

St. Josephine Bakhita



Model of True Emancipation

Called the “Madre Moretta” (the Black Mother), Josephina Bakhita was a former slave who became a Canossian Sister (Institute of St. Magdalene of Canossa) in Italy. She was born in the Sudan, in northeastern Africa, about 1870, and at the age of nine was stolen by slavers. The slave traders gave her the name Bakhita, meaning "the Lucky One." She escaped from these slavers only to be caught by another, who took her as a gift to his daughter in El Obeid. There she was treated well until she broke a vase. Then she was sold to a Turkish officer who sold her again in the market in Khartoum. She was brought by the Italian vicecouncil, who returned to Italy, taking Josephine with him. There she was given to a Signora Michieli in Genoa.

She was sent to a convent by her new owner, to be educated in the school operated by the Daughters of Charity of Canossa. Josephina became a Christian on January 9, 1890, and was baptized by the cardinal patriarch. She refused to leave the convent after discovering her religious vocation, despite the demands of Signora Michieli, who claimed ownership. The cardinal patriarch and the king's procurator were called upon to mediate the matter, and they decided in favor of Josephina's vocation. Josephina was welcomed into the Canossian convent, and she made her novitiate and took religious vows. Her holiness and devotion were demonstrated in her labours as a cook, gate keeper, and keeper of linens. It was obvious that God had brought Josephina out of Africa to glorify him among the Europeans. With this in mind, Josephina, the Madre Moretta, traveled throughout Italy to raise funds for the missions. She served as a

Canossian for half a century, dying in Schio, Italy, on February 8, 1947, and was revered by the people of her adopted land. She has not been forgotten by the Sudanese either. Her portrait hangs in the cathedral at Khartoum.

Pope John Paul II beatified Josephina on May 17, 1992, in the presence of three hundred Canossian Sisters and pilgrims, many from the Sudan. The same Pope proclaimed her a saint on October 1, 2000. During his homily at her canonization Mass in St. Peter's Square, Pope John Paul II said that in St. Josephine Bakhita:

"We find a shining advocate of genuine emancipation. The history of her life inspires not passive acceptance but the firm resolve to work effectively to free girls and women from oppression and violence, and to return them to their dignity in the full exercise of their rights."