

**Josephine Bakhita, 1869-1947.**  
**From Slavery to the Freedom of Christ**

*Conference given in Notre Dame de Paris for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 30 March 2003, by Cardinal Poupard, President of the Vatican Pontifical Council for Culture.*

From a Europe looking for its soul, with Robert Schuman, to India trying to cope with misery, with Mother Teresa, Christ speaks to us through his followers and shows us how the paths of both politics and charity can converge and turn into roads to holiness. Last Sunday the philosopher Maurice Blondel helped us to understand the meaning of our existence. Archbishop Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, spoke of Blondel as the Good Samaritan “whose intellectual charity, directed towards wounded mankind, strove to understand it and, speaking its own language, broadened its intelligence and prepared it to receive the Good News of Saving Love.” Today we are thinking of wounded humanity in Africa, and it is from that continent that the light of the Gospel is given to us to shed on our path the light of faith which opens to us the way of freedom and of holiness with Christ.

She is still hardly known in France, but the African Bakhita is like a cartoon heroine who meets Christ through slavery and finds in him the freedom to live a fully human life as a child of God. Her story might seem incredible, but it is true. It is the story of a happy little girl brutally torn from her family, sold and re-sold as a slave, a story as sorrowful as it is marvellous. For the slave Josephine went with her new masters to Italy and one of them gave her a crucifix. “It will remind you that Jesus Christ also died on the Cross for you.” The little slave received Baptism and found in her faith the strength to resist her masters who wanted to take her back to Sudan against her will. She declared: “I will not leave here. I do not wish to lose my God.” For she knew that if she went back to her home country, she would not have the freedom to practise her faith. “I looked at the crucifix, and I felt within me the peace and the strength to resist.”

Because slavery is forbidden by the law of Italy, Bakhita’s masters were obliged to leave her in Italy. So she was now a free person in a new country. Baptised and a religious Sister, as cook, laundress, embroiderer, sacristan, receptionist, she won the hearts of all by her sweet simplicity and great charity. She died on 8 February 1947, and her sanctity was recognized by the Church on 1 October of the Jubilee Year 2000. Josephine Bakhita’s message thus spread from African Sudan to the whole world at the dawn of the new millennium. She was now a Sister for the world, the product of that suffering Africa which Robert Schuman already had urged us not to forget. We Europeans may no longer have overseas territories to govern, but we still have obligations to them, as Paul VI stated in his Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*: “We must help them towards a full human development, from subhuman to more human conditions.

“Subhuman conditions include both the material destitution which deprives people of the necessities of life, and the moral deprivation of those mutilated by egotism. We are thinking of oppressive structures, whether they originate from the abuse of possessions or of power, the exploitation of workers, the injustice of commercial practice. More human conditions mean a movement from misery towards the possession of the minimum needed for life, the conquest of social scourges, the broadening of knowledge, the acquisition of culture. ‘More human’ means also an increased respect for the dignity of others, an orientation towards a spirit of modest living, of co-operation for the common good, of the will for peace. It also means man’s recognition of supreme values and of the God who is their sources and final term. Finally and above all, more human includes the gift of faith, given by God and

welcomed by man, and unity in the charity of Christ who summons us to participate as sons in the life of the Living God, Father of all men.”<sup>1</sup>[1]

The name “Bakhita” means in Arabic “Fortunate”, and it was the name given to our saint, with savage irony, by those who dragged her away from her loved ones. This happy Sudanese girl became the unhappy slave. And she has left us an account of her extraordinary adventures which led her from Western Sudan to Khartoum, Genoa, Venice and finally Schio. After being sold to a slave-dealer she escaped but was recaptured and sold to a very rich man and then to a Turkish General. Finally she was ransomed by the Italian consul who took her with him to Italy where she was given to Signora Michielli. This lady was anxious to take Bakhita back with her to Africa, but Bakhita, now twenty, refused. She had come to know Jesus through her contact with Italian Sisters, and, she tells us, “I refused to follow my lady to Africa because I had not finished my preparation for Baptism. I also thought that once I was baptised, I would have no chance of professing my religion in Africa. The best thing therefore was for me to remain with the Sisters.”

Eventually she was declared a free person by the King’s representative in Venice, and she received the three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist from Cardinal Domenico Agostini, Patriarch of Venice. She became a happy religious Sister, giving joy to all, a living example of Christ in freedom. The little slave girl had become fully free in Jesus Christ.

