

St. Josephine Bakhita, Patron Saint of Human Trafficking

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 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. Two years later, the family gave her to their friend Augusto Michieli. Bakhita became babysitter to Mimmina Michieli, whom she accompanied to Venice's Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canossian Sisters. While Mimmina was being instructed, Josephine felt drawn to the Catholic Church.

When she encountered Jesus, depicted on a cross, she resonated with the image because she too knew the pain of beatings and abuse. When she was given her own crucifix, one of the first possessions she could call her own, she felt something beyond her understanding. She joined the catechumenate and was baptized and confirmed in 1890, taking the name Josephine Margaret Mary Bakhita.

When the Michielis returned from Africa and wanted to take Mimmina and Josephine back with them, the future saint refused to go. 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. Josephine remained in Italy and decided to enter Canossians in 1893. She made her profession in 1896 and was sent to Northern Italy, where she dedicated her life to assisting her community and teaching others to love God.

[A young student once asked Josephine Bakhita: "What would you do, if you were to meet your captors?" Without hesitation she responded: "If I were to meet those who kidnapped me, and even those who tortured me, 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."](#)

Her last years were marked by pain and sickness. She used a wheelchair, but she retained her cheerfulness. Josephine died on February 8, 1947. For three days, her body lay on display while thousands of people arrived to pay their respects. But death marked the beginning of her next journey to sainthood which only began after 12 years.

On December 1, 1978, Pope John Paul II declared her Venerable. She was declared Blessed on May 17, 1992 and given her February 8 Feast Day. Finally, on October 1, 2000, she was canonized and became Saint Josephine Bakhita.

Today, Saint Josephine Bakhita is the Patron Saint of Human Trafficking. She is a shining ray of hope for victims of human trafficking and an inspirational demonstration of how a victim can recover from their trauma and become whole again.

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Feast Day: February 8

Birth: 1869, Death: February 8, 1947

Beatified: May 17, 1992 by Pope John Paul II, Canonized: October 1, 2000 by Pope John Paul II



Prayer to St. Josephine Bakhita



St. Josephine Bakhita, you were sold into slavery as a child and endured untold hardship and suffering. Once liberated from your physical enslavement, you found true redemption in your encounter with Christ and his Church.

O St. Bakhita, assist all those who are trapped in a state of slavery; Intercede with God on their behalf so that they will be released from their chains of captivity. Those whom man enslaves, let God set free.

Provide comfort to survivors of slavery and let them look to you as an example of hope and faith. Help all survivors find healing from their wounds. We ask for your prayers and intercessions for those enslaved among us.

Amen.