**St. Josephine Bakhita: A Model of Perseverance and Hope**

*(Hosea 2:14bc. 15cd. 19-20; 1 Corinthians 7:25-35; Luke 9:23-26)*

***“I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11.***

**Biography**

Saint Josephine Margaret Bakhita was born around 1869 CE 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. However, the horror of slave trade exposed the young lad into torment for many years.

**Kidnapped and Sold like a Commodity**

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.

**Scars: Suffering with a dim – obscure Hope**

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.

**God’s Way: A New Breath in Her Life**

In 1883, the Turkish general sold her to the Italian Vice Consul, Callisto Legani. He was a much kinder master and he did not beat her. When it was time for him to return to Italy, she begged to be taken with him, and he agreed. 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 had when her mistress decided to travel to Sudan without Josephine, she placed her in the custody of the Canossian Sisters in Venice. While she was in the custody of the sisters, she came to learn about God. According to Josephine, she had always known about God, who created all things, but she did not know who He was. 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 slave. She was declared free.

**Free At Last: Choosing God over the World**

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 ***Giusseppe Sarto***, the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice, who would later become ***Pope Pius X***.

**A New Bride of Christ: *Little Brown Sister***

Josephine became a novice with the Canossian Daughters of Charity religious order on December 7, 1893, and took her final vows on December 8, 1896. She was eventually assigned to a convent in Schio, Vicenza. For the next 42 years of her life, she worked as a cook and a doorkeeper at the convent. 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***."

**Her Past, A Blessing in Disguise; Protector Amidst Crisis**

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. 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.

**Last Days: Total Surrender to Divine Will**

In her later years, she began to suffer physical pain and was forced to use a wheelchair. But she always remained cheerful. If anyone asked her how she was, she would reply, "**As the master desires**." On the evening of February 8, 1947, Josephine spoke her last words, "**Our Lady, Our Lady**!" She then died. Her body lay on display for three days afterwards.

**The First Millennial Saint: Rejoice, all of Africa! Bakhita has come back to you**

In 1958, the process of canonization began for Josephine under Pope John XXIII. On December 1st, 1978, Pope John Paul II declared her venerable. Sadly, the news of her beatification in 1992 was censored in Sudan. Public acknowledgment of Bakhita’s beatification in 1992 (under Pope John Paul II) was suppressed to prevent it from inspiring Sudanese Christians or fueling discussions about religious freedom. The tension and complexity of relationship between the Muslims and the Christians could have been one issue for this censorship. Nonetheless, nine months later, Pope John Paul II visited Sudan and honored her publicly. He canonized her on October 1, 2000 in Khartoum, Sudan. Saint Josephine Bakhita is the patron saint of Sudan and venerated as the patron saint of human trafficking victims. Her feast day is celebrated on February 8.

**Reflection**

Dear brothers and sisters, the story of Bakhita is a culmination of forgiveness, hope and grace. Indeed, the name *Bak-hi-ta* comes from the Arabic word بخيتة (*bakhīta*), which means “*fortunate*” or “*lucky*.” There is no wonder, that Josephine was indeed lucky. However, through the horrible experience of the horror of slavery, I attribute her fortune to divine intervention. She became the wise virgin, whom the Lord found waiting. This story reminds us that perseverance is key to reaching an end. Difficult situations are like passing shadows which obscure the clarity of our goal, so divinely ordered. However, we have to remain resilient and steadfast even in the face of dilemma.

Hosea in the first reading reminds us that even in our difficulties, the Lord whispers to our hearts, “I will espouse you forever (…) in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and mercy, I will espouse you in faithfulness and you shall know that I am the Lord.” Her early life might remain obscure, but implies a joyous one. Her early may have been full of suffering, but suffering seated on solid hope. A logical contradiction this may seem, but a supernatural vindication and intervention surpassing the principles of human logic. Her conversion, a fulfilment of that whisper of the Lord. He finally espoused her and today, she enjoys the peace with the God who brought sense into her earthly life. The God who used her as tool to the rethinking of colonial slavery, used her to protect the people of Schio, and as a living model and saint of her time.

