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Reflecting on Sudan's Saint Bakhita

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This lovely portrait of the Sudanese Saint Josephine Bakhita hangs inside the chambers of Southern Sudan's parliament. It also hangs inside Comboni Missionaries chapel opposite a portrait of their founder, the Italian Saint Daniel Comboni.

While in Sudan, I have become fascinated by the life of St. Bakhita.

Growing up Catholic, I heard few if any stories about prominent blacks within the church, so I was thrilled to learn about this one.

Her story is shrouded in mystery. Most believe that she was of the Fur tribe, from Darfur. According to her own account, published years later in Italian, Bakhita was born in 1869 and died in 1947 in Italy. She was kidnapped, enslaved and bought and sold by a succession of masters. She forgot her own name and was dubbed 'Bakhita,' which means fortunate, by one of her masters.

While she was not so fortunate in her early life, Bakhita did get lucky when she was purchased by an Italian man. She ended up moving to Italy where she was freed, according to an account of her life on the Vatican's web site. She had been forcibly converted to Islam as a slave and voluntarily converted to Catholicism. She became a sister in 1896.

While Bakhita never distinguished herself intellectually (one of her chief tasks at the convent was "attending the door"), she became known for a gentle and kind spirit -- a miracle in and of itself, considering her early suffering. She was canonized in 2000.

Since then Bakhita's memory has inspired others. It even converted a death row inmate to Christianity.

And of course, she inspired the name of Sudan's first Catholic radio station. Watch for my article about Bakhita Radio, coming out in the next few days.

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