

# African saint turns death-row inmate's life upside down

PORTLAND, Ore. – From a windowless cell at the Oregon State Penitentiary, a Catholic death-row inmate evangelizes across the world.

A former white supremacist, Jeff Tiner is now inspired by a humble African saint. He resists publicity for himself, saying he wants only to spread far and wide the story of St. Josephine Bakhita. He uses most of this time and resources to support the Canossian Sisters, the religious community St. Bakhita joined more than a century ago.

At one time, Tiner had other priorities. In 1993 in Springfield, Ore., according to court records, he shot a man and disposed of his body in a remote area of the Cascade Range. He had been in trouble with the law before and bore tattoos of a swastika and the words “White Pride.”

Years after being convicted, Tiner was sitting despondent in his cell when a letter appeared under his door. The writer, calling herself his “Swiss Mum,” informed him that Jesus, Mary and Josephine Bakhita loved him.

Huh?

Tiner tried to throw the letter into the waste bag, but it fell short. He bent over to grab it for another try and it felt as if the letter jumped into his hand. He placed it on his desk and returned to other projects. But the letter nagged him.

Tiner wrote back to the stranger, telling her that he did not know he was Swiss and inquiring about this Bakhita woman.

As time went by, he received more letters and pamphlets about the Sudanese saint from his Swiss friend, a lay member of the Canossian order.

Born to an important family in the Darfur region in 1869, Bakhita was kidnapped at age 6 by Arab slave traders. Treated brutally, she was sold and resold five times,

falling at one point into the hands of an Ottoman army officer who marked her as his with scars and tattoos.

Sold to an Italian diplomat when she was still a teen, she met the Canossian Sisters, an Italian order founded in 1808, in Venice. Bakhita sought baptism in 1890. A court later found that Italian law did not recognize slavery and so she was freed.

She professed vows with the Canossian Sisters in 1896 and became known for her gentle spirit and holiness. She died in 1947 and was canonized in 2000.

After reading about St. Bakhita's life, the condemned man felt hope.

"I came to understand that I, too, could come back to life, spiritually," he wrote in a 2006 article for the Canossian Sisters' magazine. "I could be rescued from slavery to sin and find redemption and joy in the arms of Jesus and Mary."

He felt St. Bakhita leading him down a path toward Jesus, he said, declaring, "I am no longer waiting to die. I am alive in Christ Jesus."

Tiner was baptized in 2005. Because prison officials refused to allow him into the main chapel, the chaplain asked two guards to fill a large laundry tub with water and wheel it to death row.

"There, in shackles and handcuffs, I was baptized in the water that flowed from the side of Christ, made new in the Holy Spirit," Tiner recalled in a letter to Auxiliary Bishop Kenneth Steiner of Portland.

The summer after Tiner's baptism, Portland Archbishop John G. Vlazny came to the prison to confirm him and four other prisoners.

With the help of Deacon Allen Vandecoevering and St. Edward Parish in Keizer, Tiner started the Bakhita Project to help the Canossian Sisters.

The women, who wear simple gray habits, have worked in Sudan since 1996, teaching children who are refugees from the long warfare there. They also provide food and health care for families. Through the Bakhita Project, Tiner and his associates have so far helped build classrooms at St. Francis School in Khartoum,

paid for a brick school and women's center in a desert refugee camp, and provided food and supplies for several thousand children attending school in tents.

The project is also seeking to raise \$45,000 to pay for a new bus to transport students in the desert where temperatures can reach 130 degrees.

The Swiss lay Canossian and several Canossian Sisters who work in Rome have been sacramental sponsors for Tiner on his faith trek.

"I consider myself very fortunate in being one of Jeffrey's pen friends because of his most edifying spiritual life," writes Canossian Sister Velia De Giusto. "He shows an unquenched thirst for becoming more Christ-like."

One nun in Singapore, moved by Tiner's writings, refers to him as a "lay Canossian brother."

"Has anyone ever done so much and from behind prison bars?" Sister Mary Siluvainathan wrote in her order's magazine.

Editor's Note: More information is available on the Web site [www.sainteds.com](http://www.sainteds.com), by clicking on "The Bakhita Project" in "featured pages." Donations may be sent to: The Bakhita Project/St. Edward Church, 5303 River Road North, Keizer, OR 97303.