

A Justice that Restores

Liturgy of Bakhita (Schio, Italy)

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Our society is slowly learning to see life from the side of the victims. This certainly includes within our Church as well as in our world. Whether they are survivors of abuse, people discriminated against because of race, or the masses of humanity who are poor because of the luxuries of a few, this change of perspective has not come easily. Those with power, position, or protection, as well as those of us with privilege, have had a hard time making this shift. Thankfully, we are well on our way.

Howard Zehr, the founder of the restorative justice movement, has been a catalyst in helping society make this shift in a healthy way. His work is so inviting because he both centers the victims and also does not allow the victims to fall into a mindset of seeking revenge. He believes that our current justice systems are not victim focused and do foster revenge. Our systems ask:

1. What laws have been broken?
2. Who did it?
3. What do they deserve?

While still holding offenders accountable for the actions, Zehr proposes three alternative questions:

1. Who has been harmed?

2. What are their needs?
3. Whose obligations are these?

These questions may sound 'soft on crime,' but they are truly restorative for victims, for offenders, and for the community as a whole.

Today, we gather at the Sanctuary of St. Josephine Bakhita. She was a victim of significant emotional and physical abuse. Like Jesus, who was also a victim of this abuse, however, Bakhita sought a victimhood that restores. Even though she would not have known about the restorative justice movement today, she knew these three important points about it.

1. God comes to the aid of the victims.

Scripture is full of God coming to the aid of the poor, forgotten, and broken hearted. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah today references the pivotal story of how God ransomed and rescued the people of God who were sold into slavery in Egypt. God is the one who redressed them in new lovely garments and loosened the bonds that held them back from liberation.

Upon witnessing the abduction of her sister into slavery as a young child, Bakhita later recalled, "I can recall vividly how bitterly my mother cried and how we all cried too. (3) God is with those who cry and certainly came to the aid of their family.

2. Victims are not powerless.

This is where some victim movements go wrong. From the victim's side, some become trapped in the 'victim mentality.' They do not see themselves reclaiming their power or moving from victim to survivor. Furthermore, whenever we pity victims or think we are being helpful when we make decisions for them, we are taking away their power.

Bakhita knew she was not powerless. She did not remain passive. She faced the truth of what happened to her and she moved forward. She later recalled, "the scars are still evident on my body. I can really say that it was by a miracle of God that I did not die, for He had destined me for better things." (9) She had to get on with what God wanted her to do with her life. She still had soul. No one could take that away from her.

3. Offenders are still human beings in need of healing.

This is perhaps the definitive step for a Christian. In the Gospel, Jesus gave us the most challenging teaching about being a Christian. It wasn't about all the controversial issues we think are so important. It was this: 'love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.' While victims may not be ready for this right away, this is the only way to full healing for all of us. In loving our enemies, we see our common humanity. Bakhita famously said, "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.” (9)

At St. Josephine Bakhita Parish & School, we define our third guiding principle of liberation as desiring that both oppressed and oppressor be set free. In restorative justice, the victim becomes the starting point not only for their own healing, but also for the healing of of their offenders and even the entire community.

During our day in Schio, I encourage each of us to spend some time reflecting on any of the ways we have been a victim in life, especially if we are still seeking revenge. Bring it to God and ask Bakhita to be there with you. Through her help, let this be the day where you take a step forward on your journey of healing.

As we continue with this mass, let today be the day when you know God has heard your cries, that you know you are not powerless, and that you, like Jesus and Bakhita, become the source of healing for yourselves, your offenders, and the whole world.