

“They laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak” (Mk 6:56). Long before Safeway and the Alaska Commercial Company, people gathered in the marketplace to trade for fresh vegetables grown on family farms, for handcrafted baskets, drawings, and carvings and for the right price, you could obtain just about anything. Sadly, some marketplaces trafficked in human slaves.

Today is the memorial of Saint Josephine Bakhita. She came from a loving family but was kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of 7. She is the patron Saint for her home country of Sudan. She is also the saint we pray to for all victims of human trafficking. February 8, 2021 is the third international day of prayer and reflection against human trafficking. This year the day focuses on the plight of children, with the theme: “We are children! Not slaves!”

Even today, Bakhita’s native home of Sudan is plagued by one of the highest levels of human trafficking. Sudan knows conflict rather than peace, and one very tragic way of dealing with an enemy is to dehumanize them, conquer them and sell them into slavery.

In the troubled area of South Sudan, Bakhita is a source of pride who overcame all obstacles to live freely and in service to others. Born in the Darfur region of Sudan in 1869, slave traders stripped her away from her family in 1876. She was so traumatized she could not even remember her own name. Her captors nicknamed her Lucky, in Arabic “Bakhita.” Time and time again she was bought and sold. Her adolescent years were filled with torture and beatings.

Her fourth owner was an Italian diplomat who gave her to Augusto Michieli. This family brought her to Italy as a nanny for their daughter. With these two Italian families she was treated much more humanely but still a slave. The Michieli family gave her a small silver crucifix. The image of Jesus being crucified stirred something deep within her.

“In 1888, when she was almost 20 years old, she and the Michieli daughter were sent to be guests at the Institute of the Catechumens run by the Canossian Sisters in Venice. There she began her journey of faith.”ⁱ She was baptized taking the name Josephine Margaret. With her newfound freedom in Christ, she fought to be free from the bonds of slavery.

“During the ensuing court case, the Canossian Sisters and the patriarch of Venice intervened on Josephine’s behalf. The judge concluded that since slavery was illegal in Italy, she had actually been free since 1885.”ⁱⁱ Thankful to God, she entered the Canossian Sisters in order to dedicate her life to the “Good Master.” After a three-year period of instruction in religious life, she formally professed vows in 1896 on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

As a religious sister, she lived a simple, joyful, ordinary life. “Her gentle presence, her warm, amiable voice, and her willingness to help with any menial task were a comfort to the poor and suffering people who came to the door” of the community.ⁱⁱⁱ Sister Bakhita taught others to love with her own story as a powerful witness. She said, “If I was to meet those slave raiders that abducted me and those who tortured me, I’d kneel down to them to kiss their hands, because, if it had not have been for them, I would not have become a Christian and religious woman.”^{iv} What a beautiful witness to the transforming power of Christ to heal all wounds.

She died on February 8th, 1947 after 50 years of religious life. At her canonization in October of 2000, Saint John Paul II offered this insight:

In today's world, countless women continue to be victimized, even in developed modern societies. In Saint 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.

My thoughts turn to the new saint's country... In the name of suffering humanity, I appeal once more to those with responsibility: open your hearts to the cries of millions of innocent victims and embrace the path of negotiation. I plead with the international community: do not continue to ignore this immense human tragedy. I invite the whole Church to invoke the intercession of Saint Bakhita upon all our persecuted and enslaved brothers and sisters, especially in Africa and in her native Sudan, that they may know reconciliation and peace.^v

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/news/st-josephine-bakhita-former-slave-is-patron-of-trafficking-victims-28117

ⁱⁱ franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-josephine-bakhita

ⁱⁱⁱ usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues/africa/sudan/upload/st-bakhita-sudan-prayer

^{iv} bakhitacharities.org/saint-bakhita-quotes

^v vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20001001_canonization.html