



SILENT HOMILIES

The Girl Who Forgot Her Name

St Josephine Bakhita and the quiet power of forgiveness



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Little Treasures



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Before You Begin



This is not a full life of a saint. It is a walk beside a girl who lost her first name, was given a cruel nickname, and later learned that God had never lost her.

Some of what follows is hard. Kidnapping was evil. Torture was evil. Owning a child was evil. Holiness is not a substitute for rescue. Bakhita was first set free by law. Only then did she give herself freely to God.

Read it slowly if you have ever been named by someone who did not love you. God still knows the name they tried to erase.

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Chapter 1

The Name She Lost



She was born about 1869 in Olgossa, in Darfur. She belonged to the Daju people. She had a family and a name. Then, as a child of about seven or nine, she was seized. The shock was such that she later could not remember the name her parents had given her.

Her captors called her Bakhita. In Arabic it means fortunate. The irony is not a joke. It is part of the wound.

Isaiah has God say, I have called you by name; you are mine. The Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name. The risen Christ says Mary, and she knows Him. A child can forget her name. God does not.

This book begins there, because everything else in her life is a long answer to that theft.

Reflection

People think identity is what we remember about ourselves. Baptism says something older. God knows us before we can introduce ourselves.

Bakhita lost the first word that belonged to her. She did not lose the One who had already spoken it.

If someone has named you only by what they did to you, that name is not the last one. Revelation speaks of a new name. The Church does not pretend the old wounds were imaginary. She says they are not the whole of you.

Pray for those who cannot remember who they were before the harm. God has not forgotten.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who call us by name, keep the name no kidnapper can steal. Amen.

Chapter 2

What They Wrote on Her Body



She was sold more than once. El Obeid. Khartoum. She was beaten. She was marked. One mistress had patterns cut into her skin and filled with salt. The body was treated as paper.

Joseph in Genesis was sold by his brothers. Jesus was handed over for silver and struck. The comparison is not a tidy lesson. It is the Church noticing that God has stood in the place of the person treated as an object.

What other people write on a body is not the last word. Scars remain. Grace does not deny them. Grace does not pretend the scars are the whole story.

Bakhita later spoke of those years without dressing them up. We should not dress them up either.

Reflection

A scar is a fact. It is not a vocation.

The Passion tells us God can be wounded. It does not tell us that wounding a child is part of a beautiful plan. The Cross judges the men who strike. It does not bless the striking.

If you carry marks you did not choose, you are not required to call them lucky. You are allowed to bring them to a God who has wounds of His own, and who does not love you because you suffered well.

He loves you because you are His.

A Short Prayer

Wounded Lord, do not let what was done to us become our only name.

Amen.

Chapter 3

Kindness Is Not Yet Freedom



In Khartoum she was bought by the Italian consul Callisto Legnani. He did not beat her. That mattered. Kindness is not a small thing when you have known the opposite.

Kindness is still not freedom. She was taken to Italy and left with Augusto and Maria Turina Michieli at Zianigo, near Venice. She became nanny to their daughter Alice, called Mimmina. She was treated more gently. She was not yet free to stay or go.

Luke says Christ came to proclaim liberty to captives. The Gospel is not satisfied with a kinder room in the same house.

People sometimes stop the story here, as if a nice family were the end. It was not. A nicer cage is still a cage.

Reflection

We confuse being well treated with being free. They are not the same.

A child can be fed, dressed and even loved in a limited way, and still have no right to say no. Bakhita later had to say no. That no was holy.

If someone is being harmed, the first Catholic duty is not a speech about patience. It is help. The law, a priest, a neighbour, a door that opens outward.

Holiness comes later, if it comes. Rescue first.

A Short Prayer

Lord of the captives, do not let us call kindness a substitute for freedom.

Amen.

Chapter 4

The Silver Cross



Illuminato Checchini was the Michieli family's agent. He was kind to the girl in a way she remembered for the rest of her life. He gave her a small silver crucifix. He kissed it. He told her that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, had died for us.

Bakhita hid it, afraid it would be taken. She looked at it in secret. She later said she felt something she could not explain. She did not yet know the words. She was looking at a God who had been wounded.

Before theology there was that piece of silver. A layman put it in her hand. The Church often begins that way.

Checchini also advised that she and Mimmina be placed with the Canossian Sisters at the Institute of the Catechumens in Venice. That advice changed the rest of her life.

Reflection

She understood the Cross before she understood the Creed.

That is not anti-intellectual. It is the order of love. A wounded God can be recognised by a wounded child before the sentences are in place.

If you cannot pray well, you can still look at a crucifix. Bakhita did. The looking was already a kind of prayer.

