

February 8

# St. Josephine Bakhita

c. 1869–1947 • Sudan

A nine-year-old girl was walking with a friend in the fields of the Sudan in Africa. Two strange men appeared and ordered the girl to go pick fruit in the forest for them. Her friend they sent away. In the forest, the men seized the little girl, brought her to their town, and made her a slave. She was so frightened that she forgot her name. Because she could not remember her name, the slave raiders called her Bakhita, which means “fortunate one.”

But Bakhita did not feel fortunate. In all, she was sold to five different masters. One of her masters was especially cruel and would beat the young Bakhita terribly. Her fifth master was an Italian man named Calixto Leganini, who served as an Italian consul in the Sudan. For the first time, Bakhita felt she might be fortunate because Leganini did not beat her or whip her. When Leganini returned to Italy, he brought Bakhita with him. At the Italian harbor, the wife of one of Leganini’s friends, Mrs. Michieli, begged him for one of his slaves. Leganini gave Bakhita to Mrs. Michieli.

Mrs. Michieli took Bakhita home to watch over her daughter. When she and her husband left to manage a hotel in the Sudan, they left Bakhita and their daughter in Italy under the care of the Canossa Sisters of Venice. At the convent, Bakhita’s soul was set free. The sisters taught Bakhita about God and His love for her. Bakhita realized that she had been longing for God all of her life, but only now understood that longing. She was baptized into the Catholic Faith and took the name Josephine.

Soon Mrs. Michieli returned to Italy. She wanted to take Josephine Bakhita and her daughter back to Africa. All of her life, Josephine Bakhita had done what her masters commanded out of fear. But now she knew that she should serve no one but God. She refused to leave the convent, and Mrs. Michieli was angry. But the sisters stood by Josephine Bakhita. They declared that since slavery was illegal in Italy, Josephine Bakhita was free to stay if she wished.

Josephine Bakhita stayed at the convent and became a nun. Now she felt truly fortunate because all of her suffering had brought her to God. For the next fifty years of her life, she performed her duties at the convent and served God’s poor with quiet humility and love. She even forgave her captors. On her deathbed, her last words were “Madonna,” a final prayer to Mary. St. Josephine Bakhita, show me how serving God sets me free!

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