

St. Josephine Bakhita: Discovering Freedom in Christ

Pope John Paul II once said that “Hatred can only be conquered by love.” Saint Josephine Bakhita did just this throughout her lifetime. She was a woman who went through a difficult journey but didn’t allow that to weaken her ability to love and live fully. She went from being a slave to discovering an authentic freedom - the freedom in Christ. She impacted people throughout her lifetime and she continues to impact people today. St. Josephine Bakhita may not be one of the most known saints, but her story inspires all of us to strive to live humbly, compassionately, and in true freedom.

Bakhita was born in 1869 in Darfur, Sudan. She was kidnapped at the age of seven by Arab slave traders and sold into slavery. She would be given the name “Bakhita,” which means “fortunate”. From that moment on she would be treated like an object and sold from one master to another.

St. Josephine Bakhita was greatly tortured and abused. One of her masters even carved into her skin leaving scars on her body for the rest of her life. She suffered greatly but she didn’t argue nor did she complain. She suffered with a smile and with compassion. She held no grudges against her masters even though they treated her horribly.

Josephine would say “If I were to meet the slave-traders who kidnapped me and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands, for if that did not happen, I would not be a Christian and Religious today... The Lord has loved me so much: we must love everyone... we must be compassionate!” One would think that St. Josephine would be resentful to not only her masters but to God himself as it seems to be human nature to turn to God and put the blame on him when something goes wrong. But she didn’t. Bakhita thanked God for allowing her to get through the hardships because it led her to be the Christian she was.

Bakhita came across the Canossian sisters when she was with her last master, Augusto Michieli. Her task as his slave was to babysit Mimmina Michieli and accompany her to Venice’s Institute of the Catechumens which was run by the Canossian Sisters. Bakhita wasn’t Catholic but as Mimmina was being taught, she felt intrigued and wanted to be a part of such a church. In 1890, Bakhita was baptized and confirmed. The moment she became a Catholic, her name became complete. She took the name Josephine in Baptism, making her Josephine Bakhita.

When St. Josephine Bakhita’s master returned and attempted to take Mimmina and Josephine back with him, Josephine decided that she would not go with him. A court case would occur as Michieli wanted “his slave” back. The Canossian Sisters and the patriarch of Venice

helped Josephine and the judge would conclude that she had been free since 1885 as slavery was illegal in Italy.

Josephine Bakhita was finally free. However, her definition of freedom was different to that of society's. She would say "Seeing the sun, the moon and the stars, I said to myself, 'Who could be the Master of these beautiful things?' I felt a great desire to see him, to know him and to pay homage." She lived a life where masters abused her and controlled her, but when she met the creator, she wondered what type of master he was as she loved so relentlessly. Later on she would find out that God wasn't like any master she had met before - in fact he wasn't a master at all. He is a father that cares for his children and knows the worth of every single one of them.

Our definition of freedom can sometimes be described as doing whatever we want, when we want to. However, Bakhita knew the real definition of freedom. She knew we receive free will, but we will never feel fulfilled and free until we turn to God and seek to promote the common good. Bakhita did just this by entering the Institute of Canossa in 1893 and making her profession three years later. In 1902 she would be transferred to the city of Schio where she assisted her community with basic necessities. She would also welcome the visitors at the door with a huge smile and with much love. St. Josephine Bakhita is described as humble, simple, and as a person who never stops smiling. She didn't save the world or make a huge news headline but her simple choices and her desire to imitate the love, kindness, and compassion of Christ makes her an amazing role model.

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