The story of her life was written in Italian by Maria Luisa Daguino, and published by the Generalate of the Canossian Sisters in Rome in 1996.<sup>2</sup>[2] It has now been translated into several languages, including Polish and Russian. She excites our interest as an exploited child, a humiliated woman, and a disinherited African. She also shows us how Baptism opened for her the way of freedom, leading to total consecration to God in the religious life, joyfully lived until death.

Bakhita’s native country is now known as the Independent Republic of the Sudan. Christians are numerous in Khartoum, the capital city, but they have always been persecuted. The total population of the country is about twenty million, of whom some one million are Christians. The Archbishop of Khartoum, Gabriel Zubeir Wako, spoke to the Plenary Assembly of the French Bishops of the sufferings of Sudanese Catholics when he addressed them in Lourdes on 6 November 1999.<sup>3</sup>[3] It is a cry for help from the Bishop of a persecuted people to a world which remains indifferent.

“Christians are continually harassed by the security forces, subjected to constant humiliation, and often made the scapegoat in times of crisis.”

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<sup>1</sup>[1] *Populorum Progressio*, nos. 20-21.

<sup>2</sup>[2] See also the Story of Bakhita written and illustrated by Augusta Curelli, Editions du Signe, Strasbourg, 200; Bakhita, the Slave who Met Christ: texts by Don Roberto Lamita, illustrations by Giorgio Trevisan, Strasbourg, 2000; Bakhita, Inquiry into her Sanctity, Roberto Italo Zanini, St Paul’s, Turin, 2000.

<sup>3</sup>[3] *Chercheurs du Christ*, Centurion, Cerf, Fleurus-Mame, 1999, pp. 95-105.

“The Church in the Sudan is neither anti-Islam nor anti-government. It is a Church living in a country divided and torn by war which seeks to bear witness to Christ, who will always be a sign of contradiction.”

“Since 1995 there has been a systematic destruction of Christian schools and prayer-centres, under the pretext either that they are situated along the path of new urban roads, or that they have been built illegally without planning permission. It is a strange thing that all the new roads should have to pass through our centres. At least twenty-five of our establishments have been demolished in this way. The Church has received no compensation for the demolished buildings, nor any alternative sites.”

“Our schools educate 42,826 pupils, most of them children of displaced persons. Since the month of May, we have been struggling to retain these schools. The governor of Khartoum wanted to close them and send the children to state schools instead. The government recently issued a statement saying that they never had any intention of taking our schools, but we are nevertheless continually harassed by unannounced inspections, sometimes carried out by armed soldiers or security officers. The principal targets of all this harassment are the personnel of the schools, the schools themselves, and the rights of ownership to the land. Another source of anxiety is the frequent use of armed police and soldiers to harass the Church. I was arrested by a detachment of at least fifteen armed men who entered my house by climbing over the fence. Father Hilary was arrested by about ten armed men. Father Gilles was expelled, with an armed escort. The Catholic club was confiscated by two lorry loads of armed men. The same methods of intimidation are being used against our schools.”

“The present regime has made Islam its principal programme and the programme involves all the organs of the State, political, judicial, executive, legislative, economic, social. The problem however is not simply that of religion. There is also the government system which suppresses basic human rights and uses repressive measures, including secret imprisonment, summary executions, torture in detention, imprisonment without trial. There is also the whole machinery of intimidation, designed to operate outside the law.”

“We must not confuse political problems created by governments with the attitude of ordinary Muslims. In the Sudan, Muslims and Christians live and work side-by-side. It is at least partly true to say that tolerance and mutual respect are generally speaking characteristics of Sudanese culture. The spirit of good neighbourliness is also part of the tradition of most of the tribes. Left to themselves, without political pressure, there would be no grounds for accusing the Sudanese of mutual persecution.”

“In spite of all, the Church struggles to continue its mission. Our priorities are evangelization and adult catechesis.”

“We wish to appeal to all the Bishops of France and to all those here present to pray for us. Ask your faithful to pray for my country and its people and to make sacrifices for them. We ask you to speak in our name and work for the establishment of a peace based on dialogue and respect for human rights in the Sudan.”

