

I BEAR THE MARKS OF JESUS ON MY BODY

In Saint Paul's letter to the Church at Corinth he recounts some of what he had to endure because of his faith in Jesus Christ. He says: "Five times I received 39 lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. One time I was stoned to the point of death. Three times I was shipwrecked." No one doubts that Paul put everything on the line for the One he loved and in whom he believed. In today's second reading in which Saint Paul writes to the Galatians he says that he will not boast of any of his accomplishments but will boast only in the cross of Jesus Christ. He goes on to say that the world has been crucified to him and him to the world. "I bear the brand marks of Christ in my body, he says."

We call them scars. Paul had a lot of scars. There were literally scars on his body. You cannot receive 195 lashings with whips and not be severely scarred. And he was scarred interiorly. Betrayal. Rejection. Opposition. False accusation. Schemes. Sinister plots. All of that leaves a mark, as we say. One of the world's more recent saints is a woman named Josephine Bakhita. She was originally from the Sudan which is an African country located just south of Egypt. It is the third largest African country. Josephine was born in 1869 to a rather prosperous family in a prosperous African tribe. When she was still a young girl, 7 or 8 years old, she was kidnapped and immediately sold as a slave. In the next ten years or so she would be sold over and over again, at least five times. Along the way she was forced to convert to Islam. One of the people that bought her was a very sadistic person who beat her every day. She would cut Josephine's skin with a razor blade and then pour in salt which was excruciatingly painful and would raise welts that became scars. Her whole body front and back was covered in this way.

She was eventually sold to the Italian Consul to the Sudan and was entrusted into the care of the Cannossian Sisters who treated her with kindness and eventually she was able to be baptized around the age of twenty-one. She entered Religious life with those same sisters a few years later and spent the next 45 years in their community. Her last name, Bakhita, is an Arabic name which means: lucky. The name was at the very least ironic. Now, with all those scars you would think she would have battled depression or been a very bitter person. Instead, she was known for her gentleness, her calm demeanor and her beaming smile. She died the year I was born, 1947. She was declared venerable in 1959, blessed in 1988 and a saint in the years 2000. She was canonized by Saint John Paul II. When asked about her scars she would simply respond: "May my scars serve Him." Or when asked about her own poor health and what she wanted others to do for her, she would say: "As the Master desires."

I sat with that little expression for a bit and thought to myself, “I wonder if I could actually see my way clear to say the same thing—and truly mean it. “As the Master desires.” My friends, we all have our scars too. Maybe they are not as severe as those of a Saint Paul or a Saint Josephine but they are real nevertheless. And they matter. They matter to the Lord because they matter to us. They are indications to Him that we did strive, that we made our efforts to be faithful and true. They speak to Him of those many times when He sent us out like He sent out the 72 disciples in today’s gospel. A lot of times we are like sheep in the midst of wolves with little to protect us from the forces we encounter on a daily basis.

My friends, the Lord does not so much need our effort as He desires our effort. It is the way we turn our heart over to Him on a daily basis. The Lord knows that we get beaten up by life a lot of times. The Lord knows our sacrifices and the times we do the right and good thing and others never know of it. But He knows of it. He knows our scars—inner and outer. On our bodies and on our souls. In his kingdom those same scars will be transformed into great badges of honor for all to see. They will be signs of our faithfulness and our love especially where no one knew. Christ shares with us the power that enabled Him to endure the blows he received and that enable us to bear the blows that come our way—in relationships, in broken promises, in failed marriages, in wayward children, in lost souls, in intransigent friends, in our own sinful missteps that take us down paths that are not in any way good for us or helpful to us. He knows all that and loves us anyway. His love is a balm for our scars, the brand marks that we bear in our bodies and souls. Those scars do not come from God. God does not injure us or beat us up or send us suffering. God is the one who desires to save us from all of that. But God’s own Son endured all of that so that we would know that God knows—and loves—and cares. Let us turn to our Eucharistic Lord in gratitude.