

St Josephine Bakhita

St Josephine Bakhita is patron of victims and survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking. Liz Byrne IBVM is the chairperson of Act to Prevent Trafficking, a faith-based group seeking to create greater public awareness of human trafficking.



‘Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.’ (Micah 6:8) Born in 1869 in the village of Olgossa in western Sudan, Bakhita lived a happy and carefree life as part of a loving family of three brothers and three sisters. This would change dramatically when Arab slave traders abducted some of the children. She was just eight years old and was forced to walk barefoot almost one thousand kilometres to the large city of El-Obeid, where she was sold as a slave. She would be sold into

slavery a further three times.

As a slave she was often beaten, and at one stage, while slave to a Turkish general and his family, she was whipped, scarred and had salt rubbed into her wounds. In 1883, when the general decided to return to his homeland, he took his slaves to the city market in Khartoum to be sold. Bakhita was sold to the Italian vice-consul who treated her well, and when he and his family sought to return to Italy, she asked to go with them. In Italy,

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Vice-Consul Legnani gave ownership of Bakhita to the Michieli family, who were personal friends. Her association with this family led, eventually, to her encounter with Christianity and to freedom.

On 29 November 1889, an Italian court ruled that since slavery in Sudan had been outlawed by the British before Bakhita was born, and because slavery had never been recognised as legal in Italian law, Bakhita could not be a slave. She decided to join the Canossian Sisters of Charity whom she had met while caring for the daughter of the Michieli family. She spent most of her life in the Canossian convent at Schio, in northern Italy, and was in daily contact with the local people who appreciated her gentleness, cheerful smile and calming presence.

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8 February is observed an International Day of Awareness and Prayer for the Victims and Survivors of Human Trafficking. There are many different reasons why people can fall prey to human trafficking, but most often advantage is taken of instability caused by armed conflicts, societal violence or environmental and economic crises.

Promising safety or a better standard of life elsewhere, the traffickers draw people into situations where they find themselves enslaved for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced marriage, domestic servitude or organ removal. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, traffickers have increased their use of the internet by posting adverts for non-existent jobs. In early 2022, as thousands of Ukrainians fled the war in their country, traffickers were posting false promises of safe passage to other parts of Europe. Without the active, on the ground efforts of several European anti-trafficking groups, who gave advice on personal safety, the traffickers would have been able to entrap many crossing into neighbouring countries.

We'd like to imagine that such exploitation of people does not occur in Ireland. Demand for sexual services drives trafficking for prostitution and other related services, while the demand for cheap labour drives trafficking in the personal care, hospitality, fishing and agricultural industries. Others are trafficked for the purposes of criminal activity such as forced begging or the management of illegal cannabis grow houses. The highest percentage of people trafficked into Ireland are brought here for the purposes of sexual exploitation, but more concerning still is the fact that Irish children are trafficked within the country for exploitative and criminal purposes.

Pope Francis refers to human trafficking as 'a crime against humanity' and as 'an open wound on the body of Christ and humanity'. We pray for an end to this practice and for a renewed respect for the dignity of the human person made in the image of God.