Thank God for the lay people who hand on the faith with a small object and a true sentence.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, shown to a child on a piece of silver, show Yourself to those who have no words yet. Amen.

Chapter 5

The First Real Yes



When Maria Michieli returned to take the girl back toward Sudan, Bakhita refused. For three days the matter was forced. The superior of the catechumenate went to the civil authorities. The Patriarch of Venice was told.

On 29 November 1889 the King's attorney in Venice recognised that she was free. Slavery was not legal in Italy. It had already been outlawed in Sudan before her birth. She had never been a lawful slave. She could choose.

She chose to stay with the Sisters. That was the first yes that belonged to her.

A religious vocation later is a different kind of gift. It is not another owner. Nobody should describe the convent as a nicer form of being possessed. She gave herself. That is the opposite of being taken.

Reflection

Freedom in Christ is not only the absence of chains. It is the power to give yourself.

Galatians says it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Bakhita's first free act was to remain where she could be baptised. That is not a small sentence.

Do not use her story to tell an abused person to stay. She needed the law. She needed people who stood with her. Then she said yes.

If you are the person standing with someone, that work is already Christian. You do not have to wait until they are a saint.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who set captives free, teach us the difference between being taken and being given. Amen.

Chapter 6

A Daughter at the Font



On 9 January 1890 she was baptised, confirmed and given Holy Communion in Venice. She received the names Josephine Margaret Fortunata. Fortunata is Latin for the meaning of Bakhita: fortunate. This time the word was not a kidnapper's joke. It was a name spoken over water.

Those who knew her later said she would kiss the baptismal font and speak of becoming a daughter of God there. Baptism does not decorate a life. It makes a child of God.

The girl who had forgotten her name was publicly claimed.

Reflection

Baptism is not a ceremony that makes a nice memory. It is a new birth.

Water, words and the Church's faith do what no kindness from a household could do. They place a person inside the life of the Trinity.

If you were baptised as an infant you may not remember the font. Bakhita remembered hers because she came to it as an adult who had already lost almost everything else. She knew what was being given.

Go back to your own font, if you can. You became a daughter or a son there. That is still true.

A Short Prayer

Father, at the font You named us. Keep us in the name we did not invent.

Amen.

Chapter 7

The Saint at the Door



She entered the Canossians. She made her profession in 1896. In 1902 she was sent to Schio, in the Veneto. She cooked. She sewed. She looked after the sacristy. From 1922 she was portress. People in the town called her Madre Moretta, the little dark mother.

She spoke the local dialect. Children came to the door. Salesmen came. The poor came. Her work for years was to answer a knock.

During the First World War the convent served the wounded. She did what the house needed. Holiness here looked like a door that opened and a voice that did not snap.

She did not enjoy being made into a spectacle. When she was asked to tell her story she obeyed, slowly. The first written account was dictated in 1910. She would rather have stayed at the door.

Reflection

A vocation can look like very ordinary work.

The woman who had been owned now opened a door of her own free will. That contrast is the point. The same hands. A different meaning.

If your life is a door, a sink, a ward, a classroom, you are not waiting for a more spiritual job before you can belong to God. Bakhita's sanctity grew where the knocks were.

Answer the next knock as if Christ might be on the step. He has come through stranger doors than ours.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who stand at the door and knock, teach us to open as she opened.

Amen.

Chapter 8

Forgiveness Without Lying



Bakhita said that if she met those who kidnapped and tortured her, she would kneel and kiss their hands, because through what happened she became a Christian and a religious.

Those words are hers. They are not a rule for every victim. They must not be imposed. Forgiveness is not a feeling you owe on a timetable. It is not forgetting. It is not saying the crime was acceptable. It does not cancel justice. It does not mean going back to an unsafe person. It does not mean dropping a police complaint or weakening safeguarding.

God did not will slavery as something good. Providence does not mean calling evil good. It means evil does not have enough power to stop God bringing good from what evil has done. That is different from saying God wanted the evil.

Hatred would have been a last slavery. That thought is hers to offer. It is not a stick for anyone else.

Reflection

Christ on the Cross prayed for His enemies. He did not say their work was fine.

Romans 8 says God can work in all things for the good of those who love Him. It does not baptise the crime. It says the crime is not stronger than God.

If you cannot forgive yet, you are not failing Bakhita's exam. You may need safety, time, Confession, and a priest who will not rush you. Forgiveness, when it comes, is a decision not to let another person's evil own the rest of your life.

Ask for that gift. Do not fake it to look holy.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, who forgave from the Cross, keep us from lying about evil, and from being owned by it. Amen.

Chapter 9

Her Last Word Was Mary



She died in Schio on 8 February 1947. Those with her remembered that she called on Our Lady. Madonna. After a life in which so many human voices had named her wrongly, her last word was the name of the woman who had never owned her.

