

"Forgiveness liberated her"

In his 11 October general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on apostolic zeal, speaking about Saint Josephine Bakhita.

10/11/2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our path of catechesis on apostolic zeal – we are reflecting on apostolic zeal - today we will let ourselves be inspired by the witness of Saint

Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese saint. Unfortunately, for months Sudan has been torn by a terrible armed conflict, of which little is spoken today; let us pray for the Sudanese people, so they might live in peace! But the fame of Saint Bakhita has exceeded every boundary and reached all those to whom identity and dignity is denied.

Born in Darfur – troubled Darfur! – in 1869, she was abducted from her family at the age of seven, and made a slave. Her abductors called her “*Bakhita*,” which means “fortunate”. She passed through eight masters; each one sold her on to the next. The physical and moral suffering she suffered as a child left her with no identity. She suffered cruelty and violence: on her body she bore more than a hundred scars. But she herself testified: “As a slave I never despaired, because I felt a mysterious force supporting me.”

In the face of this, I wonder: what is Saint Bakhita's secret? We know that often a wounded person wounds in turn: the oppressed easily becomes an oppressor. Instead, the vocation of the oppressed is that of freeing themselves and their oppressors, becoming restorers of humanity.

Only in the weakness of the oppressed can the force of God's love, which frees both, be revealed. Saint Bakhita expresses this truth very well. One day her tutor gave her a small crucifix and she, who had never owned anything, conserved her treasure jealously. Looking at it, she experienced inner liberation, because *she felt understood and loved and therefore capable of understanding and loving*: this is the beginning. She felt understood, she felt loved, and as a consequence capable of understanding and loving others. Indeed, she went on to say: "God's love has always accompanied me in a mysterious way... The Lord

loved me: you have to love everyone ... you have to have pity!" This is Bakhita's soul. Truly, to pity means both to *suffer* with the victims of the great inhumanity in the world, and also to *pity* those who commit errors and injustices, not justifying, but humanizing. This is the caress she teaches us: to humanize. When we enter the logic of fighting, of division between us, of bad feelings, one against the other, we lose our humanity. And very often we think we are in need of humanity, to be more humane. And this is the work that Saint Bakhita teaches us to carry out: to humanize, humanizing ourselves and others.

Saint Bakhita, who became Christian, was transformed by the words of Christ she meditated on every day: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (*Lk 23:34*). And so she said: "If Judas had asked Jesus for forgiveness, he too would have found

mercy.” We can say that St. Bakhita’s life became an *existential parable of forgiveness*. How good it is to say to a person, “he was capable, she was capable of forgiving, always.” And she was always capable of forgiving; indeed, her life is an existential parable of forgiveness. To forgive because then we will be forgiven. Do not forget this: forgiveness, which is God’s caress to all of us.

Forgiveness liberated her. Forgiveness first received through God’s merciful love, and then the forgiveness given that made her a free, joyful woman, capable of loving.

Bakhita was able to experience service not as slavery, but as an expression of the free gift of self. And this is very important: made a servant involuntarily – she was sold as a slave – she then freely chose to

become a servant, to bear on her shoulders the burdens of others.

Saint Josephine Bakhita, by her example, shows us the way to finally be free from our slavery and fears. She helps us to unmask our hypocrisies and selfishness, to overcome resentments and conflicts. And she encourages us, always.

Dear brothers and sisters, forgiveness takes away nothing but adds – what does forgiveness add? – dignity: forgives takes away nothing from you but adds dignity to the person, it makes us lift our gaze from ourselves towards others, to see them as fragile as we are, yet always brothers and sisters in the Lord. Brothers and sisters, forgiveness is the wellspring of *a zeal that becomes mercy and calls us to a humble and joyful holiness*, like that of Saint Bakhita.

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