

Canonization of Josephine Bakhita

On October 1st Pope John Paul II canonized Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese Canossian nun, in St. Peter's Square. The Madre Morenita (Little Brown Mother), as she was called, was beatified along with the founder of Opus Dei on May 17, 1992. Here is an article by the Prelate of Opus Dei on the occasion of this canonization. Posted 10/09/00.

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The Saints are the Supreme Expression of Beauty

Bishop Javier Echevarria
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“The saints are the supreme expression of beauty.” These words of the Pope, spoken in an informal conversation with journalists during a plane trip to spread the Gospel, seem very appropriate for describing the holy life of Josephine Bakhita.

The saints, through the power of their witness, make up for the violence against man committed in the course of history. They deeply transform, each in his or her own way, all that others suffer. Their importance for the present age is especially timely, in this century of “progress” that nothing defines more starkly than the number of its martyrs. The saints’ patience in the face of injustice displays the vigor of the most refined charity, while their

docile suffering illuminates every corner of daily life. By their determination to love always and at all costs, the saints are the ones who create new civilizations.

An outstanding example of this reality is Josephine Bakhita, the Canossian nun who died in Schio, Italy, in 1947. Her life was marked by great suffering. She was kidnapped and enslaved when still a little girl, tortured, and sold several times in the slave markets of El Obeidh and Khartoum (recent documents, including audiovisuals, testify to the continuance of a flourishing slave trade in the Sudan). After being rescued by the Italian consul in 1882, she was taken in by the Canossians of Schio and baptized at the age of 21. At 27 she became a Canossian nun. Her path was truly a difficult one, and her natural goodness was not enough to explain the compassion she showed for those who had made

her suffer. Her forgiveness was the expression of a charity that only God can infuse. Thus her life became, to return to the Pope's image, an expression of what is most truly beautiful in this world.

The entire Bishops' Conference of the Sudan will be present at Bakhita's canonization. The bishops, with the daring of faith, point to the message that emanates from her life: a strong message of hope and forgiveness to the Catholics of Sudan, who at this very moment are the object of a cruel persecution that deprives them of even their most basic rights. It is a message for the conscience of all of us, who so often cover over with silence the injustice that crushes those who have no voice to make themselves heard.

In Bakhita we also see the personification of the Christian paradox of freedom. When she

finally had the possibility of freely deciding on her own life, she gave herself to another “Master” (as she called God) and handed over to Him even the beating of her heart and all of her thoughts. Thus while she carried out the humblest tasks with joy, she spread love to all around her with great simplicity. Bakhita served our Lord for almost fifty years. To renew one’s own Yes to our Lord each day is to point oneself towards eternity. For her, looking to the future did not mean forgetting the past, but rather transfiguring it, redeeming it with the freedom of love.

Bakhita, at the end of her life, expressed in these simple words, hidden behind a smile, the journey of her life: “I travel slowly, one step at a time, because I am carrying two big suitcases. One of contains my sins, and in the other, which is much heavier, are the infinite merits of

Jesus. When I reach heaven I will open the suitcases and say to God: Eternal Father, now you can judge. And to St. Peter: Close the door, because I'm staying.”

La Madre “Moretta,” as the people of Schio called her, was beatified together with Blessed Josemaria, the founder of Opus Dei, on May 17, 1992. For all of us this was an unforgettable experience. Ever since that day we have felt very close to her. And therefore today is a day of great joy for me. The heroic example of Bakhita, of the Chinese martyrs, of Katherine Drexel and of Maria Josefa of the Heart of Jesus shows to mankind the glorious countenance of Christ, who triumphs in charity. Every canonization is the celebration of the Church’s holiness, of the continuous miracle of the supreme beauty that Christ’s Spouse radiates to the world. And it is always a feast for the whole Church.

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