Mary is not a replacement for Christ. At the Annunciation she gave God a free yes. Nothing was taken from her. She consented. Bakhita's own free yes had that shape.

John Paul II beatified her in 1992 and canonised her on 1 October 2000. Benedict XVI wrote about her in *Spe Salvi*: a slave who came to know that she was known and loved, and so could live in hope. The Church names her a patron for Sudan and for those crushed by trafficking.

She can pray for people she never met. That is the Communion of Saints, not a pretty idea. It is how the Body of Christ works across years.

Reflection

A last word tells you where a person has been living.

Madonna is a short word. It holds a lifetime of being received rather than seized. Mary kept company with a Son who was also handed over. She knows the difference between sorrow and despair.

If you have no grand prayer left, her name is enough. So is His. The saints are not a second Gospel. They are people who learned the first one the hard way, and who will not leave you to learn it alone.

Ask Bakhita to pray for anyone whose name has been stolen.

A Short Prayer

Holy Mary, Mother of God, stay with those who are dying, and with those who cannot remember their first name. Amen.

Chapter 10

Rescue First



Keep the order. She was kidnapped. She was hurt. She was moved. She was treated more kindly. Then the law said she was free. Then she chose. Then she was baptised. Then she lived fifty years of ordinary work. Then she forgave as she could. Then she died calling on Mary.

If we tell only the last chapters, we make holiness look like a way of surviving abuse without help. That would misuse her. Holiness is not a substitute for rescue.

The girl who forgot her name was given others: Josephine, Margaret, Fortunata, Madre Moretta, saint. The first name is still known to God. That is enough to end on.

If someone knocks tonight who is not safe, open the door. Call the right people. Then, if they wish, tell them about the woman who once stood on the other side of one.

Reflection

When the Church gives us a saint, she gives us a life to learn from. That does not mean copying everything that happened in that life.

Copy her truthfulness. Copy her free yes. Copy her door. Do not copy the years in chains as if they were a spiritual method.

Isaiah still stands: I have called you by name; you are mine. That sentence was true in Olgossa, in Khartoum, in Venice, in Schio, and it is true over whatever name you are using this week.

Go in that freedom. It was bought at a price that was not hers.

A Short Prayer

Lord, who know the name we forgot, keep us free, and keep us from using a saint to delay a rescue. Amen.

A Last Word



She forgot her name. God did not.

She was owned. Then she was free. Then she opened a door for other people.

If you remember only one thing, remember the order. Rescue first. Then the long road. Then the name that cannot be stolen.

Sources and Further Reading



Scripture: Isaiah 43:1; Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; John 10:3; John 20:16; Genesis 37; Galatians 5:1; Romans 8:28; Revelation 2:17. Paraphrases are not marked as quotations.

Holy See, Josephine Bakhita (1869-1947), biography published for the canonisation, Vatican News Service / vatican.va. That life already records that she was often seen kissing the baptismal font and saying she had become a daughter of God there. John Paul II, homily for the canonisation, 1 October 2000. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 3-4. The first written memories were dictated to Sr Teresa Fabris in 1910 (a short Italian manuscript). They are printed, among other places, in Maria Luisa Dagnino, *Bakhita Tells Her Story* (Canossiane Figlie della Carità, Rome), and used by Roberto Italo Zanini, *Bakhita: From Slave to Saint*. The first widely read life was Ida Zanolini, *Storia meravigliosa* (first serialised in *Vita Canossiana* in 1931). The silver crucifix given by Illuminato Checchini belongs to those dictated memories.

On the legal decision of 29 November 1889: standard lives agree that the King's attorney in Venice recognised her freedom because Italian law did not admit slavery and because slavery had already been outlawed in Sudan. On the minister of the sacraments of 9 January 1890: many popular lives name Giuseppe Sarto, later Pius X; he became Patriarch of Venice only in 1893. In January 1890 the Patriarch was Cardinal Domenico Agostini. This booklet therefore does not repeat the Sarto claim.

Hold the Door Open



For years Bakhita's work was to answer a door. Someone knocked, and she opened it.

These Little Treasures stay free so that no one reaches the next page and is told it is only for those who can pay. Keeping the door open takes research, checking her own words against weak copies of her story, reading Scripture and the Catechism, writing, cutting, and making the pages. A small book can take a long time to become simple.

If this one has helped you, and if you are able to support the work through the Silent Homilies website, I would be truly grateful. A gift is not payment for these pages. They are already yours. It helps me keep the door open for the next person who knocks.

If you cannot give financially, nothing is owed. Give this booklet to someone who has forgotten that God still knows their name.

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