

St. Josephine Bakhita

BORN ABOUT 1869; DIED 1947

RELIGIOUS

FEAST DAY: FEBRUARY 8

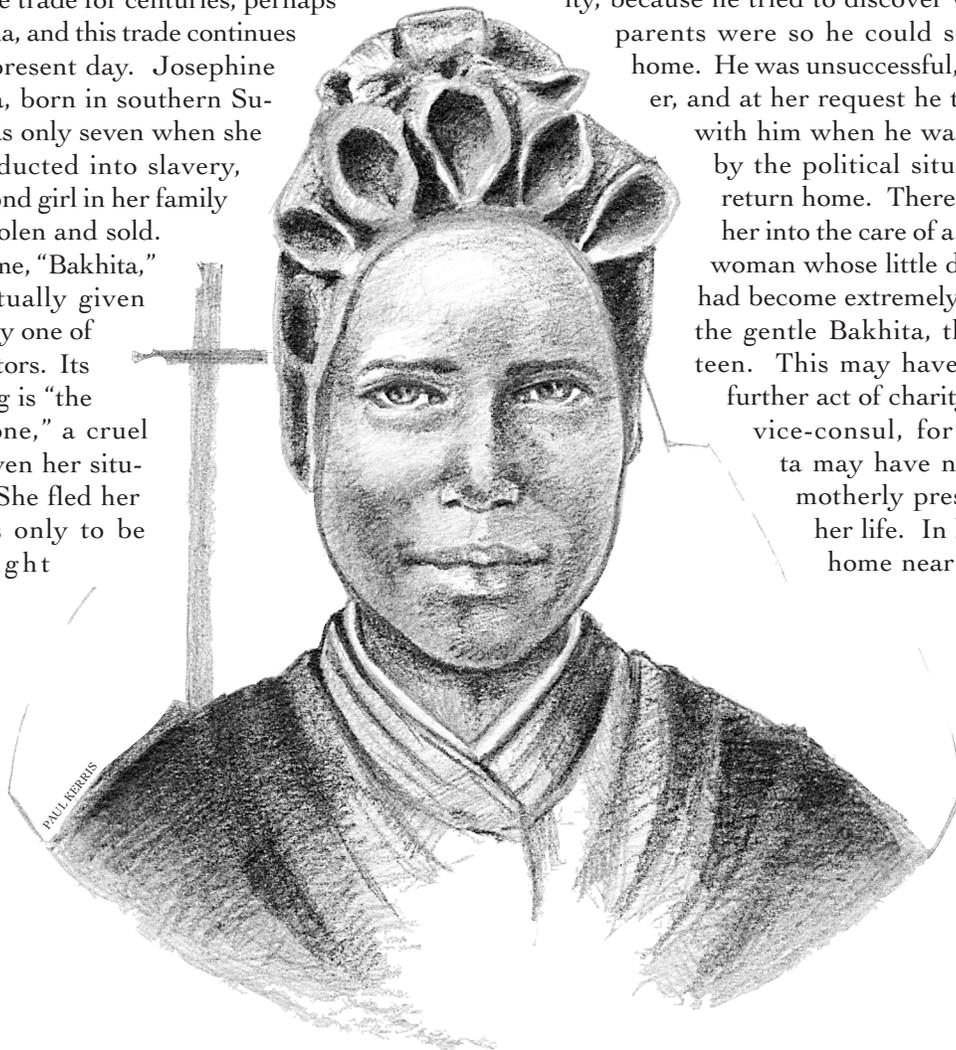
IN THE WORLD TODAY, everyone seems to feel wronged by someone, whether it is corporate misdeeds or personal injustices. Yet St. Josephine Bakhita, a victim if ever there was one, spent no time on recriminations or desire for revenge. As soon as she found God, she gave her life to him, and never looked back. Her life became a perfect offering, pure and holy in his sight, and nothing else mattered.

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen its men, women, and children torn from their families by the slave trade for centuries, perhaps millennia, and this trade continues to the present day. Josephine Bakhita, born in southern Sudan, was only seven when she was abducted into slavery, the second girl in her family to be stolen and sold. Her name, "Bakhita," was actually given to her by one of her captors. Its meaning is "the lucky one," a cruel joke given her situation. She fled her captors only to be re-caught

and sold to a merchant, becoming a maid for his daughter. This initial situation was not difficult and she was well-liked and well-treated, until the merchant's son whose vase she had accidentally broken brutally beat her and demanded that she be sold.

Bakhita's next owner whipped and beat her daily. When she was thirteen, her mistress had her tattooed (not by needle and dye, but by the much more painful method of incision and salt) over her arms, breasts, and abdomen. Following this, she was again sold and, eventually, purchased by an Italian vice-consul. While it is scandalous to learn that a Catholic purchased a slave, he may have done it as an act of charity, because he tried to discover who her

parents were so he could send her home. He was unsuccessful, however, and at her request he took her with him when he was forced by the political situation to return home. There he gave her into the care of a wealthy woman whose little daughter had become extremely fond of the gentle Bakhita, then sixteen. This may have been a further act of charity by the vice-consul, for Bakhita may have needed a motherly presence in her life. In her new home near Venice,





she acted as nanny and companion for the child, Mimmina.

For six years Bakhita lived with this family. Just before she was to be sent to work in a hotel they owned, their steward brought to the family's attention the fact that she had never received instruction in the Christian faith. Both she and Mimmina were then boarded at the convent of the Daughters of Charity of Canossa in Venice. As she entered the convent, Bakhita knew she had found her true home and the God she had been seeking from childhood.

Ten months later, her last "owner" came to retrieve her. Bakhita, however, firmly refused to leave the convent. The Mother Superior asked for help from the Cardinal-Patriarch of Venice, who in turn brought in a local official since a matter of civil law was involved. Both supported Bakhita, who made it clear that the claim of love by her "owner" (which was genuine) and the claim of Mimmina on her heart was strong, but that she could not risk losing God by leaving the convent. Since slavery was not legal in Italian law, it was not difficult to conclude that she had been legally emancipated ever since she had arrived in Italy. Following this decision, she was baptized Josephine, with her former "owner" as her godmother, another testament to the tie of love between them. Bakhita was then twenty-one, and had given her life to her God,



St. Josephine Bakhita, by Lisa E. Brown

whom she ever after called "the Master" who knew her as his true daughter.

Although Bakhita remained in the convent and continued instruction in the faith, she did not request admission to the community for several more years, fearing that her black skin would bar her from entry. However, when she did finally make the request of the Mother Superior, she was accepted with joy. She lived the remainder of her life, over fifty years, as a Canossian sister. She was at times sent out to travel throughout Italy to encourage support for the missions, acting in obedience even though she herself desired to return to Africa to help convert her own people. When she was home in the convent, she worked as a cook, as a seamstress, as a sacristan, and eventually as a portress (a position held by many other humble but eminent saints).

Her work at the door of the convent brought her into contact with those outside — the poor, the ill, the suffering — and stories of miracles began to be told.

Her life ended with four years of grievous illness. While she bore her own suffering with patience and cheerfulness, she saw it as a new kind of slavery and, as well, greatly felt the burden her condition imposed on those caring for her. Yet

to the end, she was "pure in heart" (Mt 5:8), and she now sees the God to whom she freely gave her life as a young woman.

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