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5<sup>th</sup> February 2023, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Dear Parishioner,

Page 24 of the Irish Catholic newspaper (26.1.2023) has a large heading – World News. About one quarter of the page has an article and a photograph of a man, Adam Smith-Connor, standing and praying. The heading above the article is **‘Second person ensnared by UK ban on prayer outside abortion clinics’**. The article says, Mr Smith-Connor had approached an abortion facility in Bournemouth, in south-west England. He intended to pray for his unborn son, who had died in an abortion he helped procure at a similar facility more than two decades ago. He stood silently with his back to the clinic to respect the privacy of staff and visitors, according to Alliance Defending Freedom UK. Safety officers asked him what he was doing and he replied: **“Praying for my son, who is deceased”**. His November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, encounter with the officers was recorded on his phone. “I’m sorry for your loss” one officer replied, “but I have to go along with the guidelines of the Public Space Protection Order, to say that we believe you are in breach of clause 4a, which says about prayer, and also acts of disapproval.....” “I am just standing praying” Mr. Smith-O’Connor said. **“I do understand that but the protection order is in place for a reason and we have to follow through on those regulations”**, the officer replied.

The Pro-Life Movement’s Newsletter of 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2022 has a number of items related to protest etc. One article has the heading ‘HSE fails to provide a shred of evidence that pro-life protests involve harassment’. The article says, *‘For the past three years, pro-abortion members of the Oireachtas have been making wild and unfounded claims that pro-life volunteers are consistently engaging in an abusive and harassing behaviour outside abortion facilities. **The claims are made on an almost weekly basis and are amplified by the media coverage each new story receives.....**’* Later, in the article, we read, *‘On close inspection of a list of 21 events that had taken place since January 2019, in the vicinity of abortion centres, produced by the HSE, there is not a shred of evidence that the events listed were abusive or harassing in any way.’* The writer of the article states, *‘The goal of certain politicians is to get legislation passed that singles out pro-life volunteers and criminalises them and facts are not going to be allowed stand in the way.’*

(Fr. Denis O’Mahony)

As the Master Desires (Intercom February 2023)

Madre Moretta - Patron Saint of Human Trafficking Survivors

International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking – 8<sup>th</sup> February marks the feastday of Josephine Margaret Bakhita, FDCC (ca.1869-8<sup>th</sup> February 1947), a Sudanese-Italian Canossian religious sister, who lived in Italy for 45 years, after having been a slave in Sudan. In 2000, she was declared a saint, the first black woman to receive the honour in the modern era. She was born around 1869 in Darfur (now in western Sudan) in the village of Olgossa, west of Nyala and close to Mount Agilerei. She was one of the Daju people; her respected and reasonably prosperous father was brother of the village chief. She was surrounded by a loving family of three brothers and three sisters, as she says in her autobiography: *‘I lived a very happy and carefree life, without knowing what suffering was.’* When she was 7-8 years old, she was seized by an Arab slave trader, who had abducted her elder sister two years earlier. She was forced to walk barefoot about 960 kilometres (600 Miles) to El-Obeid and was sold and bought twice before she arrived there. Over the course of twelve years (1877-1899) she was sold three more times and then she was finally given her freedom. **She once said that the most terrifying of all her memories there was, when she (along with other slaves) was marked by a process resembling both scarification and tattooing, which was a traditional practice throughout Sudan.** As her mistress was watching her with a whip in her hand, a dish of white flour, a dish of salt and a razor were brought by a woman. She used the flour to draw patterns on her skin and then she cut deeply along the lines before filling the wounds with salt to ensure permanent scarring. A total of 114 intricate patterns were cut into her breasts, belly and right arm.

