of South Sudan ethnic and political differences are a cause of division. Many fear that these divisions may lead to a civil war. St Bakhita’s example of reconciliation and forgiveness was never more relevant. We hope and pray that her example may lead all Sudanese to peace and reconciliation .



Prayer

*Heavenly Father, Your Son Jesus Christ,
through His suffering and death on the cross,
gave Himself as a gift of love for the reconciliation and salvation of all peoples.
He continues to express this love by giving us St. Josephine Bakhita.
She too offered herself through her suffering in slavery. We humbly pray that through her
Intercession You may save her brothers and sisters in Sudan from slavery and persecution.
May she obtain for her people and for the whole world the gift of justice and peace.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.*

**Rt. Rev. Macram Max Gassis
Bishop of El-Obeid Diocese, Sudan**