Sudan is an immense country covering almost the whole of the Nile basin. After the Romans had made themselves masters of Egypt, they began to cast jealous eyes on the Sudan, but Nero's envoys reported that the country was too poor to be worth conquering. Later on however the Arabs were of a different opinion, and in the seventh century, also after the

conquest of Egypt, they advanced as far as Nubia and began systematic slave-trading. In the nineteenth century, Mohamed Ali Khedive, viceroy of Egypt, and his son Ibrahim abolished the old chieftainships. When Great Britain was planning to mount an invasion from Egypt, Mohamed Ahmed the Mahdi, the so-called envoy of God, carried out a wholesale programme of destruction of Catholic missions, imposing the Islamic law on everyone and giving the imprisoned missionaries, men and women, the alternative of conversion to Islam or death. All opted for death, and they died in prison of misery or disease. The Mahdi's Holy War had been victorious. Sudan had been conquered, the Church was in ruins. The population was helpless in the face of slave-traders who descended on villages and carried off men, women and children to be sold as slaves, in defiance of international treaties and with total lack of respect for any human rights. "The fact is," wrote Bishop Comboni from El Obeid, "the Islamic government pays only lip-service to the 1856 treaty of the Congress of Paris. In Central Africa, slavery remains as flourishing as ever, but the cries of the victims are never heard far away in Europe. The desolation continues and will continue for a long time."

We may hear what Bakhita has to say. I summarize her account, while preserving its original freshness.

"My family lived exactly in the middle of Africa. I was very happy and had no acquaintance with suffering. I was about nine years old when one morning I was walking in the fields with my friend, some distance from my home. Two strange men, both armed, suddenly leapt out of a hedge in front of us. One of them took me roughly by the arm, drew a huge knife from his belt, and told that if I cried out I would be killed. In fact I did cry for help to my father and mother, in indescribable anguish, but no one could hear me. One of the men pushed me into a filthy hut full of tools and locked the door. I stayed there for more than a month. I still remember those hours of agony. I felt that my heart would burst."

Finally Bakhita was sold to a slave-dealer and she walked in a column for eight days, across woods and mountains, valleys and deserts. The men were in front with the women behind. They were tied together with a heavy chain locked round their necks, causing great bleeding sores. Bakhita was then dragged with her friend to the slave-market and locked in a hut. One day their warder came and took the chains off their legs, telling them to strip ears of maize and give the food to the mule. Having perhaps other things on his mind, the warder forgot to close the door when he left, and the two girls fled, with the maize in their hands.

"We spent the whole night running and panting. Sometimes we heard the roaring of wild beasts in the dark, and we climbed trees to save ourselves."

Finally the girls were recaptured and sold to an Arab chief who flew into a rage at the slightest lack of attention.

"He threw me on the ground and kept kicking me before leaving me half-dead."

"Three months later, I was sold to a new master, a General in the Turkish army. We were whipped mercilessly. I doubt if in three years I passed a single day without fresh wounds. The General had a daughter, and when she discovered that I had run away from my previous master she put a heavy chain on my feet which I had to wear for over a month. I was scourged by two soldiers, and the sticks tore the flesh from my thighs, leaving a long furrow which prevented me from walking for several months.

“But the worst was still to come. With the whip waiting if I resisted, I was tattooed with six marks on the chest, sixty on the stomach, and forty-eight on the right arm. I thought I was dying, especially when the woman tattooist rubbed salt into the wounds. I was bathed in blood and had to remain lying down on a mat for more than a month, with no piece of cloth to wipe the liquid continually oozing from the wound which the salt had left half open. The reason I did not die can only have been that the Lord was miraculously preserving me for ‘better things’.

Threatened by the Mahdist rebellion, the Turkish general took flight and Bakhita was sold to the Italian consul. She had been enslaved for ten years, and now for the first time she was given clothes and began to live a more human life. After two years, the consul was recalled to Italy:

“I do not know how it was, but when I heard the name ‘Italy’, whose beauty and charm I did not know, I felt in my heart a strong desire to follow my master. It was God who wanted it. I would soon understand.”

Once in Genoa, the consul offered Bakhita as a present to the Michieli’s, friends of his who had a big hotel at Suakin. That meant going back to Africa for another nine months. Signora Maria Tuurina Michieli became fond of Bakhita and brought her back to Italy with her daughter. When she had to leave again on business, she left both her daughter and Bakhita with the Canossian Sisters.

At this point, Signor Illuminato Checcini enters the scene. He was Madame Michieli’s manager, an upright man with a heart of gold, and he gave Bakhita a silver crucifix.

