

Sr. Josephine's body was made available to the public for three days, and thousands came to pay their respects. Mothers would take her lifeless hand, and place it upon the heads of their children in blessing.

At 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." In Sudan, news of her beatification was censored. The Pope visited the nation nine months later, and honored her publicly. At her canonization, he said:

"In Josephine Bakhita, 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."

Quotes of St. Josephine Bakhita

"In God's will, there is great peace."

"The Lord has loved me so much: we must love everyone... we must be compassionate!"

"Be good, love the Lord, pray for those who do not know Him. What a great grace it is to know God!"

"Mary protected me even before I knew her!"

Prayer

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. Oh 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.

Socials with the Saints

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Sources include: Vatican.va, Canossian Sisters, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and AFROL News. Photograph from the Catholic Truth Society.

St. Josephine Margaret Bakhita

Born: 1869 in Oglassa, Darfur, Sudan

Died: Feb. 8, 1947 in Schio, Vicenza, Italy

Feast Day: February 8

Canonized: Oct. 1, 2000 by John Paul II

Patronage: Sudan, Forgiveness, Against Human Trafficking



Imagine being a little girl growing up in late nineteenth century Darfur with your parents and siblings; three brothers and two sisters, one of whom is your twin. Imagine being in the fields with your parents when attackers suddenly raid your land and abduct your sister while she is tending an infant at home. You would later recall, "I remember how much mum was crying and how much we too were crying."

Later, the slave traders return. This time, they capture you.

"I was approximately nine years old when I, one early morning, walked around the fields, a bit far away from home, with a companion. Suddenly, we saw two strangers appear from behind a fence. One of them told my companion: 'Let the small girl go into the forest for me to pick me some fruits. Meanwhile, you continue on your walk. We'll catch up with you soon.' His objective was to fool my friend so that she wouldn't give the alarm while they were capturing me.

"I, of course, did not suspect anything and hurried to obey, which my mother had accustomed me to do. Once we were in the forest, I saw two persons behind me. One of them briskly grabbed me with one hand, while the other one pulled out a knife from his belt and held it to my side. He told me 'If you cry, you'll die! Follow us!' with a lordly voice."

The strangers ask for your name, but the trauma is so great that your name is suddenly erased from your memory. They call you, "Bakhita" meaning 'Lucky' or 'Fortunate One' in Arabic. For the rest of your life, you will never remember the name your family had given you.

This is the story of the person whom we now know as St. Josephine Bakhita.

She was taken to a town called El Obeid and held as a slave by her captors for a few years before being sold. Through many years of being enslaved and sold in the market, several times she tried and failed to escape.

Her fourth owners in Khartoum inflicted her with a painful type of tattooing, cutting one hundred and fourteen wounds into her skin and covering them with salt for a month. She later recalled, "I felt I was going to die any moment, especially when they rubbed me in with the salt." She was subjected to this at only thirteen years old.

She finally identified with the meaning of her enslaved name when she was sold for the fifth time in 1882 to an Italian Consul, Calixto Leganini; "I really was the Fortunate One, because the new master was a very good man and started to like me. I was not punished or whipped, so that it all seemed unreal to me, being able to enjoy such peace and tranquility."

The Mahdist War began driving out Anglo-Egyptians from Sudan, so Leganini planned to join his fellows returning to Europe. One was his friend Augusto Michieli. Bakhita joined them, along with the other servants. Upon their arrival at the dock in Italy, Michieli's wife saw the many servants and requested to have one of them. She was given Bakhita.

The Michieli family lived in a village within the Venetian province. For three years, she worked as nanny to the family's daughter, Minnia. After some time, the Michielis heard about opportunities opening again in Sudan. They bought a hotel on the Red Coast, and moved there to oversee the business. Minnia and Bakhita stayed behind, moving into a girls' institute in Venice run by the Canossian religious sisters.

Here, Bakhita learned about the God of the Christians; later saying the Sisters "introduced me to a God who from childhood I had felt in my heart without knowing who He was." She chose to receive the Sacraments of Initiation, and did so from the bishop on January 9, 1890, taking the name Giuseppina Margarita (Josephine Margaret) Fortunata (Fortunate One).

As is common for those who have experienced trauma, Josephine had difficulty expressing happiness or joyful emotions. However, one clear way she expressed this was whenever she would see the font where she had been baptized; she would kneel and kiss it, saying, "Here I became one of the daughters of God!"

Mrs. Michieli returned from Africa to bring the girls with her. Josephine refused. When their disagreement became serious, Josephine advocated for

herself to the local authorities. Based on the fact that slavery had been illegal since before the year of Josephine's birth, it was determined that in the eyes of Italian law, she had never been a slave. Therefore, she was declared a free woman. She remained at the Canossian Institute and continued to grow in her faith and as a woman.

After some time, she discerned a call from God to become a Canossian Sister; their mission being service and education, especially to the poor and sick. She entered the Order in 1896 and became Sister Josephine. In 1902, she was assigned to their house in Schio in the northern Italian province of Vicenza, where she spent the rest of her life in simple, daily duties. For the most part, she served as the door keeper, greeting visitors warmly. She also shared the responsibility of sewing, cooking, and tending to the poor.

In this seemingly mundane day-to-day life, Sr. Josephine lived modestly and humbly. Yet, she developed a reputation for holiness. To this day, the locals still call her "la nostra madre moretta" (our little/dear brown mother).

Perhaps because of this quality and her extraordinary background, she was instructed to create an autobiographical account. Both because of her humility as well as the painful memories, this proved to be a challenging test of her obedience. She began her memoirs in 1910, and they were published in 1930. She was also asked to speak about her life in various places; finally being asked to speak in Venice. After these events, she became one of the most famous persons in all of Italy. She traveled around the country, and through these tours, her Order gained donations to continue their work.

Among her reflections, perhaps this is her most quoted statement; "If I were to meet those who kidnapped me, and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands. For, if these things had not happened, I would not have been a Christian and a religious today." She would also, remarkably, say, "The whole of my life has been God's gift."

During World War II, the Schio villagers regarded her as their protector. Although bombs fell on their village, not a single citizen perished.

As she grew in age, Sr. Josephine's health began to decline, and she required the use of a wheelchair. When someone would ask her how she was, she would smile and reply, "As the Master desires." The pains of disease soon grew serious. In her suffering, she reportedly cried out to the attending nurse, "Please loosen the chains... they are so heavy!" On February 8, 1947, her pain finally ended. Her last words were, "Madonna! Madonna!" (My Lady! My Lady!)