



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval

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Assumption of the Blessed Virgin MARY

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

TWO Sudanese girls, ages seven and twelve, overflowing with life and joy, were walking through the fields, playing. Nature, the future—everything smiled on them in this springtime of their lives. Nothing signaled a tragic event. Stopping to gather herbs for cooking, they suddenly noticed two men coming towards them. One of them spoke to the elder girl, and asked her as a favor to let the younger girl go into the forest to look for a parcel that had been left behind. The little girl, in her innocence, did as she was asked and left for the forest with the two men. When they reached the woods, she realized that there was no parcel. The two men drew near her and threatened her, one with a knife, the other with a revolver. “If you scream, you’re dead! Come, follow us.” Terrified, the little girl tried to scream, but was unable to. Later on, the kidnappers asked her her name. Petrified with fear, she was unable to answer. “Okay,” they said, “we’ll call you Bakhita (meaning ‘lucky one’), because you really are lucky.” To the men, it was irony to call the girl’s misfortune “luck”. But in the eyes of God, Who guides all events for the good of the elect, it was truly an undreamed of stroke of luck for Bakhita.

Bakhita was born in Sudan around 1869, into a family of eight children who belonged to the Nubian Dagi tribe. She spent her early years in Olgossa, a little village in Darfur, close to Mount Agilerei. She was still very young when her eldest sister was kidnapped by slave traders, never to return. It was now Bakhita’s turn to be dragged for long days on a forced march over a difficult path with others who, like her, were to be sold as slaves. She would be bought and sold five times in the markets of El-Obeid and Khartoum. She would serve several masters over a dozen years, amidst unspeakable sufferings. One particularly cruel master daily beat Bakhita bloody. Another forced her to be tattooed in a way used only for slaves. It consisted of tracing designs with a razor blade on her breasts and belly. The open wounds were then stuffed with salt to keep them from closing up. As a result of this ill treatment, she would bear 144 scars for the rest of her life.

Within me

In spite of the ill treatment, Bakhita was loyal to her masters. She never helped herself to what belonged to them, even when she was starving. She strove to faithfully carry out all the orders she received, no matter how difficult and disagreeable they might be. Later, when she was asked if she acted this way to obey God, she replied, “I did not yet know God. I acted that way because I felt within me that it was the way one should act.” Bakhita

obeyed her conscience illumined by the natural law inscribed in the heart of every human being: “In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience”, the Second Vatican Council explains. “Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 16).

Several months after the tattooing, her master, an officer in the Turkish army, had to return to his country. Unable to bring his slaves with him, he decided to sell them. Providentially, Bakhita was bought in 1883 by the Italian Consul in Khartoum, Callisto Legnani. She would later recount, “The new master was rather good and he took a liking to me. ... I had no more reprimands, blows, punishments, so that I was hesitant to believe such peace and tranquility were possible.” For the first time since the day of her kidnapping, Bakhita did not fear the whip—she was even treated graciously and cordially. In the Consul’s house, she knew serenity, affection, and moments of joy, even if they were still clouded by her longing for her family, lost to her forever.

In 1885, political events forced the Consul to return to Italy. Wishing to remain in his service, Bakhita was allowed to follow him. When the diplomat arrived in Genoa, a friend shared with him his pregnant wife's wish to have a servant to help her. The Consul agreed to the request, and Bakhita entered a new family, the Michieli's. When the child, a daughter, was born, Bakhita was put in charge of raising her; later, both were entrusted to the hands of the Daughters of Charity, known as the Canossian Sisters, in their institute for catechumens in Venice. At that time, a friend presented Bakhita with a silver crucifix. As he gave it to her, he respectfully kissed it, explaining that JESUS CHRIST was the Son of God and that He had died for us. Bakhita did not grasp the full significance of these words—nevertheless, at the Sisters, she learned to know God, Whom she had felt in her heart since her childhood. One day she would write, "Seeing the sun, the moon, and the stars, I said to myself: 'Who, then, is the Master of these beautiful things?' And I felt a great desire to see Him, know Him, and honor Him."

