

Let the Oppressed Go Free

Bringing awareness to the crisis of human trafficking through art

BY JOHAN VAN PARYS, PHD





Let the Oppressed Go Free Blessing, April 21, 2024.



On Good Friday, 2024, *Let the Oppressed Go Free*, a sculpture by world-renowned Canadian sculptor Timothy Schmalz, was installed on the plaza in front of The Basilica of Saint Mary. This was the second large-scale sculpture by Schmalz The Basilica has hosted. In 2021 his famous *Angels Unawares* sculpture graced the Basilica Plaza.

After commissioning *Angels Unawares*, which draws attention to the plight of immigrants throughout the ages, Cardinal Czerny, who is The Vatican’s Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, commissioned *Let the Oppressed Go Free*. He asked that the new sculpture draw attention to the evil of human trafficking.

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?”

— *Isaiah 58:6*

It took Schmalz about one year to create the original sculpture out of clay. From that, he made a rubber mold which was sent to a foundry to be cast in bronze. The nearly life-sized bronze sculpture is 22.5' long, 4' wide, and 8' tall and weighs 5 tons.

The first cast of *Let the Oppressed Go Free* was installed in 2023, in the Italian city of Schio, near Venice where Saint Josephine Bakhita lived and is now buried. The sculpture The Basilica of Saint Mary hosted is the second and last cast.

After traveling the country for about a year it will be permanently installed on the campus of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., where it will join the second cast of *Angels Unawares*. As you will remember, the first cast of *Angels Unawares* is installed in St. Peter’s Square. It is the only sculpture added to the square since Bernini finished it in 1667.

Let the Oppressed Go Free is inspired by the 58th Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah in which God explains the true meaning of fasting, saying: “Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke. Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58: 6-7)

The one clearly identifiable figure in the sculpture is Saint Josephine Bakhita. Saint Josephine was born in Sudan at the end of the 19th century. At a young age she was abducted from her village and was sold into slavery. After having been maltreated by different slave owners she ended up in the household of an Italian diplomat who took her to Italy. Since Italy did not

Continued

recognize slavery, Saint Josephine was declared a free woman.

She converted to Christianity and became a Canossian sister. She was the cook and doorkeeper at the Canossian Convent in Schio for 42 years. She is said to have been gentle and charismatic, and the villagers saw her as their protector, especially during World War II.

After Saint Josephine Bakhita was canonized on October 1, 2000, she became the patroness of people who are experiencing modern day enslavement. That is why she is depicted in *Let the Oppressed Go Free* as opening a trapdoor, freeing figures that represent victims of all kinds of human trafficking.

While describing his inspiration for the sculpture, Schmalz referenced the famous folktale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. He explained that “when the piper wasn’t paid for removing the rats, he played another tune, and the ground opened up, and the children of the town got sucked into the underground.”

Schmalz holds that this poignantly describes our modern-day plague—human trafficking—which is sucking children and adults underground. The sculpture shows victims of human trafficking finally released from that underground by Saint Josephine Bakhita.

Let the Oppressed Go Free depicts almost a hundred figures representing the different faces of human trafficking including sex exploitation, organ trafficking, forced labor, debt bondage, child brides, child soldiers, and more.



Men, women, and children, including an infant, are shown to demonstrate the wide range of victims. Some of the figures in the sculpture would never be recognized as victims of human trafficking. They look like the people next door, and their plight often goes unnoticed.

Others never come into daylight such as slave laborers who are not allowed to leave the place where they work.

There is a little girl wearing a veil and a crown of flowers representing the girls and young women who are pressed into child marriages.

Some of the women in the sculpture are branded with barcodes or tattooed with dollar signs. One of the woman is holding money in her hand. This emphasizes the unmistakable connection between human trafficking and money. One woman has a dollar sign set in a crown referencing the nefarious power of money.

A child soldier is shown with his gun. An older man is resting, a scar shows the place where an organ was forcibly removed from his body. Another man represents those who are forced to work in mines.

The power of this sculpture was confirmed for Schmalz when he read the message released by Pope Francis on February 8, 2023, to mark the World Day of Prayer and Reflection against Human Trafficking.

Pope Francis said, “Human trafficking disfigures dignity. Exploitation and subjugation limit freedom and turn people into objects to use and discard.”

What specifically struck Schmalz relative to the sculpture was when Pope

Francis remarked that human trafficking “will always exist if kept underground.” Schmalz recalls looking at his sculpture and thinking, “these words of Pope Francis are expressed in bronze with the hero being Saint Josephine Bakhita.”



Sculpture Installation, March 29, 2024

Schmalz loves to work in bronze as it is a permanent material which takes up space and, in this case, makes visible what is, 99% of the time, invisible within our society.

One of the evil reasons human trafficking works is that it thrives on being unseen. This sculpture makes us face the reality of human trafficking that exists all around us.

The figures and especially the faces are very expressive. As they are liberated by Saint Josephine Bakhita, you can see them crawling, their faces grimacing in pain and frustration, struggling to get freed from slavery. The further they get away from their entrapment, the happier and joy filled they are, having regained freedom.

Let the Oppressed Go Free was on display at The Basilica of Saint Mary through the end of June 2024. From here it traveled to Indianapolis where it was featured during the tenth National Eucharistic Congress. At the end of August it was moved to The Catholic University of America where it will be permanently installed. ✚

Johan M.J. van Parys, Ph.D., has been The Basilica’s director of liturgy and sacred arts since 1995.