



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Catechesis. The passion for evangelization: the apostolic zeal of the believer. 22. *Saint Josephine Bakhita: witness of the transforming power of Christ's forgiveness*

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of catechesis on apostolic zeal — we are reflecting on apostolic zeal — today we 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 said today; let us pray for the Sudanese people, so they might live in peace! But Saint Bakhita's fame has exceeded every boundary and reached all those to whom identity and dignity are denied.

Born in Darfur — battered 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 had eight different masters — each one sold her on to the next. The physical and moral suffering she experienced 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 was Saint Bakhita's secret? We know that a wounded person often wounds in turn: the oppressed easily becomes the 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 strength 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, treasured it jealously. Looking at it, she experienced inner liberation, because *she felt she was understood and loved* and therefore *capable of understanding and loving*: this was the beginning. She felt she was understood, she felt loved, and as a consequence, capable of understanding and loving others. Indeed, she would go on to say: "God's love has always accompanied me in a mysterious way... The Lord has loved me very much: you have to love everyone ... you have to have pity!". This is Bakhita's soul. Truly, to feel 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 among us, of bad feelings, one against the other, we lose our humanity. And very often we think we are in need of humanity, of being more humane. And this is the work that Saint Bakhita teaches us: to humanize, to humanize ourselves and to humanize others.

When Saint Bakhita, became Christian, she was transformed by the following words of Christ, upon which she meditated every day: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). That is why she used to say: "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*. It is nice to be able to say about someone: "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 we will be forgiven. Do not forget this: forgiveness, which is God's caress to all of us.

Forgiveness set her free. Forgiveness she first received through God's merciful love, and then the forgiveness given, 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 against her will — she was sold as a slave — she later freely chose to become a servant, to bear the burdens of others on her shoulders.

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: forgiveness takes away nothing from you but adds dignity to the person; it makes us lift our gaze from ourselves and 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.

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Canada and the United States of America. I also welcome the distinguished delegation from the nato Defense College, with prayerful good wishes for their service to the cause of peace. Upon all of you I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

I address a special thought to the people of Afghanistan, who are suffering following the devastating earthquake that struck, claiming thousands of victims, including many women and children, and displaced persons. I invite all people of good will to help this people, already sorely tried, contributing in a spirit of fraternity to alleviating the sufferings of the people and supporting the necessary reconstruction.

Lastly, I greet *young people, the sick and newlyweds*. I invite you to turn your thoughts to Mary, invoked during this month of October as Queen of the Rosary. Please, persevere together with her in prayer for those who suffer hunger, injustices and war, especially for beloved, battered Ukraine. I offer my blessing to all of you!

Appeals of the Holy Father

I continue to follow what is happening in Israel and Palestine with tears and apprehension: many people killed, others injured. I pray for those families who have seen a day of celebration turn into a day of mourning, and I ask that the hostages be released immediately. It is the right of those who are attacked to defend themselves, but I am very concerned about the total siege under which the Palestinians are living in Gaza, where there have also been many innocent victims. Terrorism and extremism do not help reach a solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, but fuel hatred, violence and revenge, and only cause suffering to both. The Middle East does not need war, but peace, a peace built on justice, dialogue and the courage of fraternity.

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Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our catechesis on apostolic zeal, we have been reflecting on the spread of the Gospel through the witness of men and women of every time and place. Today we turn once more to Africa and to the powerful witness of Saint Josephine Bakhita. Born in Darfur in Sudan, Josephine was kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery. Despite the violence and terrible sufferings she endured, she never despaired. In the cross of Christ she discovered the source of a merciful love that affirms our innate dignity as God's children, brings true freedom and enables us to forgive and indeed love those who wrong us. The experience of God's mercy and forgiveness inspired Josephine to devote herself to Christ as a religious and to serve others humbly and selflessly in Italy, her new country. The life of Saint Josephine Bakhita reveals the power of God's grace to transform lives, to resolve conflicts and to bring about the justice, reconciliation and peace so greatly needed in our time. Let us entrust ourselves to her prayers and ask especially for the gift of peace for our brothers and sisters in war-torn Sudan and in so many other parts of our world.