“When he made me this gift, he kissed it devoutly and explained to me that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who died for us. I do not know why it was, but a mysterious force led me to hide this crucifix in case the Signora should take it from me. I was entrusted with Madame’s daughter to Sister Maria Fabretti, who was in charge of the instruction of catechumens. When she learned that I not only wished to be a Christian but had come there precisely with that intention, she rejoiced with all her heart.”

Bakhita continues her story in moving words:

“These holy Sisters instructed me and enabled me to get to know the God whose presence I had felt in my heart from my childhood, without knowing who He was. I remembered how, on seeing the sun, the moon, the stars, and the beauties of nature, I would say to myself: ‘Who could be the Master of all these beautiful things?’ and I had a great desire to see Him, to get to know Him, to worship Him. Now I knew him. Thank you, thank you, for God!”

In this moving testimony, Bakhita shows us how in the complete destitution of her personal journey, in spite of her agony, through all the miles of the forced march, she never lost her extraordinary peace of soul. In all her account of her sufferings, there is no word of hatred or of resentment against those whom one can hardly consider other than her executioners. Later on, when she was invited to tell her story, she would say:

“All through my life, the Lord has always been good to me. My whole life has been a gift of God. If I met these slave-traders who captured me, even those who tortured me, I would kneel

down to kiss their hands. For, without them, I would never have become either a Christian or a religious.”

When I read these moving confidences of Bakhita, I cannot help thinking of my dear and venerable friend, the Vietnamese Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuận, whom the Lord called to himself last September. On 24 April 1975 Pope Paul VI had appointed him coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon, on the eve of that city’s conquest by Hồ Chí Minh. As this Archbishop told me himself, on the 15 August of that same year he was dragged brutally to the government headquarters and spent the next thirteen years in detention, nine of them in solitary confinement. Part of the time he spent under electric light night and day, and at others times he was in complete darkness, also for night and day, the aim being to break his spirit by breaking the rhythm of time. But he was never broken. There was never any question of a trial. During the last years, we were neighbours on the same landing in Rome, and I heard from him many times the story of his arrest, his detention, his ingenuity in obtaining a little wine, under the pretext of medicine for the stomach, in order to celebrate the Eucharist. He was a man of unshakable patience and gentleness, able, with the strength of God, to convert successive warders. They used to say to him, “How can you say that you love us after all the suffering we have inflicted on you?” His only reply was a gentle smile, and in Rome too he continued to wear, as his cardinal’s pectoral cross, the little wooden cross and the chain made from the electric wire in his cell. I often asked him about the barbarities of his tormentors, but I never heard from his lips a word of hatred or of revenge or even complaint. Like Bakhita, he found the strength of Christ in the prayer of Jesus on the Cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Like Cardinal François-Xavier Van Thuận, and like the little Bernadette of Lourdes, Bakhita found it painful to talk about herself. But she did it for the glory of God and to exalt the power of the one who had made her know salvation. Sister Giulia Campolongo knew Bakhita when she was herself a boarding-school pupil. “When she spoke to us of the most tragic events, she never lost the expression of peace and tranquillity which was her characteristic. She did not know the meaning of the word enemy.” When she entered the religious life, any time left over from her duties as doorkeeper, cook or laundress she spent in prayer in the church. When she was asked what she was thinking about during these hours of prayer, she would reply:

“I meditate on the life of Jesus Christ, so that I may always know and love him better, and help others to know and love him.

“She often spoke to us of our Guardian Angel, and told us that he was our guide and we must follow him and never make him sad.”

“She told us that our Reverend Mother Superior had invited her to tell us something about her life as a slave. She said that remembering these episodes made her appreciate more and more the great gift which God had given her in choosing her as His spouse. Later on she would say: There are things which only the Lord has seen. One can neither speak of them nor write of them.”

In all this lapidary simplicity we see a soul remarkably open to what she called “the better things” which happened to her before her Baptism and in which she perceived the mysterious action of the Spirit who wishes all men to be saved.

When she was a happy little girl in the midst of her family, she contemplated heaven and the beauties of nature and felt a burning desire to know the author of all these marvels and to worship him. We think of the words of Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you.”<sup>4[4]</sup> Bakhita found him, and she offered Him thanks in all the simplicity of her fresh heart: “Now I knew Him. Thank you, thank you, my God.”

