

Josephine Bakhita

She was born around 1869 in Darfur (western Sudan) in the village of Olgossa. In 1877, when she was 7–8 years old, she was seized by Arab slave traders, who had abducted her elder sister two years earlier. Over the course of twelve years (1877–1889) she was sold three more times. She could not recall a day that passed without some severe beating or scarring. When a wound from the whip began to heal, other blows would pour down on her. 'Bakhita' was not the name she received from her parents at birth. It is said that the trauma of her abduction caused her to forget her original name. she took one given to her by the slavers, *bakhīta*, Arabic for 'lucky' or 'fortunate'

Josephine was sold to an Italian diplomat at age 14 and received Christian instruction for the first time from the Sisters of Charity in Venice, Italy. Later, when the diplomat's family returned to Africa, Saint Josephine Bakhita refused to go with them. She remained within the protection of the Sisters' convent in Italy, where slavery was illegal. Grateful to her teachers, she recalled, "Those holy mothers instructed me with heroic patience and introduced me to that God who from childhood I had felt in my heart without knowing who He was."

On January 9, 1890, Bakhita was baptized with the names Josephine Margaret Fortunata (the Latin translation of the Arabic *Bakhita*). On the same day, she was also confirmed and received Holy Communion. On December 7, 1893, Josephine Bakhita entered the novitiate of the Canossians. She later took her vows in December of 1896 and was assigned to the Canossian convent at Schio, in the northern Italian province of Vicenza, where she spent the rest of her life. She spent time talking about her experiences and helping to prepare young sisters for work in Africa. A strong missionary drive animated her throughout her entire life – "her mind was always on God, and her heart in Africa".

For the next 50 years, she joyfully and faithfully served as the convent's cook, seamstress, sacristan, and doorkeeper. Her gentleness, calming voice, and the ever-present smile became well known and Vicenzans still refer to her as *Sor Moretta* ("little brown sister") or *Madre Moretta* ("black mother"). Her special charisma and reputation for sanctity were noticed by her order; the first publication of her story (*Storia Meravigliosa* by Ida Zanolini) in 1931, made her famous throughout Italy. During World War II (1939–1945) she shared the fears and hopes of the townspeople, who considered her a saint and felt protected by her presence. Bombs did not spare Schio, but the war passed without a single casualty.

Her last years were marked by pain and sickness. She retained her cheerfulness, and if asked how she was, she would always smile and answer: "As the Master desires." Bakhita died at 8:10 PM on February 8, 1947. A young student once asked Bakhita: "What would you do, if you were to meet your captors?" Without hesitation, she replied: "If I were to meet those who kidnapped me, and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands. For, if these things had not happened, I would not have been a Christian and a religious today".

The petitions for her canonization began immediately. On December 1, 1978, Pope John Paul II declared Josephine Venerable, the first step towards canonization. On May 17, 1992, she was declared Blessed. She was canonized in 2000, becoming the first female black Catholic saint in the modern era. She is the patron saint of victims of human trafficking, survivors of slavery, and Sudan.