

## MA CONNEXION...LIIBRE No 1

---

*Dear ones,*

*For a moment, I thought: "My Connection." Bah. I'm tired. It's too much work... » Then I changed my mind: « Why disconnect? I don't make it an obligation. I am free. Quietly, when I feel like it and a subject attract me or an event provokes me, I will continue.*

*And here is my first Connexion...liibre ("Liibre" should be pronounced in the style of Charles de Gaulle!). It works out well, I'm talking to you about a free woman. It's the draft of an article I was asked to write for the Magazine of Quebec Foreign Mission Society.*

### THE LUCKY ONE!

"Come on, Roland, you're telling us stories." Slavery, it no longer exists! " These are the words of a colleague to whom I had just told that I had already clandestinely bought back a slave in Sudan." I'll tell you how it happened. Dinka friends in Khartoum had asked me for a contribution to go and free a young member of their ethnic group, held in a northern village by Arabs who were demanding a ransom. I didn't believe it much, but, after a few consultations with people from the country, I agreed to contribute to their efforts. Mostly -- it was 1992 -- I had just learned that a former Sudanese slave was about to be declared blessed by the Pope. So I made my financial contribution to their expedition, and, rather unbelieving, I nevertheless entrusted this intention to Blessed Bakhita.

It was the beginning of my devotion to the one who became Saint Josephine Bakhita. She was blessed long before the pope's proclamation. It happened somewhere between Darfur and Kordofan, around the 1870s, according to estimates based on wars and raids in Sudan. Among the hundreds of captives of Arab slave traders, a little girl of about six was given the name Bakhita. It was probably in derision. Let's translate: The Lucky One!

Lucky. Because she hadn't been killed. The name will stay with her thru the exhausting marches, the whips, the branding irons, the sales to the highest bidder. Sold three times, her last master, the Italian vice-consul, takes her to Turin where she first works as a nanny, then, legally freed, becomes a Christian and a Canossian nun.

From that moment on, her story can be traced: a simple life as a cook, a

receptionist, a sacristan. The lucky one? Yes. And it's no longer out of mockery because she herself said: "If I met the merchants who enslaved me, I would kiss their hands... they made me meet Christ!"

In 1992, John Paul II proclaimed her as such: fortunate, blessed. She had said: "When I get to heaven, I will tell Saint Peter, I've had enough, you can close the door, I'm staying here!" Well, she didn't keep her word. Indeed, she lends herself to working for the liberation of slaves, all over the world. And the successor of Peter, not only did not close the door, he named her the patron saint of all those who fight against human trafficking. Do you want some examples? I'll take a few from the list of intentions I presented to The Lucky One, I mean to Saint Josephine Bakhita.

In Kenya, my friend, Brother Julias Awino, goes to great lengths to raise awareness among his compatriots, especially young girls, about the danger of lucrative job offers. If they respond to simple anonymous messages on their cellphones: "Do you need work? " (exactly like the ones I receive myself), and one thing leads to another, then they fall into a real trap. In this African country experiencing a deep economic crisis, being offered work, in another city or in another country, the Gulf countries among others, is more than tempting, it's a real opportunity. You are offered a passport, a plane trip, the possibility of earning enough in a few months to build a simple house or start a small business... That's an opportunity you can't miss! It's more subtle than the raid where Bakhita was the "lucky one." Who can resist? So Julias, on behalf of Justice and Peace of the Conference of Religious Men and Women, offers awareness sessions on the dangers of human trafficking to anyone who wants to listen. "It can lead you to forced labor, sexual slavery, the extraction of vital organs," he tells them roughly, presenting them with real-life testimonies, because he has many.

Kenya is far away, but similar situations occur in Canada as well. Oh scandal! A few months ago, Amnesty International denounced Canada as a country that promotes a kind of modern slavery. Indeed, temporary foreign workers come to work in our fields by contract, binding them to a single employer. If they are victims of abuse, they have no other option than to return to their country. "We are slaves tied to one employer," said one of them. Will Bakhita hear their call for help? In any case, CATHII (Committee of Action against Internal and International Human Trafficking) heard it and is pleading on their behalf by offering letters to send to our deputies to denounce this system put in place by our governments.

We are well aware that modern slavery takes many forms and the ways to oppose it are multiple. Julias has his method, CATHII, his own. Both are responding to Pope Francis' invitation during the liturgical feast of Bakhita (February 8, 2025). He proposes to get involved in "the courageous and effective promotion of targeted initiatives aimed at weakening and countering the economic and criminal mechanisms that profit from trafficking and exploitation."



Bakhita died in Schio in 1947, but is still very active. This is what the bronze sculpture by the Canadian, Timothy Schmalz, expresses well. We see Bakhita opening a trapdoor and freeing a hundred people representing the different facets of human trafficking, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, debt bondage, etc. It's as if Schmalz puts the words of Isaiah 58:6 into Bakhita's very mouth: "Let the oppressed go free."

Bakhita, the lucky one? Of course. But lucky also are we having her on our side in the fight against human trafficking!

This is the opportunity to say it: Good luck!

*Roland Laneuville*

Roland Laneuville  
rolandlaneuville@yahoo.com