



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY  
TO BENIN, UGANDA AND KHARTOUM (SUDAN)

EUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION  
IN HONOR OF BLESSED JOSEPHINE BAKHITA

*HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II*

*Green Square, Khartoum (Sudan)  
Wednesday, 10 February 1993*

"Come to me, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11: 28).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Sudan,*

1. In every age and place, these words of our Lord Jesus Christ have been a source of untold strength and consolation for Christians. Especially in times of trial and suffering, men and women, even young children, have experienced in their hearts the powerful presence of the Saviour, speaking these words to them and teaching them the mystery of his saving death on the Cross. "Let us be confident then in approaching the throne of grace, that we shall have mercy from him and find grace when we are in need of help" (Hebr. 4: 16).

One of the people to whom the lesson of the Cross brought incomparable strength amid all kinds of sufferings was *Blessed Josephine Bakhita, a daughter of this land. Today, in Khartoum, in the Sudan, in Africa*, the whole Church in communion with the Successor of Peter turns to Blessed Bakhita and implores her intercession for the Bishops, priests, Religious and laity of this land: for Archbishop Gabriel Zubeir and the faithful of the *Archdiocese of Khartoum*; for Archbishop Paulinus Lukudu and the faithful of the *Archdiocese of Juba*; for the Pastors and faithful of the *Dioceses of El Obeid, Malakal, Rumbek, Tombura-Yambio, Torit, Wau and Yei*.

2. Was it not a moment of refreshment and renewal, offered by Christ the Good Shepherd to the

whole Catholic community of the Sudan, when, in Saint Peter's Square in Rome, *Josephine Bakhita was elevated to glory among the Blessed of the Church?* She thus became a model of virtue and holiness of life for Christians. To religious believers everywhere she speaks of the value of reconciliation and love, for in her heart she overcame any feelings of hatred for those who had harmed her. She learned from the tragic events of her life to have complete trust in the Almighty who is always and everywhere present, and therefore she learned to be *constantly good and generous to everyone* (Cf. John Paul II, *Address on the occasion of the Beatification of Josephine Bakhita*, 18 May 1992). Her Beatification was an act of respect not only for her but also for the Sudan, since *a daughter of this land was put forward as a hero of mercy and of goodwill*. God used her to teach us all the meaning of Jesus' words: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Mt. 5: 9).

Jesus says: "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and learned" (Ibid. 11: 25). With these words *Christ blesses the simplicity of Bakhita, a child, like you, of this land*. Through her simplicity and endless trust she embodied, on the *via dolorosa* of her life, that wisdom which comes from God himself, the wisdom which belongs to the Saints.

3. Today I give thanks to Divine Providence that *I have been granted the opportunity of fulfilling the wish of the Church in the Sudan* that Bakhita be honoured on her own soil, a wish expressed on the day of Blessed Josephine's Beatification. I thank everyone: the civil authorities and all who have worked to prepare this visit; the Bishops who have invited me to pray with you and to share, even for a brief moment, the life of the Catholic community here.

I am happy also to greet the representatives of the other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities. We are united by profound spiritual bonds, because of our common Baptism, bonds which must lead us to seek the unity which Christ himself wanted for his followers (cf. Jn. 17: 21).

Likewise, I greet the entire Muslim community. An important purpose of my visit is to appeal for a *new relationship between Christians and Muslims in this land*. Only recently, in Assisi, Catholics, other Christians and Muslims of Europe gathered for a day of prayer and fasting for peace. I repeat now the conviction which I know was shared by the Muslims present at that meeting: "that genuine religious belief is a source of mutual understanding and harmony, and that only the perversion of religious sentiment leads to discrimination and conflict" (John Paul II, *Address to Muslim Leaders in Assisi*, 10 January 1993).

It is my earnest hope that there will be more dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims in the Sudan. We must all realize that "to use religion as an excuse for injustice and violence is a terrible abuse, and it must be condemned by all true believers in God.... There can be no genuine peace unless believers stand together in rejecting the politics of hate and discrimination, and in affirming the right to religious and cultural freedom in all human societies"

(Ibid.).

4. It is difficult at this moment not to think of all the prayers and sufferings of those affected by the continuing conflict in this land, especially in the South. So many of you came originally from there, and are now homeless and displaced because of the war. The immense suffering of millions of innocent victims impels me to voice my solidarity with the weak and defenceless who *cry out to God for help, for justice, for respect for their God-given dignity as human beings, for their basic human rights, for the freedom to believe and practise their faith* without fear or discrimination.

*I earnestly hope that my voice will reach you, Brothers and Sisters of the South.* Like the people mentioned in the First Reading of this Liturgy, you too may be tempted to say: "The Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us" (Is. 49: 14). And yet, your Christian faith teaches you that *your prayers and sufferings* are joined to the *great cry of Christ himself* who, as the Supreme High Priest of the whole People of God, entered the Holy Place in order to intercede on our behalf (Cf. Hebr. 9: 11-12). And just as once on earth, so now in the Father's house he says: "Come to me, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11: 28). And when, in your hearts, you listen to his words, he adds: "*Learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest*" (Ibid. 11: 29).