This voice from Africa echoes Francis of Assisi’s Hymn of Creatures which in turn recalls the cry of the Psalmist:

**The heavens are telling the glory of God;**

And the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge. (Ps 19, 1-2)

O Lord, our God,  
How majestic is thy name in all the earth!  
Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted  
By the mouths of babes and infants,  
Thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,  
To still the enemy and the avenger.  
When I look at the heavens, the work of thy hands,  
The moon and the stars which thou hast established:  
What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?  
Yet thou hast made him little less than God,  
And dost crown him with glory and honour...  
O Lord, our Lord,  
How majestic is thy name in all the earth! (Ps 8)

Pope John-Paul II canonized our little Bakhita on 1 October 2000, thus offering her to us as a model of holiness.

If we are not careful, the wonders of modern scientific discoveries and of technological progress, the growth of the human sciences and of urbanization, can obscure our vision as believers and lead us into a scientific positivism which claims that science can do everything and the hypothesis of God is therefore no longer needed. It is salutary, after listening to the philosophical analyses of a Maurice Blondel, to rediscover the open-eyed wonder of little Bakhita looking at the stars of heaven. Both of these Christian people provide us with an antidote against modern scientism, the science which recognizes no frontiers. “The positive sciences are not sufficient,” repeated the philosopher of Aix, “because they are not sufficient.” As believers, we trust like Blondel in the power of reason, while like him too we rely on faith. We do not limp between two antagonistic systems, but we go ahead with confidence, standing solidly on both of our legs. Science can have nothing to tell us about the origin of things, any more than faith can tell us about the mechanism of the material world. For science, knowing means explaining. For faith, it means loving. We are all searching for truth and love, and we need them both, the love of truth and the truth of love. It is love, the poet Dante tells us, which

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<sup>4[4]</sup> Augustine, Confessions, Prologue, 1,1. Gallimard, 1998, p. 781.

moves heaven, earth and stars. Bakhita offers us the same message. Science cannot remove the mystery dimension from the universe but it rather invites us ever more to worship its Creator, thanks to those thinkers who, led by the hand of God, continue their humble and persevering effort to penetrate the secret of things. 5[5] Faith and reason, Pope John-Paul II tells us, are the two wings which enable the human spirit to rise up to the contemplation of truth.6[6] Bringing into harmony the values of science and the values of conscience is the great moral challenge facing the coming generation.7[7]

### **From Slavery to the Freedom of Christ**

In 1462 Pius II described slavery as the great crime, the *magnum scelus*. It was of this crime that Bakhita was the victim, and it is still alive and well in Sudan, as we were reminded in *La Croix* of 12 August 2002. After twenty years of war which produced two million dead and four million displaced persons, and during which animists and Christians were the object of persecution, we have the right to our identity as Africans, as Christians, as animists, cried Bishop Paride Taban, President of the Episcopal Conference of Southern Sudan, which is struggling to retain this threatened and persecuted identity. The terrifying struggle in the land of Bakhita is our struggle too, for it is a struggle for the rights of human beings, black or white, my neighbour, my brother, for the liberation of men sunk in slavery, whether as traders or purchasers. Pope John-Paul II spoke of this anthropological tragedy in Korea on 22 February 1992: “It is time that this sin was confessed in truth and humility, for it is a sin of man against man and of man against God.”8[8] Historical reflection on slavery and on the damage it has done in Africa and elsewhere is salutary and necessary. But we must not forget the modern version of slavery which, with all the horror of the old barbarity, still oppresses, offends and humiliates the human person, created in the image and likeness of God. There is still much to do, especially in centres of education, to offer to Africans and to all men of the third millennium an integral development, based on respect for the human person, interracial acceptance and openness to other cultures. In particular African women have to be rescued from the humiliations and murders of which Bakhita was the victim before she was able to thank God for her liberation. For love of us, Christ took on himself the condition of a slave and knew death. But with the whole Church we sing with joy in the Paschal Liturgy that the Master of Life has died, but now lives and reigns.

We have seen how Bakhita, in her determination to remain faithful to Christ in all liberty, refused to accompany her mistress. “I do not wish to lose my God.” She involved all the authorities, down to the Patriarch of Venice and the King’s representative. “The latter declared that since I was in Italy, where there was no buying and selling of slaves, I was entirely free. It was God Himself who gave me this strength of purpose, because He wanted me for Himself alone. I received Baptism with a joy which only the angels could describe. They called me ‘Josephine Margaret Bakhita’, which in Arabic means ‘Fortunate’.”

