

## Homily

### Solemnity of St. Josephine Bakhita

International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking

February 8th, 2024 - Malakal, South Sudan

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These days, we are recognizing the anniversary of His Holiness Pope Francis's visit to South Sudan, on pilgrimage with his two counterparts from Great Britain, who came bringing a message of peace. The seed of peace was planted; it is our responsibility to make it grow.

Today, we thank God for the shepherds he is continuing to send, starting with the new Cardinal of South Sudan my brother Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba, as well as all the bishops, priests, deacons and ministers of the Gospel in this country. In a special way, we thank God today for our three brothers here who are about to be ordained Deacons.

In this spirit of thanksgiving, we also celebrate the Solemnity of St. Josephine Bakhita. She is much-beloved here in Malakal, South Sudan and beyond, in Sudan and throughout the whole Catholic world. She is the patron saint for Victims of Human Trafficking. Tied to her story, this day has also been designated as the International Day of Prayer for victims of human trafficking.

We know that St. Josephine Bakhita suffered greatly in her life. As a child, she was abducted and forced to walk hundreds of kilometers to be sold as a slave. During the journey to El Obeid, she was bought and sold twice. And after El Obeid, she was sold multiple times, spending many years in captivity marked by abuse and hardship.

Yet, the story of St. Josephine Bakhita is a story of hope, from captivity and slavery to eventually learning of God in a convent of Sisters. When finally, she was freed, she chose a life of full commitment to God and entered religious life. As a religious sister, she shared her story of captivity and slavery, thanking her kidnappers, for without them she might not have known of Jesus, nor of the Church. Despite her sufferings, and even later despite the illness she endured, she remained cheerful, following always the desires of her Master

Jesus Christ. In all of this, St. Josephine Bakhita gives us such a strong example of being hopeful even amidst dire circumstances.

On 11 October 2023, Pope Francis dedicated his remarks at the Wednesday Audience to the life and witness of St. Josephine Bakhita. He said, “This is Bakhita’s soul. Truly, to feel pity means both to *suffer with* the victims of the great inhumanity in the world, and also to *pity* those who commit errors and injustices, not justifying, but humanizing. This is the caress she teaches us: to humanize. When we enter the logic of fighting, of division among us, of bad feelings, one against the other, we lose our humanity. And very often we think we are in need of humanity, of being more humane. And this is the work that Saint Bakhita teaches us: to humanize, to humanize ourselves and to humanize others.”

Turning now to today’s South Sudan, in every place you need to be very awake and alert, to remain faithful to the God of Jesus Christ, who is the God of peace, the God of Love, the God of forgiveness, the God of reconciliation, the God of well-being and the God of true goodness and true happiness.

In the first reading, from 1 Kings (11:4-13), we hear that Solomon, a man who was supposed to be wise, followed the example of some of his wives and turned his heart away from the God of his Fathers and worshiped the false gods of his wives. Taking a step even further away from true worship, Solomon built shrines to the gods of his wives. God was displeased and revealed to Solomon the consequences of his idolatry.

The temptations to worship idols continue today. Today’s false gods, that detract us from following our God and Lord Jesus Christ, are different from those of Solomon’s days, but they are no less dangerous, and they come in different forms and with different names, such as the following:

- The god of *greed for wealth/money*, which makes us to deprive others of the common good; whereby the resources meant for many people are only utilized by a few, or even by one.
- The god of *hunger for power, control and domination*, not only at the national level but even within our local communities, villages and all levels of human organization.
- The god of *tribalism or nationalism*, which drives us to exclude others and to treat them as being less human, or even to kill them, as some of you have witnessed.

These false gods have really ravaged South Sudan, and it is time to arise and denounce them.

When Pope Francis came to South Sudan, he was prompted by the Holy Spirit to remind all the people of this country that God is calling you to walk in the way of peace. His presence and his words stirred up a flame of zeal, he enkindled here a fire. He ignited a spirit that leads South Sudan to be known for peace and not for war. Everyone in South Sudan has the obligation to maintain that fire, the obligation to spark that flame in the lives and hearts of others.

