

During World War II, the people of the village of Schio regarded her as their protector. And although bombs fell on their village, not one citizen died.

As she grew older, she experienced long, painful years of sickness and was forced to use a wheelchair. During her agony, she relived the terrible days of her slavery and more than once she begged the nurse who assisted her: "Please, loosen the chains...they are heavy!"

Mother Bakhita continued to witness to faith, goodness and Christian hope. To those who visited her and asked how she was, she would respond with a smile: "As the Master desires."

This African flower, who knew the anguish of kidnapping and slavery, bloomed marvelously in Italy in response to God's grace, with the Daughters of Charity. Divine Providence which "cares for the flowers of the fields and the birds of the air", guided the Sudanese slave through innumerable and unspeakable sufferings to human freedom and to the freedom of faith and finally to the consecration of her whole life to God for the coming of His Kingdom.

Her humility, her simplicity and her constant smile won the hearts of all the citizens. Her sisters in the community esteemed her for her inalterable sweet nature, her exquisite goodness and her deep desire to make the Lord known. "Be good, love the Lord, pray for those who do not know Him. What a great grace it is to know God!"

It was Mary Most Holy who freed her from all pain. Her last words were: "Our Lady! Our Lady!" and her final smile testified to

her encounter with the Mother of the Lord. Mother Bakhita breathed her last on February 8, 1947 at the Canossian Convent, Schio, surrounded by the Sisters. A crowd quickly gathered at the Convent to have a last look at their "Mother Moretta" and to ask for her protection from heaven. Her body lay on display for three days afterwards. The fame of her sanctity has spread to all the continents and many are those who receive graces through her intercession.

In 1958, the process of canonization began for Josephine under Pope John XXIII. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1978, Pope John Paul II declared her venerable. Sadly, the news of her beatification in 1992 was censored in Sudan. But just nine months later, Pope John Paul II visited Sudan and honored her publicly. He canonized her on October 1, 2000.

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"In our time, in which the unbridled race for power, money, and pleasure is the cause of so much distrust, violence, and loneliness, Sister Bakhita has been given to us once more by the Lord as a universal sister, so that she can reveal to us the secret of true happiness: The Beatitudes ....Here is a message of heroic goodness modeled on the goodness of the Heavenly Father: "Rejoice, all of Africa! Bakhita has come back to you: the daughter of the Sudan, sold into slavery as a living piece of merchandise, and yet still free: free with the freedom of the saints." *Pope John Paul II*

Patron saint of Sudan

Feast Day: February 8

*St. Josephine Bakhita, pray for us!*

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## St. Josephine Bakhita (1869-1947)



Saint Josephine Margaret Bakhita was born around 1869 in the village of Olgossa in the Darfur region of Sudan. She was a member of the Daju people and her uncle was a tribal chief. Due to her family lineage, she grew up happy and relatively prosperous, saying that as a child, she did not know suffering.

Historians believe that sometime in February 1877, Josephine was kidnapped by Arab slave traders. Although she was just a child, she was forced to walk barefoot over 600 miles to a slave market in El Obeid. She was bought and sold at least twice during the grueling journey. For the next 12 years she would be bought, sold and given away over a dozen times. She spent so much time in captivity that she forgot her original name.

As a slave, her experiences varied from fair treatment to cruel. Her first owner, a wealthy Arab, gave her to his daughters as a maid. The assignment was easy until she offended her owner's son, possibly for the crime of breaking a vase. As punishment, she was beaten so severely she was

incapacitated for a month. After that, she was sold.

One of her owners was a Turkish general who gave her to his wife and mother-in-law who both beat her daily. Josephine wrote that as soon as one wound would heal they would inflict another. She told about how the general's wife ordered her to be scarred. As her mistress watched, ready with a whip, another woman drew patterns on her skin with flour, then cut into her flesh with a blade. She rubbed the wounds with salt to make the scars permanent. She would suffer a total of 114 scars from this abuse.

In 1833, the Turkish general sold her to the Italian Vice Consul, Callisto Legani. For the first time since the day she was kidnapped, she realized with pleasant surprise, that no one used the lash when giving her orders; instead, she was treated in a loving and cordial way. In the Consul's residence, Bakhita experienced peace, warmth and moments of joy, even though veiled by nostalgia for her own family, whom, perhaps, she had lost forever.

Political situations forced the Consul to leave for Italy. Bakhita asked and obtained permission to go with him and with a friend of his, a certain Mr. Augusto Michieli. When it was time for him to return to Italy, she begged to be taken with him, and he agreed. After a long and dangerous journey across Sudan, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean, they arrived in Italy. She was given away to another family as a gift and she served them as a nanny. Her new family also had dealings in Sudan so when her mistress decided to travel to Sudan without Josephine, she was placed in the

custody of the Canossian Sisters of the Institute of the Catechumens in Venice.

It was there that Bakhita came to know about God whom "she had experienced in her heart without knowing who He was" ever since she was a child. "Seeing the sun, the moon and the stars, I said to myself: Who could be the Master of these beautiful things? And I felt a great desire to see Him, to know Him and to pay Him homage..." The sisters answered her questions. She was deeply moved by her time with the sisters and discerned a call to follow Christ.

When her mistress returned from Sudan, Josephine refused to leave. Her mistress spent three days trying to persuade her to leave the sisters but Josephine remained steadfast. This caused the superior of the institute for baptismal candidates among the sisters to complain to Italian authorities on Josephine's behalf. The case went to court, and the court found that slavery had been outlawed in Sudan before Josephine was born, so she could not be lawfully made a slave. She was declared free.

For the first time in her life, Josephine was free and could choose what to do with her life. She chose to remain with the Canossian Sisters. She was baptized on January 9, 1890 and took the name Josephine Margaret and Fortunata. (Fortunata is the Latin translation for her Arabic name, Bakhita). She also received the sacraments of her first Holy Communion and Confirmation on the same day. These three sacraments are the sacraments of initiation into the Church and were always given together in the early Church. The Archbishop who gave her the sacraments was none other than Giuseppe

Sarto, the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, who would later become Pope Pius X. Bakhita remained in the catechumenate where she experienced the call to be a religious and to give herself to the Lord in the Institute of St. Magdalene of Canossa. On December 8, 1896 Josephine Bakhita was consecrated forever to God whom she called with the sweet expression "the Master"!

For another 50 years, this humble Daughter of Charity, a true witness of the love of God, lived in the community in Schio, engaged in various services: cooking, sewing, embroidery and attending to the door. When she was on duty at the door, she would gently lay her hands on the heads of the children who daily attended the Canossian schools and caress them. Her amiable voice, which had the inflection and rhythm of the music of her country was pleasing to the little ones, comforting to the poor and suffering and encouraging for those who knocked at the door of the Institute.

She also traveled and visited other convents telling her story to other sisters and preparing them for work in Africa. She was known for her gentle voice and smile. She was gentle and charismatic and was often referred to lovingly as the "little brown sister" or honorably as the "black mother."

When speaking of her enslavement, she often professed she would thank her kidnappers. For had she not been kidnapped, she might never have come to know Jesus Christ and entered His Church.