On 29<sup>th</sup> November 1889, an Italian court ruled that because the British had outlawed slavery in Sudan before Bakhita’s birth and because Italian law had never recognised slavery as legal, Bakhita had never legally been a slave. For the first time in her life, Bakhita found herself in control of her own destiny. On 9<sup>th</sup> January 1890, Bakhita was baptised with the names of **‘Josephine Margaret’** and **‘Fortunata’** (the Latin translation of the Arabic Bakhita). On the same day, she was also confirmed and received Holy Communion from Archbishop Giuseppe Sarto, the Cardinal Patriarch of Venice and later Pope Pius X. On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1893, Josephine Bakhita entered the novitiate of the Canossian Sisters and on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1896, she took her vows,

welcomed by Cardinal Sarto. In 1902, she was assigned to the Canossian convent at Schio, in the northern Italian province of Vicenza, where she spent the rest of her life. Her only extended time away was between 1935 and 1939, when she stayed at the Missionary Novitiate in Vimercate (Milan); mostly visiting other Canossian communities in Italy, talking about her experiences and helping to prepare young sisters for work in Africa. A strong missionary drive animated her throughout her entire life –**‘her mind was always on God, and her heart in Africa’**.

During her 42 years in Schio, Bakhita was employed as a cook, sacristan and portress (doorkeeper) and was in frequent contact with the local community. Her gentleness, calming voice, and ever-present smile became well known and Vicenzans still refer to her as Sor Moretta (‘little brown sister’) or Madre Moretta (‘black mother’). Her special charisma and reputation for sanctity were noticed by her order, the first publication of her story (Storia Meravigliosa by Ida Zanolini) in 1931, made her famous throughout Italy. During the second World War (1939-1945) she shared the fears and hopes of the townspeople, who considered her a saint and felt protected in her presence. Bombs did not spare Schio, but the war passed without a single casualty. Her last years were marked by pain and sickness. **She used a wheelchair but she retained her cheerfulness, and if asked how she was, she would always smile and answer: ‘As the Mater desires.’** In the extremity of her last hours, her mind was driven back to her youth in slavery and she cried out: ‘The chains are too tight, loosen them a little please!’ she died at 8.10 p.m. on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1947. For three days, her body lay in repose while thousands of people arrived to pay their respects. Her remains were translated to the Church of the Holy Family of the Canossian convent of Schio in 1869.

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1978, Pope John Paul II declared Josephine Venerable, the first step towards canonisation. On 17<sup>th</sup> May 1992, she was declared Blessed and given 8<sup>th</sup> February as her feastday. On 1<sup>st</sup> October 2000, she was canonised as Saint Josephine Bakhita. She is venerated as a modern African saint, and as a statement against the brutal history of slavery. She has been adopted as the patron saint of modern Sudan and human trafficking survivors. Caritas Bakhita House in London, which provides accommodation and support for women escaping human trafficking, is named in her honour. Josephine is the patron saint of Sudan, South Sudan and human trafficking survivors.

### Points to Ponder (Intercom February 2023)

In this Sunday’s Gospel passage, immediately after the Beatitudes, Jesus says to his disciples: *‘You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world’* (Mt 5:13-14). Who were these disciples? They were fishermen, simple people... but Jesus sees them with God’s eyes, and his assertion can be understood precisely as a result of the Beatitudes. He wishes to say: if you are poor in spirit, if you are meek, if you are pure of heart, if you are merciful... you will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world!

**We who are baptised Christians are missionary disciples and we are called to become a living Gospel in the world: with a holy life we will ‘flavour’ different environments and defend them from decay, as salt does; and we will carry the light of Christ through the witness of genuine charity.** The Christian should be a luminous person; one who brings light, who always gives off light! A light that is not his, but a gift from God, a gift from Jesus. We carry this light. If a Christian extinguishes this light, his life has no meaning: he is a Christian by name only, who does not carry light; his life has no meaning. I would like to ask you now, how do you want to live?

As a lamp that is burning or one that is not? Burning or not? How would you like to live? It is truly God who gives us this light and we must give it to others. Shining lamps! This is the Christian vocation.

### Seeing your Life through the Lens of the Gospel.

1. Jesus uses the image of salt as something that makes food tasty. Without salt food can be tasteless. Who are the people who give zest to your life and make it enjoyable? For whom have you done this? When have you been particularly aware of your potential in this regard?
2. The second image is that of light. Who have been the people who have been a light for you, particularly in moments of darkness? For whom have you been a light? Recall these experiences and give thanks.
3. The images of salt and light can also be applied to communities to which we belong, a family, a parish, or other group. Thinking of the groups of which you are a member, how can their potential be enhanced to enrich the lives of members and offer them a guiding light? How can you make a contribution to this? **(John Byrne, Intercom February 2023)**