



February Holy Hero - St. Josephine Bakhita

Feast day: February 8

Our holy hero story for February tells of a woman who was once a slave, but whose spirit was always free. Josephine Bakhita was born in Sudan, Africa, in 1869. She was kidnapped by Arab slave traders at age seven and sold into slavery. Over the next eight years, she was resold several times, suffering torture, humiliation, and brutality at the hands of her cruel captors. Because of the way she was treated, she forgot her real name and was given the name Bakhita by her kidnappers. In 1883, she was bought by an Italian consul, and for the first time, she was treated with kindness when given orders. Two years later, she was taken to Italy and given to the consul's friend to become a nanny to Mimmina Michieli. There, they were under the care of the Canossian Sisters of the Daughters of Charity. She came to know the God of the Christians whom she had experienced in her heart without knowing who he was. She said, "Seeing the sun, the moon, and the stars, I said to myself: Who could be the Master of these beautiful things? And I felt a great desire to see him, to know him, and to pay him homage..."

After several months of preparation, she received the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist, and was given the name Josephine. When the Michielis returned to take their daughter and nanny back to Africa, Josephine courageously refused to go. The court declared her free since slavery was illegal in Italy. For the first time in her life, Josephine was in control of her own destiny. Following the call of God, she later took her religious vows as a Canossian Sister. For the next 50 years, Mother Bakhita was a witness to faith, goodness, forgiveness, and Christian hope. Her humility and simplicity were lived out as she performed her duties as cook, seamstress, and doorkeeper. Her gentle, loving voice and constant good nature won the hearts of both her sisters and the local citizens.

Mother Bakhita's special holiness and virtue was noticed by her order and she was instructed to publish her memoirs and to give talks about her life experiences; these made her famous throughout Italy. After many years of sickness and pain, Josephine Bakhita died on February 8, 1947, at the age of 78. She was canonized on October 1, 2000, by Pope John Paul II, who spoke of her, saying that in a world divided and hurt by hatred and violence, Mother Josephine Bakhita left us a message of reconciliation and forgiveness.