

A NOTE FROM FATHER PHIL



February is Black History Month. Throughout the liturgical year the Church celebrates its heroes who come from all ethnic backgrounds and many countries. Standing alongside great African saints like Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine and Monica is Saint Josephine Bakhita. Her feast day is on February 8th. I hadn't heard of Saint Josephine until just a few years ago when I ran across a short article describing her life.

Josephine was born in the Sudan in 1869 and was kidnapped by slave traders at the age of 9. Traumatized, she could not remember the name given her by her parents, so her abductors sardonically dubbed her 'Bakhita' which means 'Lucky.' Only much later was she able to talk about the abuse she suffered as a young slave. She relived these horrors on her deathbed, hallucinating and feverishly begging for her chains to be loosened.

Josephine's 'luck' began to change when, at age 14, she was sold to the Italian Consul in the Sudan. He welcomed her into his family and into his home where she was treated with respect and kindness. When it was time to return to Italy, she accompanied the Consul's family and then went to work as a domestic in another home. When this family had to leave the country on business, Josephine stayed behind with their younger children in Venice. They lived at a motherhouse of the Canossian Sisters (I never heard of them, either). It was at this Catholic convent where Josephine came to know God more intimately and to realize that God was the source of her love, hope and wonder. Not to mention, her 'luck.' After a few months, she was baptized and took the name of Josephine.

When Josephine was of legal age, she asked permission to remain in the convent. There, at the age of 27, she professed her final vows. She lived for 50 years as a religious in the town of Schio (Vicenza), employed in simple tasks: cooking, sewing, and answering the door. She died there on February 8, 1947.

Throughout her life, Josephine treated everyone with humility, goodness and a gentle smile. She liked to sing. She was legendary for the comfort and encouragement that she brought to the poor and to the sick. To this day she is still known in Schio as "Our Black Mother." When Pope John Paul II canonized her in 2000, he praised her for "leaving us a message of reconciliation and evangelic forgiveness in a world so much divided and hurt by hatred and violence." St. Josephine is the patron saint of Sudan.

One of the hallmarks of Pope John Paul II's papacy was the number of saints he canonized. What a wonderful gift to the Church. These women and men remind us of God's goodness that shines out of people of every race, language and way of life. They remind us of our own call to be saints and, like Josephine Bakhita, to do our simple tasks well and to treat people with humility and respect, the way we ourselves want to be treated. Something our divided society could really use.