



**St. Josephine Bahkita**  
**Patroness of the Enslaved or Trafficked**

On February 8<sup>th</sup> we celebrate the feast of St. Josephine Bahkita, the patroness of those who are enslaved or trafficked. Today, women, men and children in the U.S. and around the world are subjected to forced labor, domestic servitude and the sex trade at the hands of human traffickers. Pope Francis and other faith leaders have condemned human trafficking, calling it a crime against humanity, a scourge and an open wound in contemporary society.

Who was Josephine Bahkita? How did she become a saint and patroness for those enslaved? Her life is a reflection of the lives of modern-day slaves. As a slave, she suffered the same exploitation enslaved or trafficked persons endure today.

Bahkita was born in the Darfur region of southern Sudan, ca. 1869. She was kidnapped at the age of seven and sold into slavery. She was given the name Bahkita, which means *fortunate or lucky*, by her captors -- she was so terrified she could not remember her birth name. She was anything but fortunate because she endured torture and many forms of humiliation. She was re-sold several times, finally in 1883 to Callisto Legnani, Italian consul in Khartoum, Sudan who treated her with kindness.

When the Consul returned to Italy, he brought Bahkita with him and gave her to his friend Augusto Michieli. She became babysitter to Mimmina Michieli, whom she accompanied to Venice's Institute of the Catechumens, run by the Canossian Sisters. While Mimmina was being instructed, Bahkita felt drawn to the Catholic Church. She was baptized and confirmed in 1890, taking the name Josephine.

When the Michielis returned from Africa and wanted to take Mimmina and Josephine back with them, the future saint refused to go. During the ensuing court case, the Canossian sisters and the patriarch of Venice intervened on Josephine's behalf. The judge concluded that since slavery was illegal in Italy, she had actually been free since 1885.

Josephine entered the Institute of St. Magdalene of Canossa in 1893 and made her profession three years later. She assisted her religious community through cooking, sewing, embroidery and welcoming visitors at the door. She soon became well loved by the children attending the sisters' school and the local citizens. She once said, "Be good, love the Lord, pray for those who do not know Him. What a great grace it is to know God!" Her Baptism set her on an eventual path toward asserting her civic freedom and

then service to God's people as a Canossian sister. She who worked under many "masters" was finally happy to address God as "master" and carry out everything that she believed to be God's will for her. She died on February 8, 1947.

The first steps toward her beatification began in 1959. She was beatified in 1992 and canonized eight years later. 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." (Source: American Catholic.org)

**Contact:** If you would like to learn more about human trafficking, including having a presentation, please contact Sister Jeanne Christensen, RSM at [jchristensen10@kc.rr.com](mailto:jchristensen10@kc.rr.com)

**Prayer Card:** The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website has a prayer card honoring St. Josephine Bakhita in English and Spanish. It can be found at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-and-refugee-services/national-migration-week/upload/M7-266-Josephine-Bakhita-Prayer-Card.pdf>,