

St. Josephine Bakhita of Sudan, patron saint of human trafficking survivors

Born around 1869, Josephine lived a happy, carefree life with her large and loving family. At the age of 7 or 8, she was seized by Arab traders. Over the course of 12 years, she was sold 5 times and then given away. The trauma of Josephine's abduction caused her to forget her own name. She was forcibly converted to Islam and took the name given to her by the traders - "Bakhita", which means "fortunate" or "lucky" in Arabic.

Some of Josephine's owners were kind and treated her well. Others beat her severely and she was forced to undergo multiple painful scarifications through a combination of branding and tattooing. Over 100 intricate patterns were carved into her body.

In 1883, Bakhita was sold to the Italian consul in Sudan, who treated her kindly. She ended up in Italy and was given to an Italian family to be a nanny to their daughter. When her new mistress decided to travel to Sudan without her daughter and Josephine, they were placed in the care of the Canossian Sisters in Venice. This was to be a temporary living arrangement; however, when her mistress returned to Venice for her servant and daughter, Bakhita refused to leave the convent. There, cared for and instructed by the Sisters, Bakhita encountered Christianity for the first time. Grateful to her teachers, she recalled, "Those holy mothers instructed me with heroic patience and introduced me to that God who from childhood I had felt in my heart without knowing who He was". On 29 November 1889 an Italian court ruled that because Italian law did not recognize slavery, Bakhita had never legally been a slave while living in Italy. For the first time in her life, Bakhita found herself in control of her own destiny. She chose to remain with the Canossians, and on 9 January 1890 Bakhita was baptized with the names of Josephine Margaret and Fortunata (which is the Latin translation for the Arabic *Bakhita*). On the same day she was also confirmed and received Holy Communion from the future Pope Pius X.

In December 1896, Bakhita took her vows and lived with the Canossian Sisters at their convent in Schio for the rest of her life. During her 42 years in Schio, Josephine was employed as the cook, sacristan, and door-keeper. She was well known for her gentleness and ever-present smile, as well as her special charisma and reputation for sanctity. During World War 2, the townspeople considered her a saint and felt protected by her mere presence. Although Schio did not escape the bombing, there was not a single casualty.

Although her last years were marked by pain and sickness, Josephine remained ever cheerful. When she was once asked how she would treat those who kidnapped and tortured her, she replied that she would kneel and kiss their hands, for without them she would not be a Christian and a religious.

Bakhita's legacy is that transformation is possible through suffering. Her story of deliverance from physical slavery also symbolizes all those who find meaning and inspiration in her life for their own deliverance from spiritual slavery. Her entire life story is an outstanding example of Christian hope. Josephine died in 1947 and was canonized in 2000. Her feast day is February 8.