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5[5] Cf Gaudium et Spes, 36, 2.

6[6] In Fides et Ratio, 14 September 1998.

7[7] Cf Paul Poupard, Après Galilée. Science et Foi: nouveau dialogue, DDB, 1994..

8[8] Documentation Catholique 1992, p. 325.



Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto, who was later to become Pope as Pius X, questioned the young postulant for the religious life and declared to her: "Pronounce the holy vows without fear. Jesus loves you. Jesus wants you. Love him and serve Him always, as you have done up to now."

"Since that day," Bakhita tells us, "fourteen years of religious life have passed, and every day I have come to appreciate more and more the goodness which God has shown to me...I have been completely free. God made me strong because he wanted me to belong to him by Baptism and religious profession."

So Bakhita the slave became the model of a free faith. This is Bakhita's most important message for our times, just as it is also the most difficult to understand in our fractured post-modern culture still thirsting for freedom. For us Christians of the third millennium perhaps the most urgent and the most fascinating challenge facing us is how to convince our contemporaries, and especially young people, that freedom is not the same thing as a permissiveness which ends up in nihilism. True freedom spreads out into the gift of love given and received, lived and cultivated like a tender plant.<sup>9[9]</sup> Freedom, beautiful freedom, is the great ideal which everyone sings about, carved in stone at the entrance to our public buildings. Freedom, equality, fraternity, we chant; but it was Henri Bergson who pointed out that only the last of this trio, fraternity, could reconcile the other two. "Theoretical democracy proclaims freedom, demands equality, and reconciles these two warring sisters by reminding them that they are sisters in virtue of fraternity." Solidarity, we say, Solidarnost in Polish. John-Paul II warned his compatriots against a false ideology of freedom and the noisy propaganda of liberty which preaches a liberty without either truth or responsibility.<sup>10[10]</sup>

The word freedom may be magical but it is also ambivalent, like all the great human values. Born out of the purity of the image and likeness of God, it is obscured by man's sin, continually surfacing afresh since its appearance in our first parents in the Garden of Eden in Genesis, but finally set free by the free gift of Jesus, son of God and of the Virgin Mary, who died on the Cross to give us life.

The perverted freedom of the African slave-trader destroyed the happy freedom of the little Bakhita and imprisoned her in slavery. The freedom of the slave-trader is the freedom of the free fox in the free hen-house. Father Lacordaire, the great preacher of Notre Dame, expressed it in lapidary terms: "When it comes to a struggle between the strong and the weak, it is freedom which oppresses and the law which sets free."

We can certainly acknowledge with gratitude the achievements of our social legislation, so often the fruit of bitter struggles, while recognizing too that such achievements are far from being universal. I remember the tribute which Pope John-Paul II paid to our social legislation which he saw as one of the fruits of the Gospel. It was in 1980 at the airfield of Le Bourget to which I had accompanied the Holy Father in a helicopter after welcoming him to the Institut Catholique early on the morning of 1 June.

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<sup>9[9]</sup> Cf Paul Poupard, *Nouvelle Europe. Reconquête de la Liberté et Défi du Libéralisme*. Mame, 1993.

<sup>10[10]</sup> Homily in Cracow 18 August 2002, *Documentation Catholique* 6 October 2002, p.827.

“We know how much the sons and daughters of your nation have contributed to our understanding of man and to the formulation of his inalienable rights. The ideas of freedom, equality and fraternity have deeply marked your history and your culture. These are at bottom Christian ideas, even if those who first formulated the ideal restricted their vision to man and did not associate it with an alliance between him and eternal wisdom. For ourselves, God’s wisdom is the basis of all culture and of all truly human culture.”<sup>11</sup>[11]

As St Paul wrote in letters of fire, Where there is the Spirit of God, there is freedom. The Gospel message is a message of liberation. Ancient Christianity owed some of its extraordinary dynamism to its strong affirmation of freedom. The authentic evangelical distinction between the temporal and the spiritual includes the distinction between the State and the Church. It means recognizing the legitimacy of the political kingdom while rejecting its totalitarian claim to be the ultimate reality, a claim already vigorously rejected by the first generation of Christians in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. We might think too of Antigone, in her pious innocence, standing up to Creon and paying with her defenceless life for her refusal to accept the impious claim of totalitarian power.