A completely different "Paron"

In his encyclical on Christian hope, *Spe salvi*, issued November 30, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI makes reference to Bakhita's spiritual path: "After the terrifying 'masters' who had owned her up to that point, Bakhita came to know a totally different kind of 'master'—in Venetian dialect, which she was now learning, she used the name 'Paron' for the living God, the God of JESUS CHRIST. Up to that time she had known only masters who despised and maltreated her, or at best considered her a useful slave. Now, however, she heard that there is a 'Paron' above all masters, the Lord of all lords, and that this Lord is good, goodness in person. She came to know that this Lord even knew her, that He had created her—that He actually loved her. She too was loved, and by none other than the supreme 'Paron', before Whom all other masters are themselves no more than lowly servants. She was known and loved and she was awaited. What is more, this Master had Himself accepted the destiny of being flogged and now He was waiting for her 'at the Father's right hand'. Now she had 'hope'—no longer simply the modest hope of finding masters who would be less cruel, but the great hope: 'I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good.' Through the knowledge of this hope she was 'redeemed', no longer a slave, but a free child of God" (no. 3).

Bakhita followed the stages of the catechumenate. At this time, Mrs. Michieli, about to follow her husband who had to return to Africa, decided to take her servant back. On the basis of the freedom guaranteed to her by Italian law, Bakhita declared she would not return to her country—she wished to remain with the Canossian

Sisters to complete her Christian formation with them. "I cannot return to Africa," she said, "because if I did, it would mean abandoning my faith in God. I love my mistress and her child very much, but I cannot lose God. So I have decided to stay here." On January 9, 1890, Bakhita received, at the hands of the Patriarch of Venice, the Sacraments of Christian initiation—Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist—and took the Christian name Josephine. According to a witness who was at the celebratory meal that followed, Bakhita was transfigured. "She spoke little, but happiness radiated from all her gestures, all her words." Afterwards, Bakhita was often seen kissing the baptismal fonts, saying, "Here I became a child of God!" From day to day there grew in her an immense gratitude to God, Who had never stopped holding her by the hand to lead her to Himself. She experienced the truth of Saint Paul's words: *all things work together for good to them that love God* (Rom. 8 :28). A superficial analysis of events cannot explain Bakhita's destiny—only faith enables it to make sense. As Benedict XVI says, "It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love—a Person. ... Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in JESUS has revealed Himself as Love" (*Spe salvi*, no. 5).

Entirely God's

After her baptism, Bakhita continued her formation in the faith, and soon heard the Lord's voice calling her to consecrate herself entirely to Him. On December 7, 1893, she was received into the Canossian Sisters' novitiate, and on December 8, 1896, she made her first profession of vows, under the name Sister Josephine, consecrating herself to the One Whom she familiarly called "My Master!" According to custom, before being allowed to make her profession, to confirm that she was freely committing herself, she was questioned by the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Sarto — the future Pope Saint Pius X. After hearing her, the prelate told her with a beautiful smile: "Make your vows with no fear. JESUS loves you. Love Him and serve Him always as you have up till now."

Several years later, an Italian student asked Bakhita what she would have done if she encountered by chance the men who had kidnapped her. She answered without hesitation: "If I met the slave traders who kidnapped me, and even those who tortured me, I would kneel down and kiss their hands. If what happened to me had not taken place, how would I have become a Christian and a nun?" Far from harboring feelings of hatred

toward her tormentors, Bakhita made every effort to forgive them. Like Our Lord on the Cross, she prayed for them, *for they know not what they do* (Lk. 23 :34). One day, when someone alluded to her abusers, she said, “I feel pity for them. They undoubtedly did not know of the anguish they caused me. They were the masters, and I was the slave. Just as for us it is natural to do good, for them it is natural to do what they did to me. They did it out of habit, not out of malice.”

This woman’s astonishing attitude witnesses to the loving presence of God in a world that is all too often unjust. During a visit to Gorée Island off the coast of Dakar, Senegal on February 22, 1992, Pope John Paul II recalled the millions of Africans deported into slavery in the Americas : “For an entire period of the African continent’s history, black men, women and children were brought onto this narrow patch of land, snatched from their homes, separated from their loved ones, to be sold here as commodities. ... They were victims of a shameful trade, in which people who were baptized but not living their faith participated. How can we forget the tremendous suffering inflicted on populations deported from the African continent, with no regard for the most basic human rights? How can we forget the human lives annihilated by slavery? This sin committed by man against man, this sin committed by man against God, must be confessed in complete truth and humility. How long the road the human family must travel before its members learn to see and respect one another as images of God, so as to love one another as sons and daughters of the same heavenly Father !”

Still today

But such crimes are not only a thing of the past. Even in our days, slavery in various forms is a wound on society. The Second Vatican Council forcefully asserts, “Whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 27).

