



St. Josephine Bakhita

We see in our Christian tradition a great concern for those bound in slavery. Through the leadership of Moses, God freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that God wishes the “releasing [of] those bound unjustly” (Isaiah 58:6). And Jesus himself tells us that his mission includes the proclaiming of “liberty to captives” (Luke 4:18). Clearly, God is concerned for our freedom, desiring that we be released from the chains that bind us—whether they be physical or spiritual.

In St. Josephine Bakhita, we see a woman who, though forced to endure a period of slavery, cast off her shackles to serve God. Born in southern Sudan, Josephine was kidnapped and sold into slavery at the age of 7. Forgetting her birth name as a result of the traumatic experience, her captors dubbed her “Bakhita,” which means “fortunate.”

And fortunate, one might say, she was. She was bought by an Italian politician who treated her kindly. Although she missed her family, she found moments of real joy. When her owner moved to Italy, he brought Josephine along and gave her to his friend Augusto Michieli. She became a babysitter for the Michielis’ young daughter, Mimmina, and accompanied the girl to Venice’s Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canosian Sisters.

Bakhita came to know God at the institute and felt drawn to enter the Catholic Church. When the Michielis returned to collect Mimmina and Bakhita, Bakhita refused to leave. She wanted to stay with the Canosian Sisters—and Italian law supported her desire, declaring her a free woman.

Bakhita, who took the name Josephine, soon consecrated her life to God, becoming a sister and serving in the Canosian community. She became a great source of comfort to children who came to the institute, and aided the poor and suffering who came to the sisters’ door. She was known far and wide for her caring nature and desire to spread the love of God. When she died in 1947, a crowd gathered at the convent to pray for her and to ask for her intercession.

We see in St. Josephine Bakhita a woman who struggled in distant lands, a stranger forced to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. We also see a woman who served God in all she did—even before she entered the Church—and who found the strength to release the chains that bound her and embrace God’s call.

What chains exist in our own lives? How can we work with God this Lent to free ourselves and others from whatever holds us captive?