In our day we have seen other examples of defenders of human dignity against the arrogance of the police state. We think of people like Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, and of all those others, believers or non-believers, with whom I was commissioned by Pope John-Paul II to institute a dialogue. We are on the side of all those who oppose the dehumanising tendencies which are so often hiding behind dominant cultures. The confrontation between the religious vision of the world and the agnostic or even atheistic vision is a feature of the modern scene, but common ground can be found in a loyal and respectful recognition of the essential rights of conscience of every man and woman on earth. Human rights are as indivisible as the Republic itself. Christians see these rights as dictates of conscience, the universal moral teacher of mankind. There is still much to be done, in Africa and elsewhere, to give to all that access to freedom which the little Bakhita so appreciated, and especially to that freedom of belief which is the guarantor of all other freedoms.

From the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope John-Paul II has insistently urged all the members of the international community to respect human rights. In his first Encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, he spoke with the strong convictions generated in his tragic Polish experience of a totalitarian regime:

“Among these rights are very properly included religious freedom and freedom of conscience. The Second Vatican Council considered especially necessary the preparation of a fairly long declaration on this subject. This is the document called *Dignitatis Humanae*, in which is expressed not only the theological concept of the question but also the concept reached from the point of view of natural law, that is to say from the ‘purely human’ position, on the basis of the premises given by man’s own experience, his reason and his sense of human dignity. Certainly the curtailment of the religious freedom of individuals and communities is not only a painful experience but it is above all an attack on man’s very dignity, independently of the religion professed or of the concept of the world which these individuals and communities have. The curtailment and violation of religious freedom are in contrast with man’s dignity and his objective rights. The Council document mentioned above states clearly enough what the curtailment or violation of religious freedom is. In this case we are undoubtedly

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<sup>11</sup>[11] John-Paul II, “Que fais-tu de ton Baptême?” Centurion 1980, p. 139.

confronted with a radical injustice with regard to what is particularly deep within man, what is authentically human. Indeed, even the phenomenon of unbelief, a-religiousness or atheism, as a human phenomenon, is understood only in relation to the phenomenon of religion and faith. It is therefore difficult, even from a 'purely human' point of view, to accept a position that gives only atheism the rights of citizenship in public and social life, while believers are, as though by principle, barely tolerated or are treated as second-class citizens or are even – and this has already happened – entirely deprived of the rights of citizenship.

Even if briefly, this subject must also be dealt with, because it too enters into the complex of man's situations in the present-day world and because it too gives evidence of the degree to which this situation is overburdened by prejudices and injustices of various kinds. If we refrain from entering into details in this field in which we would have a special right and duty to do so, it is above all because, together with all those who are suffering the torments of discrimination and persecution for the name of God, we are guided by faith in the redeeming power of the Cross of Christ. However, because of my office, I appeal in the name of all believers throughout the world to those on whom the organization of social and public life in some way depends, earnestly requesting them to respect the rights of religion and of the Church's activity. No privilege is asked for, but only respect for an elementary right. Actuation of this right is one of the fundamental tests of man's authentic progress in any regime, in any society, system or milieu."12[12]

Little Bakhita, guided by Providence, was obliged to leave her native country in order to find freedom of belief, and indeed in the first place any freedom at all. We may think of all those legions of brothers and sisters of ours, especially in Africa and Asia, who are deprived of freedom, and not only of freedom of belief, and who are often waiting for God, "groping after Him" in the word of St Paul, by following their right conscience with generosity and love. The astonishing life of Bakhita sheds a marvellous light on all those persons who do not know God, as she put it, but who are faithful to Him in following their right conscience and find in him joy in its fullness when finally they meet Him. Bakhita did not need to go in search of God. He was already present in her heart. "You would not be looking for me, if you had not already found me." This little girl who contemplated the wonders of nature also endured three consecutive days of frightful torture in which her breasts were twisted as if they were wet rags. "Nevertheless," she says, "when my master sent for me I ran to him and knelt to receive his orders." When she was asked whether she did this because she thought that God was looking at her, she replied: "I did not know the good God. I behaved in this way because I thought in my heart that that was how I should behave. I was sunk in the mud, but I was not defiled. Our Lady protected me even when I did not know her. Even when I was a slave, full of sadness and discouragement, I never despaired because I felt within me a mysterious power which sustained me. I did not die because the good Lord had destined me for 'better things'. And finally I came to know this God whom I felt in my heart when I was little without knowing who He was."

