

St. Josephine Bakhita (1869 – February 8, 1947)
Feast Day February 8

St. Josephine Bakhita was one of the last slaves to be kidnapped from Africa, about 125 years ago. It is important to know that even when slavery was practiced, the Catholic Church always considered slaves to be children of God with equal spiritual dignity. In the history of the Catholic church slaves were even able to become pope or be proclaimed a saint! For instance, "Pope St. Pius I (second century) and Pope St. Callistus (third century) were former slaves, as were the martyrs St. Blandina of Lyons (second century) and St. Felicitas of Carthage (fourth century). All four of these were white. But black slaves have likewise been canonized: St. Benedict the Moor and St. Martin de Porres, for instance.

Born in 1869 in what is now southern Sudan, East Africa, Blessed Josephine spent her first six years in her native village. One day, however, when she happened to walk a little outside the village boundaries, she was kidnapped by slave traders,

By that same year, 1875, the trade in black slaves had been largely phased out in African law. Egypt, which then exercised political control over the Sudan, had lately signed a treaty declaring slavery illegal. But abuses die hard, and "bootleg" enslavement still continued. To the little six-year-old, the experience of kidnapping was so traumatic that she forgot her own name. The kidnappers therefore gave her the name "Bakhita." They did not know how well they chose: "Bakhita" is Arabic for "the lucky one."

Bakhita was sold several times to different owners, who were mostly Muslims. One of her purchasers, a general in the Turkish army, had her "branded" like his other slaves. The branding was entrusted to a woman expert in the procedure. She inflicted 114 razor cuts on the breasts, arms and abdomen of the 13-year-old. Then she rubbed salt and flour into the wounds so that they healed into a permanent seal of ownership.

Throughout her early life, however, this black pagan girl demonstrated an inborn goodness and gentility that protected her virtue. Although she exemplified the enslaved at their most voiceless, she possessed what could only be called a "naturally Christian" soul. The last couple that owned her made no mistake in appointing her "nanny" to their little daughter. Having moved to Venice, Italy, they enrolled the daughter in a course of religious instruction conducted by the Canossian Sisters, a branch of the Sisters of Charity. Bakhita accompanied the child to each catechism class. At last the pagan slave from Sudan encountered Catholic doctrine and Catholic nuns, and found both deeply impressive.

Then a new crisis occurred in Bakhita's eventful life. Her master and mistress decided to return to Sudan. What should their nanny do? If she returned with them she knew that her economic condition would always be guaranteed, and she might even be able to rediscover her own family. On the other hand, she was still a catechumen, not yet a Catholic, and deeply desirous of baptism. Furthermore her association with the Canossian Sisters, by now so dear to her, would come to an end. During her period of indecision the question of her legal status as a slave was also raised before an Italian tribunal. Having studied the case carefully, the judge reached the decision that since Sudan had enacted a law forbidding slavery not long before her birth, the young black woman had actually never been a slave.

Bakhita at length made a most Christian decision. She chose to remain in Italy, be baptized a Catholic, and leave all else in the hands of God. The Canossians saw her through the course of studies. In 1890 she was baptized "Giuseppina" (Josephine). Her next step was logical. In 1893 she sought admission into the Canossian Sisters, and in 1896 she took final vows as a member of their community, During the next half century, Sister Bakhita proved herself a model religious, ever humble, ever grateful. Nobody realized better than she that were it not for the incredible trials of her youth she would never have come to know God.

Pope John Paul II beatified Sister Josephine in 1992. Only eight, years later, during the Great Jubilee, he canonized her. The space between beatification and canonization was unusually brief.

In declaring her a saint the Pope was doubtless influenced in part by the fact that in the year 2000 Sudan was still a land fraught with conflict and notorious for its disregard of civil rights.

The principal reason for his choice, however, seems to have been to hold up to the world Josephine, "The Lucky One", as the recipient of God's ever-fatherly love. In his canonization homily the Pope cried out for more saints: "Choose them, Lord! You can raise up saints. Take them from all lands Lord, give us saints!"

Quotations from "Saints Alive" by Father Robert F. McNamara (www.stthomasirondequoit.com)



From Slave to Saint; The Story of St. Josephine Bakhita by Jill A. Boughton

The girl was walking in the fields some ways off from her home, when two strangers appeared and asked her to pick them some fruit. Brought up to show courtesy to adults, the nine-year-old hurried to obey. Not until she was in the forest did she realize it was a trick.

“I saw two persons behind me,” she later recalled. “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.”

After a forced march, the girl was sold as a slave. “Bakhita,” her captors called her—Arabic for “Lucky One.” Though the title was intended sarcastically, it came to express the girl’s own outlook on her life. In later years, she gladly accepted the name and wished for an opportunity to forgive her captors. Even more remarkably, she thanked God for the good that had come from her suffering. “If I were to meet those who kidnapped me, and even those who tortured me,” she wrote, “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.”

Into Darkness.

Once she was whipped for overhearing a quarrel between her master and his wife—wounded so severely that “I had to lie on the straw mat for two months without being able to move.” According to the fashion of the time and place, her arms, breasts, and stomach were tattooed with 114 elaborate designs incised with a razor, then kept open by being rubbed with salt. However, she was never raped. “Our Lady protected me, even before I could know her.”

Despite this misery, Bakhita said she “never despaired. I felt a mysterious strength within me that sustained me.” She refrained from theft and trickery, as well as bitterness.

She talked about carrying two bags on her journey towards eternity. “One contains my sins. The other, much heavier, contains the infinite merits of Jesus Christ.” She described how she would cover her ugly bag with Our Lady’s merits, and open the other at her moment of judgment. “I am sure I will not be rejected. Then I will turn to St. Peter and say, ‘You can close the door after me—I am here to stay.’”

In her mid-seventies, when arthritis and bouts of pneumonia made Josephine dependent on a walking stick and then a wheelchair, she remained grateful. “I thank God for the many graces granted me, happy to have something to offer in return.” She had never imposed rigorous penances on herself, but she willingly accepted “the suffering caused by illness.” In the last days of her life, pain and high fever caused her to relive her tortures as a slave. In her delirium, she begged, “The chains are too tight. Loosen them a little, please!”

Sr. Josephine died in the Schio convent on February 8, 1947. As townspeople filed by her bier, mothers laid her hand on their children’s heads for the last time; some remarked that it remained flexible even in death.

