

Father Augustus Tolton **1854 - 1897**

“The Catholic Church deplores double slavery – that of the mind and that of the body. She endeavors to free us of both. I was a poor slave boy but the priests of the Church did not disdain me. It was through the influence of one of them that I became what I am tonight.”

Father Augustus Tolton, from a speech given at the First Black Catholic Congress, 1889 at Washington DC

Father Augustus Tolton carries the reputation of being the first identified priest of African descent in the United States by reason of his mother and father being direct descendants of Africans who were brought here as slaves. Tolton’s ordination was taken simultaneously as an anomaly and a news sensation in 19th century America. An ordination of a Negro was generally thought to be unimaginable. Others took it as an extraordinary achievement. A priest of black skin vested in the priestly vestments was a novel sight for American eyes, white or black, and equally an exhilarating experience for black Catholics to receive Holy Communion from a priest of their own race. Tolton was viewed as an eloquent and religious man, an innocent soul, given admiration and respect on the one hand, and on the other hand, contempt and scorn arising from the climate of racial separation ordered for that time.

His story begins with his mother escaping slavery in Brush Creek, Missouri with her three children at night dodging Confederate bounty hunters who were rewarded financially for their capture of runaway slaves. Her husband, Peter Tolton, had left the family earlier to fight with Union forces for black freedom in the nation’s Civil War in 1861 but died in a St. Louis hospital of dysentery. Martha Jane Tolton made it across the Mississippi River to Hannibal, Missouri and then on to safety at Quincy, Illinois that harbored a station of the secret Underground Railroad. There, she settled with her family. The Toltons, having been baptized Catholic by order of the Elliott family who owned them back in Missouri, attended several churches in Quincy while Martha Tolton attempted to educate her children. But at every school attended, Augustus met with askance looks and threats from fellow pupils and parents of the pupils. He was expelled or removed successively from several schools till one Father Peter McGirr had compassion on the family and took them in to St. Peter Parish and School in Quincy where Augustus made his first Holy Communion and Confirmation.

As Augustus grew in his youth, he worked several jobs to help support the family. In between, several priests of Quincy, along with the Notre Dame Sisters, noticed his giftedness and innocence. They tutored him in the catechism, the classics and in languages. The Franciscan Fathers, later on, arranged for him to go to Quincy College. Through it all, Augustus was subjected to subtle insults and derisive remarks because of his race. But with the help of priests who befriended him and the sisters he was able to endure the unjust treatment without retaliating, but not without tears. Father McGirr and the sisters stood firm in maintaining the right of blacks to a Catholic education. Augustus excelled in school ranking in the top percentile of his class. He was also a daily communicant and helped with the religious education of the town’s Negro children.

Impressed by Augustus’ intelligence and piety, several priests tried to get Augustus into a seminary but that proved impossible. After a number of attempts applying to diocesan and religious seminaries for which no response was received from some or a polite decline was delivered from others indicating the seminary was not ready to take in a Negro student, the Franciscan Fathers through their Minister General managed, after months and months of waiting, to get Augustus accepted into the college operated by the Propaganda Fide in Rome which trained seminarians to be missionaries anywhere in the world. There, Augustus met other African seminarians and seminarians from all over the world anxious to serve the church as priests some day. At the age of 26, Augustus traveled to Rome to pursue studies toward the priesthood in 1880. Six years later, April 24, 1886, he was ordained a priest at St John Lateran Basilica in Rome.

Those who guided him in the seminary felt he could not be a success in the United States given the climate of race relations and the anti-Catholicism prevalent at that time. Thinking he would be sent to Africa, the Cardinal prefect Giovanni Simeoni, surprised Tolton by insisting that he return to the United States. *“America has been*

called the most enlightened nation; we will see if it deserves that honor. If America has never seen a black priest, it has to see one now” said the Cardinal.

Tolton was indeed the first and would carry the cross of that fact throughout his priesthood. On July 18, 1886, Father Tolton arrived in Quincy and celebrated his first mass before a large crowd of whites and blacks at Quincy’s St. Boniface Church. He was assigned the next day to pastor St. Joseph Church, a small poor black parish in the same city. The parish had grown out of the catechism classes that he had started earlier. Whites sought him out for counsel and attended his masses attracted as they were to his sermons and his goodness. In time this aroused the jealousy of fellow priests in the community and even certain Protestant clergyman who feared Tolton was making “inroads” and otherwise spreading “Romanism.”.

Father Augustus was reprimanded in light of these suspicions by the local priest-Dean of the clergy, an issue eventually the Dean took to the bishop for resolution. Derogatory remarks were made about Father Tolton around town as some people saw him attempting to create a situation of an unacceptable mingling of the races, which was not the case at all. Actually, most whites came voluntarily to Tolton for mass and the sacraments.

Father Tolton grew accustomed to adversity during his short life. Apart from many speaking engagements, even to white audiences, he lived in an enclosed world mired in poverty and neglect, a separate world where blacks were condemned to live. At the same time as a priest he was wedged between two communities, one white and one black and the disparate emotions between those two communities. It was an era that struggled to process the dignity of black skin.

Slaves and former slaves of the 19th century were allowed only a haphazard participation in American life. There were no laws that would guarantee their movement in society without harassment. Civil Rights were not yet coined in the popular social consciousness. Any rights at all were conceived to be the privilege of white persons in America alone. Much of this apartheid was co-opted in praxis but not in theory, unfortunately, by the various churches, Catholic and Protestant.