When she was asked how she came to be a religious Sister, she could only reply, "I do not know. He was the one who did it all."

The joyful mysteries in her early African childhood, the sorrowful mysteries of her slavery, the luminous mystery of her life as a baptised religious, the glorious mysteries of her holiness.

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12[12] John-Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, March 1979, n° 17.

Called by Christ to freedom before she even knew Him, her whole life was finally spent in making Him loved: “Be good, love the Lord, pray for these poor people who do not know Him. If you realized what an infinite grace it is to know the good Lord. Yes indeed, the Lord is good, eternal his merciful love.”

Then she prayed for her family, her people, for Africa, for her country:

“O Lord, if only I could fly there to my people and preach to all of your Goodness at the top of my voice. How many souls would be drawn to you! My mother and my brother, my sister who is still a slave, all the poor, poor people of Africa. O Jesus, may they too come to know and love you.”

We pray that we may share Bakhita’s wonder at the marvels of creation, her uprightness of conscience, her courage in terrible trials, her joy in believing, her burning hope, her fervour in loving Christ and in bringing others to love Him. We may ask that she give us also the grace of her own simple trust in the final meeting with the Father.

“I am making my way gently towards eternity. I am taking two bags with me, one containing my sins and the other, much heavier, with the infinite merits of Jesus Christ. When I present myself before God’s tribunal, I will cover my poor little suitcase with the merits of the Virgin Martyr, and then I shall open the other and present the merits of Jesus. Then I shall say to the Eternal Father: ‘Now, you be the judge of what you see!’ I am quite sure that I shall not be sent away. Then I shall go on to St Peter and say to him: ‘You can close the door, for I have come to stay.’”

What a challenge is holiness! Here was little Bakhita, the African slave-girl, and she rose to the freedom of the saints. She shows us the price and the meaning of freedom. “Freedom for what?” Georges Bernanos wondered. Bakhita answers the question: we are all called to be free in order to love with the same love both God and our brothers and sisters.

#### **Notes :**

<sup>1</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, n°20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Luisa Daguino, *Bakhita raconte son histoire*, Maison Généralice des Sœurs Canossiennes, Rome, 1996.

Cf aussi *L’Histoire de Bakhita écrite et illustrée par Augusta Curelli*, Ed. du Signe, Trarbach, 2000,

*Bakhita, l’esclave qui rencontre le Christ*, textes : Don Roberto Lamita, Illustrateur : Giorgio Trevisan, Ibid, 2000,

*Bakhita, inchiesta su una sancta* par il 2000, Roberto Italo Zanini, San Paolo, Turin, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Conférence des Evêques de France, Lourdes 1999. *Chercheurs du Christ*, Centurion, Cerf, Fleurus-Mame, 1999, Témoignage de Monseigneur Zubeir Wako, Archevêque de Khartoum, Soudan, samedi 6 novembre 1999, p.95-105.

<sup>4</sup> Luc, 23, 34

<sup>5</sup> Saint Augustin, *Confessions*, Prologue, I, 1, éd. Lucien Jerphagnon, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », Gallimard, 1998, p.781.

<sup>6</sup> Psaume 18.

<sup>7</sup> Psaume 8.

<sup>8</sup> Gaudium et spes, n°36, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Paul II, Fides et ratio, 14 septembre 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Paul Poupard, Après Galilée. Science et foi : nouveau dialogue, DDB, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> La Documentation Catholique, 1992, p.325.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. les actes des deux colloques que j'ai réunis à Madrid et Prague sur « Dieu, l'Eglise et la liberté en Europe ». Paul Poupard, Nouvelle Europe. Reconquête de la liberté et défi du libéralisme, Mame, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Paul Poupard, intervention aux XXVIII<sup>èmes</sup> Rencontres internationales de Genève, l'exigence d'égalité, Histoire et Société d'aujourd'hui, Ed. de la Bâconnière, Neuchâtel, 1982, p.296.

<sup>14</sup> Homélie du pape Jean-Paul II au Parc Blonia à Cracovie, le 18 août 2002, dans Documentation Catholique, t, XCIX n°2277, 6 octobre 2002, p.827.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul II, France, que fais-tu de ton baptême ? Centurion, 1980. p.139.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul II, Redemptor hominis, n°17.

<sup>17</sup> Psaume 117

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