

Homily: Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Catedral Metropolitana de Buenos Aires

Feast of St Josephine Bakhita, Friday, 8 Feb 2019

Today, all over the world, Catholic people are celebrating the Feast of St Josephine Bakhita. I am delighted to be here with you for this celebration of a truly remarkable woman and saint.

She is, as you all know, the Patron Saint of all victims of Human Trafficking and of those who fight against this scourge. But now I need help.

Her story links Africa to Europe, but her name has spread all over the world, with celebrations taking place round her statue in the Philippines, for example, and here in the Southern Hemisphere. Her name has spread with the growing awareness of the evil and shame of the trafficking of human beings, our brothers and sisters, as if they were no more than units of economic activity to be traded, used and then cast aside.

There are over 40 million people in the world today held in such modern-day slavery. They are to be found in every continent, in every country and probably in most towns and cities. My awakening to this reality started with the story of a young woman trafficked from England into prostitution in Italy. St Josephine Bakhita's story took her from Darfur, in Western Sudan, to Italy. It is a story that, in its tragedy, is repeated over and over again. We pray that in its outcome it will also be repeated again and again.

This girl, who became known as Josephine, started life in a strong family with three brothers and three sisters. She tells us that she had a happy childhood. But that came to an abrupt end in 1877 when she was abducted at the age of eight and sold as a slave. Five times she was sold on, suffering great cruelty, each day bringing fresh physical suffering and such trauma that even her own name was wiped from her awareness. Her slave masters gave her the name Bakhita, which actually means 'lucky'. She was also forcibly 'converted' to Islam, from the pagan upbringing of her family. The cruelty she suffered came to its climax when her body was deliberately cut in 114 different ways and salt rubbed into each wound so that it would remain a permanent scar.

Eventually she came into the possession of an Italian family and taken back to Italy. There she managed to free herself by refusing to move from a convent in which she had been put 'for safe keeping'. Gaining her freedom she decided to stay with the Canossian sisters who, as she later said, 'introduced me to God who from my childhood I had felt in my heart without knowing who he was.' Then, with the

support of the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto, later Pope Pius X, she was baptised with the names Josephine, Margaret, Fortunata - the equivalent of Bakhita - and eventually professed as a member of the Canossian Sisters. She lived the rest of her life in their convent near to Vicenza and became known for her unfailing kindness and happiness in all circumstances. But her greatest joy was to be a Christian.

A young student once asked Bakhita: "What would you do, if you were to meet your captors?" Without hesitation she responded: "If I were to meet those who kidnapped me, and even those who tortured me, I would kneel and kiss their hands. For, if these things had not happened, I would not have been a Christian and a religious today".

As we today confront the horror of slavery, St Josephine points us always to the person of Jesus. In Him we see the deeper reality of human trafficking. Pope Francis uses two phrases to describe it. He says: 'It is a wound in the flesh of humanity.' But then he adds, 'It is a great wound in the body of Christ.' In this way we too see human trafficking not only as a disgrace to our humanity but also as a disfiguring of Christ himself. The voice of its victims, just like the victims of childhood abuse, is the voice of Jesus crying out to us. We have to learn, again and again, how to truly listen to that cry, how to let it enter our hearts. That is not easy because we are constantly protecting ourselves with excuses and competing demands. But, again as Pope Francis has said, this tragedy will never be defeated until we have learned again how to weep.

Today, we celebrate these Sacred Mysteries affirming again that the wounded and broken Body of Christ rises from death to new life, in the power of the Holy Spirit and according to the will of the Father. It is never the intention of God that this flesh should be discarded as broken remains. Rather His will to restore to all creation, in and through the Son, to the dignity for which it was made. It is this light that we undertake this struggle against human trafficking, so that this depth of dignity might be restored to those who have been taken captive, humiliated and rubbished. It is the light of the risen Lord that we wish to shine into this dark corner of our humanity.

The reading we have heard from the Letter to the Hebrews is instructive. This Letter has insisted on the unique and essential place of Jesus in the plan of our salvation. He alone is the priest who constantly offers the sacrifice of his body and blood for us, the one who has entered heaven and is now at the right hand of the Father, pleading incessantly for us.

Today we hear of some of the consequences of this ministry of our one and only High Priest. The text proclaimed that we are 'to keep in mind those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; and those who are badly treated, since they too are in one body.' Each victim of human trafficking is in prison, the prison of modern slavery in which all autonomy is taken from them, in which total control over their

lives is exercised, with cruelty, by those who think they 'own' them, in which all prospects of freedom has vanished, in which they live each day in fear, servitude and enforced poverty.

Their fate is not distant from us. We have to recognise how we too are part of the dynamics of life which lead to their captivity. In one way or another we are parts of the chain of supply and demand that results in their enslavement. We want cheaper goods, illegal or immoral pleasure, cheap services for our bodies or for our cars. We are part of the demand met by modern day slaves, part of the processes by which this slavery is one of the most profitable criminal activities in the world!

Today's Gospel is, for me, one of the most distressing that we hear. It points to the corruption that can enter the human heart and then lead to the corruption of others, even within the same family. Here is a mother, acting out of corrosive anger and jealousy, leading her daughter into the most horrendous of actions: that of carrying in her young hands the freshly decapitated head of John the Baptist. Listening to this today reminds me that more than one third of the victims of human trafficking are children, many of whom are handed over by their families, deceived by the evil of the traffickers and the false hopes they spin in the face of poverty and need.

In the coming days, here in Buenos Aires, we will hold an important conference under the title Latin American Meeting on New Slavery and Human Trafficking "Together against Trafficking in Persons" [**Encuentro Latinoamericano sobre Nuevas Esclavitudes y Trata de Personas "Juntos contra la Trata de Personas"**], promoted by the Santa Marta Group, the Episcopal Conference of Argentina through the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, the Episcopal Commission of Social Pastoral and the National Commission of Justice and Peace, with the Latin American Episcopal Council -CELAM- through its Department of Justice and Solidarity, the Network Clamor and the International Forum of Catholic Action.

This Conference brings together the leaders of the Catholic Church from this part of the world to study how we can better fight against this evil, and to do it in cooperation, members of the Church, civil society organizations, other religious confessions and the State forces in charge of the enforcement of law, Argentinian Federal Police.

I thank His Eminence Cardinal Poli for his invitation to celebrate this Holy Mass, Bishop Oscar Ojea for celebrating together today and contributing to this meeting, all those who are working to make this happen, I thank Commander Roncaglia for his unwavering commitment with this cause for many years and all those who have participated in this celebration. Please pray for the success of this work. Please support it by increasing awareness of the reality of human trafficking in this society. Please, learn the best way to respond when you realize what is happening. Only

together we will overcome this evil. Only together can we heal these wounds in the Body of Christ. Only with his strength and grace, which we receive in this great sacrament, will we have the courage and determination, the fire of the Holy Spirit, to carry out this mission.

I thank you, and I impart the blessing on all of you and your families. Amen.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

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