So says Christ – the One who alone knows the Father and whom the Father knows as the only-begotten Son – the eternal Word, of one Being with the Father. Today, in the Sudan, the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of Peter, repeats these words and encourages you to stand firm and to take heart. *The Lord is close to you. He will never leave you alone. The whole Church understands your distress and prays for you.*

5. In the midst of so much hardship, Blessed Bakhita is your model and heavenly patron. In the terrible trials of her life *Bakhita always listened to Christ's word.* She learned the mystery of his Cross and Resurrection: the saving truth about God who so loved each one of us that he gave his only Son (Cf. Jn. 3: 16), the saving truth about the Son who loves each one of us to the end (Cf. ibid. 13: 1).

Blessed Bakhita was faithful, she was strong. She confided in Christ without reserve. *She showed herself a servant of God* by patiently enduring troubles, hardships and difficulties, by purity, knowledge, forbearance and kindness (Cf. 2Cor. 6: 4-6) – *like the first Christians* who, in the midst of the persecutions of the Roman Empire, showed themselves to be "servants of God... in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute" (Ibid. 6: 8). So writes the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Corinthians. And so speaks the history of the Church in Africa, not excluding the countries which I have now visited: Benin, Uganda, the Sudan.

6. It was the power of God which made Bakhita – in the likeness of Christ – into *the one who enriches many.* The poor slave-girl who had nothing showed that she was in fact the one who had

the greatest treasure (Cf. *ibid.* 6: 10). And even if, humanly speaking, *she seemed condemned to death, she lives!* (Cf. *ibid.* 6: 9). She lives just as Christ lives, though he was condemned to death and was crucified. She lives with his life!

In her new life in Christ this sister of ours returns to Africa today. This daughter of the Christian community of the Sudan *returns to you today*. You too are being tried in many ways, *and yet life is your heritage*, that life which the Risen Christ has brought for all.

And what are the signs of life in Christ in the Sudan today? The words of Saint Paul in the Second Reading speak eloquently of your daily toil: "Although saddened, we are always glad; we seem poor, but we make many people rich; we seem to have nothing, yet we really possess everything" (*ibid.* 6: 10).

7. The Church and people of good will all over the world rejoiced when it was announced that a new political system would be introduced, a system in which all citizens would be equal, without any discrimination by reason of colour, religion or sex. It was said that all legitimate diversities would be respected in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country; that all religions would be free in their religious activities.

Religious freedom is a right which every individual has because it springs from the inalienable dignity of each human being. It exists independently of political and social structures and, as has been stated in a host of international Charters, the State has the obligation to defend this freedom from attack or interference. Where there is discrimination against citizens on the basis of their religious convictions, a fundamental injustice is committed against man and against God, and the road to peace is blocked. Today the Successor of Peter and the whole Church reaffirm their support of your Bishops' insistent call for respect of your rights as citizens and as believers.

Every day the Christians of the Sudan are in my thoughts and prayers. The whole Church feels a deep solidarity with the victims of famine, with the terrible plight of refugees and displaced persons, of the sick and injured, of those unjustly treated, of so many lost and abandoned children. *Africa must not fail to find and follow new paths of human solidarity, of justice and respect for human rights, of peace and constructive progress.* The international community must not neglect its solemn commitments to Africa. International agencies must be enabled to provide assistance, to foster development, to promote conditions of freedom and peace in this sorely troubled part of the world.

8. Dear Brothers and Sisters, this Eucharist celebrated on Sudanese soil must be a sign of hope for us all. Christ is present here among his faithful people. "Sing, heavens! *Shout for joy, earth!*... the Lord will comfort his people; He will have pity on his suffering people" (Is. 49: 13).

*Rejoice, all of Africa!* Bakhita has come back to you: the daughter of the Sudan sold into slavery

as a living piece of merchandise and yet still free. Free with the freedom of the saints. *Blessed Josephine comes back to you with the message of God the Father's infinite mercy.*

Man sometimes thinks: "The Lord has abandoned us! He has forgotten us" (Ibid. 49: 14). And God answers with the words of the great Prophet: "*Can a woman forget her own baby, and not love the child she bore? Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you. I have written your name on the palms of my hands*" (Is. 49: 15-16). Yes, on the palms of the hands of Christ, pierced by the nails of the Crucifixion. *The name of each one of you is written on those palms.*

Therefore, with full confidence we cry out:

*"The Lord is our help and our shield.*

*In him do our hearts find joy.*

*We trust in his holy name"* (Ps. 28(27): 7). Amen.

Sallu lillah bi wasitati at-tubawiya Bakhita

as – sudaniya likay

yubarika 'aylati-kom.

(Through the intercession of Blessed Bakhita I ask God to bless your families.)

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### **Greetings to the faithful at the conclusion of the Eucharistic Celebration**

This celebration has been a great grace of God. I wish to thank all who have prepared it and taken part in it: especially Archbishop Gabriel Zubeir and the other Bishops of the Sudan; the Cardinals and Bishops who are visiting; the organizers and volunteers who have arranged everything so well. I thank all of you for your respectful and prayerful participation in the Liturgy.

During this visit I have remembered a close friend of mine from the days of my pastoral work with the University students of Krakow – Professor Jerzy Ciesielski. He worked for some years as a visiting professor at the University of Khartoum, but in 1970 he died tragically in the Nile, together with his two daughters. A man of authentic faith, he made holiness the goal of his life as husband, father and University teacher. The Cause of his Beatification has already been introduced.

Before I leave you I wish once more to encourage you to place your trust in God and not to lose heart, especially the young people who are the hope of a better future.

*Azkùru-kom fi salawati:*

*Antom wa awlada-kom wa biladakom.*

(I will remember you in my prayers: you, your children and your country.)

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