

Father Augustus Tolton

By Sarah Jordan

First place winner of the Gulf Coast District's Father Tolton essay competition



Who is a saint? A saint is a person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or likeness or closeness to God. The term also preserves its original Christian meaning as any believer who is “in Christ” and “in whom Christ dwells, whether in Heaven or on Earth.” Father Augustus Tolton is such a man, for in the face of rejection and struggles he maintained his closeness to God.

Augustus Tolton's commitment was to ensure that everyone knew, “The Church was the True Liberator.” His belief in God and the Catholic Church drove him to dedicate his life to carry out this mission.

Father Tolton certainly did not live a life of ease and comfort. He endured struggles and persevered to accomplish his journey to sainthood. From the journey of his childhood, through the journey

of becoming a priest, to his mission as a priest, he endured the struggles of being a black person. His journey can only be compared to that of a Christ-like person, or maybe a Saint!

Father Tolton's life began in slavery on April 1, 1854 in Brush Creek, Missouri, where his mother worked on the Elliot plantation. She was a baptized Catholic, and thus he was baptized about two months after his birth. Father Tolton was fortunate to receive classes in the Catholic faith, thus began his journey in the faith. The struggles of slavery caused his family to run away to Quincy, Illinois, a free state. He worked to help his mother while taking classes because he could not read or write. He endured humiliation as he was put into classes with younger students because of his inability. He was even taunted by the white students.

He endured the belittlement, and received his First Communion and Confirmation on June 12, 1870. The priest in charge saw Father Tolton as good, humble, and devoted to the faith. He also recognized that a vocation to the priesthood was in his future. His priestly learning began in Missouri under Father Patrick Dolan, where he was tutored at the risk of being captured and hanged. He was also guided by several priests of Quincy who prepared him for the seminary (references throughout this essay are from Duriga, Joyce. *Augustus Tolton The Church Is The True Liberator*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018.)

His biggest challenge was finding a seminary that would accept him, but was finally accepted at the Urban College in Rome. While there he formulated his lifelong conviction that the Catholic Church is the true liberator of black Americans (Duriga). Also, his time in Rome gave him a hiatus from the racism in America.

His return to America was not without controversy, he wanted to go to Africa to minister, but was sent to America instead. According to Duriga, the college officials doubted he would be successful, given the country's racial prejudices. But someone had to be the first black priest and Cardinal Simeoni decided it would be Tolton. This, to me, is his first step to sainthood. He took the Mission faithfully.

Father Tolton returned home to an extremely warm welcome on July 17, 1886. His first Mass in Quincy at St. Boniface Church was said to be, “The grandest service ever held in Quincy,” according to the Quincy Daily Journal of July 19, 1886. He was welcomed by many denominations, and both blacks and whites. The people were drawn to him because of his simplicity and genuine love, qualities that come from a Christ-like person.

Integration came naturally to him but was met with much opposition because the white priest, Father Weis, was angered over the amount of whites who worshiped at Father Tolton's church – St. Joseph in Quincy. He wrote to the Propaganda Fide numerous times asking to go to Chicago. Even in this struggle with his own Catholic priest counterparts he never lost faith or even thought of leaving the Catholic faith. He endured and was granted permission to leave for Chicago in 1889. “Father Tolton maintained his history

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of humility and kindness and did not reveal the real motivation for his departure to Chicago” (Duriga). His love for people and not wanting them to waver was shown in this gesture.

Father Tolton held true to his belief that the Catholic Church is the only true liberator of black Americans when he addressed the third Black Congress, held in Cincinnati. He spoke about being taught by the priest who did not disdain him, and it was through the influence of one of them that he became a priest (Duriga).

Many challenges met Father Tolton when he arrived in Chicago. He had the challenge of ministering in the basement of St. Mary’s, where that congregation needed their space. He overcame the challenge of finding his own church when he opened a storefront church, which he called St. Monica Chapel, after the mother of St. Augustine, but not before his challenge of finding a place to live and then a rectory. He had to overcome the challenge that other priests did not understand that he had to minister to his parishioners before going to make speeches at their church. He had to overcome the challenge of finding money to build a church. At one point he addressed his need to Katharine Drexel who was a philanthropist and was working on becoming a nun. She, in her good works, did help him, but also opened schools for Blacks and Native Indians (Duriga).

Even though St. Monica’s church – the church Father Tolton built – is not standing today, Father Tolton was able to bring hope to Catholics. He believed in the Church and had profound faith in the Church, despite all the shortcomings of his fellow priests.

Sainthood should come to Father Tolton because he took his mission seriously and gave his life to accomplish his conviction that the Church is the True Liberator.

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Servant of God Augustus Tolton now honored as ‘Venerable’

>> Pope Francis has advanced the sainthood cause for Father August Tolton, the first African-American diocesan priest in the United States, and founder of the first black Catholic parish in Chicago. He is now allowed to be referred to as the Venerable Augustus Tolton. Father Tolton was one of eight people whose causes for sainthood were advanced by the Pope on June 11, 2019, in Rome.

Three of these holy people were recognized officially as martyrs; the others, including Father Tolton, were given “decrees of heroic virtue,” following a lengthy period of investigation into their lives and ministry. The decree noted “the heroic virtues of the Servant of God Augustine Tolton, Diocesan Priest; born in Brush Creek (United States of America) on April 1, 1854, and died in Chicago (United States of America) on July 9, 1897.”

The Venerable Father Tolton’s cause for sainthood was begun in 2010. To progress, the Church will look for evidence of miracles that can be attributed to his intercession. If these can be verified as having no natural causation, his cause will progress to his beatification, and then his canonization.

Sainthood Process:

The process for a man or woman to become a canonized saint includes four phases

- A “cause for beatification and canonization” begins and the candidate is called “Servant of God.”
- A Positio (or position paper) is created by those who are seeking the canonization of the person. This report documents the person’s life and makes a case for the candidate’s “heroic virtue.” The completed report goes to the Pope and a panel of theologians, including the cardinals of the Congregation for the Cause of Saints. They evaluate the candidate’s life. If there is enough evidence of heroic virtue in the person’s life to continue the cause for sainthood, the Pope declares the person “venerable.”
- Evidence of a first miracle attributed to the candidate’s intercession is investigated. If it is verified as having no natural cause, the person is declared “Blessed.”
- After a second miracle is proven, the person is named a “Saint” and is canonized in a ceremony overseen by the Pope.