

On Oct. 1, 2000, John Paul II canonized Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese woman, freed slave, Canossian Daughter of Charity, known as the “flower of the African desert,” Like so many saints, she lived a hard life, but one that ultimately was centered around courage, fortitude and hope.

Bakhita was born in 1869 a member of the Dagiou people in Darfur, western Sudan. She described her family -- father, mother, three brothers, and three sisters -- as happy, reasonably prosperous, and well respected in their village. Her father owned sizable herds of cattle and sheep as well as fields that were cultivated by hired help.

The Dagiou people are reputed to be peaceful and hard-working, but then, as now, they and all the indigenous peoples of Sudan faced precarious circumstances.

Young children and women were specific targets of trans-Saharan slave-raiding and trade. Young girls and women were sold for domestic use (for agriculture, cleaning, cooking, cloth-weaving); many were also abused by men as well for their bodies.

When Bakhita was 5 or 6 years of age, slave raiders kidnapped her eldest sister. Three years later, while Bakhita was strolling outside the village with a friend, two Arabs used deception to separate her from her companion and then kidnap her. Threats and rough treatment so traumatized the little girl that she was unable to shout for help and could not speak her own name when questioned. With mocking irony, the men named her “Bakhita” (fortunate or lucky one).

After a day’s march, the men locked Bakhita in a dark hut for more than a month and then sold her to a trader. Between 1876 and 1882, Bakhita was sold to three different masters, including a general in the Turkish army. The last slaveholder, albeit benign, was the Italian vice consul Callisto Legnani. During the two years that Bakhita was held in the vice consul’s household, the political situation in Darfur deteriorated as the people rebelled against the corrupt rule of Egypt. The situation forced him to leave; Bakhita first requested and then insisted that she be allowed to accompany him to Italy, hoping for a new life, but upon their arrival in Genoa, Legnani gave her as a gift to a friend. Before that friend left, his family had Bakhita placed with the Institute for Catechumens run by the Canossian Sisters.

The friend owned a hotel, and the manager of that hotel, a Catholic, became a friend of Bakhita. Once, while in his home, she discovered a crucifix; gazing at it intently she wondered: "Who are you? Why have they put you on the cross?" The manager told her about Jesus Christ, the son of God. While her poor command of Italian and her lack of religious background may have hindered the depth of Bakhita's understanding, she knew the pain of the lash, of beatings, of abuse. She too was a person of sorrow, despised, and rejected.

Illuminato Checchini (the hotel manager) gave Bakhita a silver crucifix. "As he gave it to me," Bakhita said, "he kissed it with devotion. I looked at it almost secretly, was filled with a mysterious force and felt something inside me that I could not understand." Almost immediately, Bakhita expressed her desire to become a Christian. For nine months, she was nurtured and enjoyed the solace of the catechumenate where she "came to know the God whom I had felt in my heart since I was a child without knowing who he was."

When her owners wife returned demanding Bakhita back as a slave, she stood up for herself, for she knew that on Italian soil she was a free person.

Bakhita recalls that she fixed her eyes on a crucifix on the wall in front of her and declared, "I can't leave this place because I don't want to lose God." On Jan. 9, 1890, Bakhita was baptized Josephine Margaret Maria Bakhita, received Communion, and was confirmed.

Six years later, at the age of 30, after three years of religious formation, Josephine Bakhita made her profession of vows as a member of the Canossian Daughters of Charity. She lived and worked at the institute until 1902, when she was transferred to a Canossian house in Schio, where she carried out various domestic duties.

Her biographer comments that people from all walks of life and of all ages were attracted to her goodness. Through prayer, she devoted herself to the welfare of her African brothers and sisters as well as to all who crossed her path. Throughout her adult life she demonstrated only sympathy and forgiveness toward her former captors and oppressors and prayed for them continually. To put it another way, she brought hope to our world.

During World War II, Schio endured heavy bombing, but the people suffered no casualties. The townspeople of Schio admired Bakhita,

respected her, relied on her listening ear, advice, and counsel, indeed, her very presence. They believed that her prayers and intercession protected them from harm; she was a beacon of hope for them.

In 1943, after 50 years in religious life, Bakhita's health began to decline; she was diagnosed with arthritis, asthma and bronchitis. As her body weakened and twisted with pain, her strength diminished and even walking with a cane grew difficult. Bakhita began to use a wheelchair, and when she could no longer use it alone, she asked to be pushed to the chapel. There she spent hours in prayer "look[ing] from the tabernacle to the crucifix." As put by her biographer, it seems she gave herself over to the awe she experienced as a child. She tells us that from an early age she was drawn to the beauty and mystery of nature -- the rising and setting of the sun, the bright night stars, flowers and plants of all kinds. Often she asked herself, "Oh who is the Master of all these beautiful things? How I would like to meet him and pay him homage!"

She contracted severe pneumonia in February 1947. When one of the sisters inquired about her condition, Bakhita replied:

I'm going slowly, slowly towards eternity. ... I'm going with two suitcases: one contains my sins and the other, which is much heavier, contains the infinite merits of Jesus Christ. When I appear before the judgment seat of God, I will cover my ugly suitcase with the merits of Jesus and Our Lady and I will say to our eternal Father: "Now judge what you see." Oh, I'm sure I won't be sent away! Then I'll turn toward St. Peter and I'll say to him: "Close the door because I'm staying here." Josephine Bakhita died on the evening of Saturday, Feb. 8, 1947.

During her final illness, she assured the sisters who stood around her bed: "Don't be sad, I'll still be with you. If the Lord allows me to, I'll send many graces from heaven for the salvation of souls."

Her question, "who are you, why have they put you on a cross" has several answers. One is of course God. Another is they have put Him on a Cross, for the same reason they put her in chains and in a hut until she was sold: sin. The Passion we just read shows on one hand the ugliness of sin; the horrible things people do to one another. All of us are parts of that; we objectify, we slander, we gossip, we tear one another down, we become

cold and cruel towards one another, often to our own families. It is indeed ugly stuff.

But in this, while we put Him on a Cross, He is there out of love for us. And so as we enter into this week, my hope is that you have peace - the same peace Saint Josephine did, knowing that his love covers our ugly suitcases of sin, and He will never send us away, for He is the God of love. A God whose love knows no limits. So no matter what your past, or battle, or anxiety, let go, let God, and let His love set you free.

And lastly, what I'd also invite us to do as we think about the Passion is to not drop our palms and walk away. Why does the crowd drop the palms and disappear so shortly after welcoming Jesus? Where are Jesus' friends on Good Friday? Filled with fear they walk away. Jesus in the Passion shows us the power of fortitude; to boldly stand for something, namely love. A challenge for us is how do we also show this bravery; if our Lord stands with us, how do we stand with one another? When we speak up for what is just and right; when we challenge one another, when we own up to our mistakes, we can do so much to do exactly as Saint Josephine did namely to bring hope into the world.

The Passion on the one hand shows the ugliness of humanity, and like Saint Josephine this is something so many people experience too. But as her life goes to show you, the Passion also reveals God's love - something we can do when, like her, we are a people of faith, hope and love. May this love be revealed to us, destroying our fears and anxieties and sins, and may we reveal it to one another, being not afraid, and with our Lord, conquering fear and darkness, transforming this world as He did all those years ago.