Pope Francis came among you as a servant of the gospel. His visit marked a new beginning in South Sudan. We are duty bound to follow his example. Today, if we fight, let us fight for peace and unity as one blessed family of God, as siblings all. In the words of the Second Reading today, *“You are all sons [and daughters] of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28).* Unity is the weapon that we possess to fight against whatever divides us and takes away our peace. Unity is our defense against all that threatens peace here in South Sudan.

When Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders of his days, he sometimes retreated to the land of foreigners, where they welcomed him and even looked for him to help them. We have an example of this in the Gospel today.

A Greek woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter. Her faith in Jesus was so strong that, even when Jesus challenged her saying, “it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs”, the woman was able to persist in her prayer for help. The woman rightly understood that Jesus was not equating her to a dog, but instead was giving her the opportunity to express her faith even more emphatically. Despite what might appear to be the case on the surface, he was highlighting her humanity. His very dialogue with her was a testimony of Jesus’ respect for her and would have shocked many of his fellow Jews. Jesus’s contemporaries often discriminated against foreigners, the Gentiles, and considered them to be unclean. They called Jesus a sinner for befriending them. But Jesus included the Gentiles in his ministry in order to show his fellow Jews that the Gentiles also have a place in the Kingdom of God. Whomever we consider an outsider is invited to the Kingdom just as we are.

Dear brothers Michael, Emmanuel and Matthew: with the imposition of hands and prayer of consecration, you will be ordained to the sacred ministry of the diaconate, are called to build a civilization of love and peace in the world today. You will do this by imitating Jesus Christ, the Master who came, not to be served, but to serve. Your ministry should be centered on him, avoiding every form of vanity that may distract you. This means avoiding every form of greed, hunger for power, wealth, tribalism or even an unhealthy nationalism. Confronting the difficulties of our age, you must speak of Jesus,

witness to Jesus, with hopefulness, cheerfulness and joy, especially when you meet the poor and suffering.

In light of these, and other, particular challenges that you will encounter throughout your life and ministry, I point you to the commitments that you will make as we celebrate the ritual of the ordination of deacons. I will ask you a series of questions, which outline the new responsibilities that you will begin today. The first concerns your commitment to discharge the office of deacon with humility and love, to assist the bishop and the priests and to serve the people of God. The second is to hold on to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience, as the Apostle urges, and to proclaim this faith in word and actions as it is taught by the Gospel and the Church tradition. The third is to maintain and deepen a spirit of prayer appropriate to your way of life and, in keeping with what is required of you, to celebrate faithfully the liturgy of the hours for the Church and for the whole world. You have reflected on these questions and are invited to respond to them with a strong "I do." Recognizing the centrality of the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass in the life of the Church, and in the life of Deacons, the ritual also exhorts you to shape your way of life always according to the example of Christ, whose body and blood you will give to the people. Finally, in a very real way, all of these commitments are rooted in your promise of respect and obedience to the Local Bishop and his successors.

Dear brothers Michael, Emmanuel and Matthew, the common thread throughout the prayer and ritual today, the identity of a deacon, is service. The diaconate is a ministry of service that requires closeness to Christ, the Bishop and priests, deacons and the people of God, especially the poor and suffering. I once again recall the address of Pope Francis' at the audience of 11 October 2023 about St. Josephine Bakhita. He noted the way in which she saw service. The Pope said, "Bakhita was able to experience service, not as slavery, but as an expression of the free gift of self." In this and in so many ways, I invite you to learn from this great saint who hails from this part of the world.

Dear brothers Bishop(s), priests and deacons: you are ordained to be heralds of the Gospel. You are called to show people the way to Jesus Christ, the way to God, the way to fullness of life (John 10:10). If you slack in this responsibility, if you hesitate in this service, the nasty false gods will attempt to claim God's people and lead them astray. If the people go astray, the problems of this country will continue unchallenged and unsolved. You have the great responsibility of every deacon, to share the Good News and to serve the poor and needy.

So, my dear brothers and sisters let us pray for these three men as they receive the great Sacrament of Holy Orders and accept their new pastoral responsibilities. And with our Holy Father, Pope Francis, let us pray that we may all be one in Christ Jesus. For unity and reconciliation are the way to lasting peace in South Sudan.

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