In 1902, Sister Josephine was sent to Schio, in northern Italy, where she took on various responsibilities—cooking, laundry, sewing, serving as the porter. As cook, she was attentive to everyone, especially to the sick, for

whom she prepared the most appetizing meals—she desired to love and to serve out of love for Christ. As the porter, she gave particular care to children, whom she loved to bless affectionately, placing her hand on them. With her kind voice, “the Little Black Mother”, as she was called, became close to the children, welcoming to the poor and suffering, and encouraging for all those who knocked at the convent door. Faithfully seeking God in the humble tasks of everyday life, she had the heart of an apostle. On the occasion of her religious profession, she wrote this prayer : “Beloved Lord, how good You are ! May I fly to Africa and proclaim aloud Your goodness toward me to all my people. How many souls would hear my voice and turn to You ! Lord, grant that they might also know You and love You !” Pope Benedict XVI points out this missionary spirit : “She made several journeys round Italy in order to promote the missions : the liberation that she had received through her encounter with the God of JESUS CHRIST, she felt she had to extend, it had to be handed on to others, to the greatest possible number of people. The hope born in her which had ‘redeemed’ her she could not keep to herself; this hope had to reach many, to reach everybody” (*Spe salvi*, no. 3).

The true poor

In 1935, her Superior asked her to go to several of the congregation’s convents to witness to the other Sisters the marvels God had done for her. Naturally shy and profoundly humble, she was not enthusiastic about this project, but accepted it in a spirit of obedience. And grace did not fail her. Her message consisted of encouraging her Sisters to holiness, to gratitude for all the blessings they had received, and to prayer for all the souls who had not yet had the joy of knowing JESUS CHRIST. After hearing her testimony, listeners sometimes expressed their condolences to her. She explained, “People often say to me, ‘My poor woman ! My poor woman !’ I am not poor, because I belong to the Master and I live in His house. The ‘poor’ are those who are not completely His.” From 1936 to 1938, Mother Josephine performed the duties of porter in the novitiate in Milan, where she had the opportunity to edify novices and their families. For those who found it difficult to see their daughters leave for a distant land, she found words of comfort : “How many Africans would accept the faith if they had missionaries to preach to them the name of JESUS CHRIST, His love for us, His redeeming Sacrifice for souls !”

In 1943, the community and the people of Schio celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Mother Josephine’s profession. Shortly thereafter, her health declined and she was confined to a wheelchair. One day she replied to a prelate who asked her what she was doing sitting in her wheelchair : “What am I doing? Exactly the same

thing as you—the Will of God.” Another time, the doctor quoted to her the passage from the *Song of Songs* (1:4): “Nigra sum, sed formosa” and explained its meaning to her: “My skin may well be black, but my soul is beautiful and dazzling.” Mother Josephine replied, “Oh, if only Our Lord could think that of me when I meet Him!” She yearned for this meeting. “When you love someone very much, you have a great desire to be with him. Why then be afraid of death? Death leads us to God.” And to those who suggested to her that even so, God’s Judgment was something to be feared: “Do now what you will want to have done then. It is we ourselves who prepare our own judgment.”

This unshakable confidence helped her to endure the sufferings of her last days. In her agony, she relived her terrible years of slavery, and several times begged the nurse at her bedside: “Loosen the chains a little ... they are hurting me!” However, at the end, the Blessed Virgin came to permanently deliver her from all pain. The dying woman’s last words — “Our Lady! Our Lady!” — as well as her smile as she died witnessed to her encounter with the Mother of God. It was February 8, 1947, in the convent in Schio. The community surrounded her with prayer; a crowd quickly came to see the “Little Black Mother” one last time, and ask her to

extend her protection over them from her place in Heaven.

Something essential

On October 1, 2000, Mother Josephine Bakhita was canonized by John Paul II, and in 2007, Benedict XVI proposed her as an example of hope in his encyclical *Spe salvi*. This encyclical also contains a remark worthy of particular attention: “I would like to add here another brief comment with some relevance for everyday living. There used to be a form of devotion—perhaps less practiced today but quite widespread not long ago—that included the idea of ‘offering up’ the minor daily hardships that continually strike at us like irritating ‘jabs’, thereby giving them a meaning. Of course, there were some exaggerations and perhaps unhealthy applications of this devotion, but we need to ask ourselves whether there may not after all have been something essential and helpful contained within it. What does it mean to offer something up? Those who did so were convinced that they could insert these little annoyances into Christ’s great ‘com-passion’ so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love. Maybe we should consider whether it might be judicious to revive this practice ourselves” (no. 40).

In the light of this delicate suggestion of the Holy Father, we can move forward on the path of life, guided by MARY, the star of hope.

Dom Antoine Maie
o.s.b.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it.
– Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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