Tolton’ priesthood was hampered by isolation and economic hardship. His letters to Mother Katherine Drexel betray much of this pathos in a socially intolerant era. It proved to be enormous pressure that may well have taken its toll on him physically and emotionally. Through it all Father Tolton remained steadfast to his priestly vows and remained a symbol of fidelity, priestly dignity and constancy in midst of suffering. Having stood impiously alone for so many years and having scattered the seeds of truth about his race he sought to explain that the Catholic Church had the means and resources to improve the poor lot of blacks in America during the period of Reconstruction. Tolton also sought to impress upon the black community a sense of hope and belief in themselves through education and a practiced faith.

I shall work and pull at it as long as God gives me life for I am beginning to see that I have powers and principalities to resist anywhere and everywhere I go.

Father Tolton’s Letter to Mother Katherine Drexel, June 5, 1891

Feeling his work was severely curtailed in Quincy, he decided to accept, with permission of his superiors at the Propaganda Fide in Rome, an invitation from Archbishop Patrick Feehan of Chicago to come work with the fledgling community of black Catholics, in 1889. On Chicago’s south side, Father Tolton started in the basement of downtown St. Mary’s Church picking up a ministry among blacks begun by Father Joseph Rowles under the title of St. Augustine. There was the push for a church for black Catholics that Father Tolton oversaw the construction of at 36th & Dearborn Streets with donations from sympathetic whites. The Church with starts and stops in its construction was given the title of St. Monica. But the Church never succeeded beyond completion of its basement where the community worshipped along with a temporary roof.

Father Gus, as he was called affectionately, was a familiar figure in the streets and alleys of the black ghetto. He brought hope and comfort to the dying and promises of better days to the living. Father Tolton was well accepted in Chicago by the priests and people, nevertheless, he was alone in shaping some semblance of a Catholic community in the poverty laden terrain of the south side slums. Unfortunately, his ministry would be relatively short lived.

During the first week of July, 1897, Chicago was hit by a heat-wave where a number of people lost their lives overcome by the sustained heat of days. Newspapers were listing on a daily basis the names of the dead. Returning from a priests' retreat in Bourbonnais, Illinois, on July 9th, Father Tolton got off the train to 105 degree heat that was scorching the city. According to the Chicago Daily News, "*the Reverend August Tolton, pastor of St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church, 36th & Dearborn Streets, died at Mercy Hospital at 8.30pm, a victim of heatstroke.* He was about to make several sick calls in his parish before noon. He was 43 years of age.

Newspapers recounted thousands of people paid tribute to the deceased priest, along with his mother and sister, both at St. Monica's where he lay in state, and at Quincy, where, at his own earlier request he wanted to be buried. An imposing cruciform tombstone, years later, was erected over his grave at St. Peter Cemetery.

Father Augustus Tolton proved what the human spirit can accomplish despite insurmountable odds, in this instance, the evil of racism and discrimination. Father Tolton demonstrated that blacks could be dedicated adherents as well as ministers of the Lord, that the black Catholic community has much to offer the Church if they are recognized and are given the opportunities to use their talents and abilities. It remains the task of the Church now to raise up his holiness for the edification of the Church.

Ministry to blacks continued on at St. Monica Church until 1945 when the still unfinished church was razed. The parish was merged with St. Elizabeth Church where Mother Katherine Drexel's Blessed Sacrament sisters continued to carry on the ministry of education at the parish school.

June 12, 1870	Tolton's First Communion & Confirmation at St. Peter Church, Quincy
February 21, 1880	Tolton leaves for Rome
November 8, 1885	Tolton ordained Deacon, Rome
April 24, 1886	Tolton ordained Priest, St. John Lateran Basilica, Rome
April 25, 1886	First Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, Rome
July 7, 1886	First Mass with Franciscan Sisters, Hoboken, New Jersey
July 18, 1886	First Mass at St. Boniface Church, Quincy
July 25, 1886	Appointed pastor of St. Joseph Church, Quincy
December 19, 1889	Began ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago
July 9, 1897	Died at Mercy Hospital, Chicago
July 12, 1897	Funeral at St. Monica Church, 36 th Dearborn St., Chicago
July 13, 1897	Funeral at St. Peter Church, Quincy

Prayer for the Cause of Father Augustus Tolton

O God, we give you thanks for your servant and priest, Father Augustus Tolton, who labored among us in times of contradiction, times that were both beautiful and paradoxical. His ministry helped lay the foundation for a truly Catholic gathering in faith in our time. We stand in the shadow of his ministry. May his life continue to inspire us and imbue us with that confidence and hope that will forge a new evangelization for the Church we love.

Father in heaven, Father Tolton's suffering service sheds light upon our sorrows; we see them through the prism of your Son's passion and death. If it be your will, O God, glorify your servant, Father Tolton, by granting the favor I now ask through his intercession, (*mention your request*), so that all may know the goodness of this priest whose memory looms large in the Church he loved.

Complete what you have begun in us that we might work for the fulfillment of your kingdom. Not to us the glory, but glory to you O God, through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are God, living and reigning forever and ever. Amen

Bishop Joseph N. Perry
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Archdiocese of Chicago
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To report any spiritual or physical favors granted through prayer in Father Augustus Tolton's name, please write: The Office of the Cardinal, 835 N. Rush Street, Chicago, Illinois 60611

The Archdiocese of Chicago