We are invited to detach from the world and follow Christ. This detachment enables us to have an undivided interest, time and focus. To offer our whole lives to the service of Christ and his people. To bring the good news to the poor and marginalized. St Paul explained how the interest of a married person are directed to pleasing their partner. He further showed us that “an unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord.” Meanwhile “A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.” Paul emphasized total dedication and “adherence to the Lord without distraction.” Moreover, Jesus validates Paul’s assertions in saying that whoever wants to follow Him “must deny himself (…) take up his cross daily and follow me.” The cross is a central aspect in the life of our founder, St Daniel Comboni. It is at the foot of the cross that the mission and the works of God grow. It gives a Christian a peculiar identity and an offspring from where they get consolation, grace, energy and daily bread. If I may ask, “Have I truly denied myself the joys and pleasures of this world? Why should I? Does Jesus guarantee me, a greater joy and happiness than the world could? How should I balance the scale of my relationship with God versus the world?”

We should keep in mind that the Lord has better arrangements for our well-being. The human mind may not comprehend, but we should always remember what he whispers to your hearts that “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. '”  Jeremiah 29:11.

St Daniel Comboni when faced with difficulties in the mission would request the Lord for more crosses, for they gave him strength to endure in his mission. He trusted that the Good, Loving, and Omniscient God would never harm him. Instead, dismantles the plans of the devil with his might. Bakhita embraced these aspects, chose to live for, with and in Christ for the rest of her life. She became an inspiration to many and protector of the people. I see in this first African millennial saint, the complex interplay between the grace of God and the veins of evil. Why would God allow one to suffer to be redeemed? And was it the case in the first place or a coincidence? Nonetheless God does not give us a burden we cannot carry.

**Influence**

St. Josephine Bakhita's life and legacy have a significant influence on human rights, particularly in the areas of ***dignity, freedom,*** *and the fight* ***against human trafficking***. In choosing to follow consecrated life, Bakhita’s story highlights the fundamental **human right to dignity** and freedom. Her journey from enslavement to sainthood is a powerful testimony that **every human being has inherent worth, regardless of their background**. She showed that true freedom is not just physical liberation but also spiritual and personal growth.

During the canonization of Blessed Bakhita in Khartoum, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II said:

“In the midst of so much hardship, Blessed Bakhita is your model and heavenly patron. In the terrible trials of her life *Bakhita always listened to Christ’s word*. She learned the mystery of his Cross and Resurrection: the saving truth about God who so loved each one of us that he gave his only Son (Cf. Jn. 3: 16), the saving truth about the Son who loves each one of us to the end (Cf. ibid. 13: 1). Blessed Bakhita was faithful, she was strong. She confided in Christ without reserve. *She showed herself a servant of God* by patiently enduring troubles, hardships and difficulties, by purity, knowledge, forbearance and kindness (Cf. 2Cor. 6: 4-6) – *like the first Christians*who, in the midst of the persecutions of the Roman Empire, showed themselves to be "servants of God... in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute" (Ibid. 6: 8). So writes the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Corinthians. And so speaks the history of the Church in Africa, not excluding the countries which I have now visited: Benin, Uganda, the Sudan.”[[1]](#footnote-1) (Pope John Paul II, 5)

Therefore, glossing through the life of such a beautiful Saint, I find a pragmatic dimension of love, forgiveness, hope and faith. These aspects are found throughout the books of the Bible, but scarcely in the lives of people who ought to practice them. The freedom which Saint Bakhita found in the Lord made her story a blessing in disguise. It earned her the pressing need to forgive, a prompt response to Jesus’ call to forgive. Hence, have you ever taken a leap of faith to forgive a terrible mistake done against you? Do you still hold that person you hate in your heart? Remember Bakhita forgave those who enslaved her for many years, those who stamped her with 114 scars; what about you, are you ready to forgive for that minor mistake? Jesus forgave those who nailed him on that crossed wood. What about you, that minor mistake, why should it give you intra-psychic war? Remember further that in the Lord we find our true dignity and autonomy. For without him, our hope, faith, nature autonomy and love as well as forgiveness finds no place to rest. For they find their true meaning in the Lord, God. May the Lord grant you freedom of heart, perseverance, a heart to forgive and hope to live your faith in him without ceasing through the intercession of St. Josephine Bakhita.

***HAPPY SOLEMNITY***

Simon Lodai Amin Salvatore

Nairobi, February 8, 2025

1. Eucharistic Concelebration in Honor Of Blessed Josephine Bakhita, Homily Of His Holiness John Paul II (Green Square, Khartoum (Sudan); Wednesday, 10 February 1993 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)