

## Venerable Augustus Tolton, Servant of God (Died July 9, 1897)

Father Augustus Tolton was the first black American to be ordained as a Catholic priest. This Monday is the anniversary of the death of this holy man who may soon be canonized as a saint (He died July 9, 1897).

The story of Fr. Augustus Tolton is very interesting. His parents were slaves in Missouri. They were baptized Catholic because their owners were Catholic. During the civil war his father escaped to the north and died while serving in the Union army. His mother ran away from her slave owners, escaping into the free state of Illinois with her three small children.

Augustus remembered how they escaped by rowing across the Mississippi River at night while slave chasers with guns tried to shoot at their dilapidated rowboat. After the crossing his mother Martha told him: "John, boy, you're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord." The fugitives reached safety in Quincy, Illinois, a town that was famous for its support of runaway slaves. It was the first stop along the "underground railroad".

Although Martha ran away from the slave owners, she did not want to abandon the Catholic faith which she had received from them. She enrolled her son Augustus in a Catholic parochial school. Augustus was the first black child ever enrolled in that Catholic school, and soon the other parents began to complain and to threaten the school, the parish and the pastor. The other children made fun of Augustus and bullied him. His teacher, Sister Chrysologus, kept him after school to give him special lessons to protect him from the children outside. Within a month Martha understood the gravity of the situation and made a mutual

agreement with the pastor that she should withdraw her son from the school. The pastor never forgot that sad day and years later he wrote: "I can see them yet – mother and son – Mrs. Tolton's arms flung around the boy's shoulders, walking down the sidewalk after we drove them out."

However the local priests and sisters were able to provide home-schooling for Augustus. As a teenager he was able to become the first black student at a local Catholic High School because of the support of the pastor who defended him against the bigotry of the other parents.

Augustus wanted to become a priest and tried to enter the seminary. Unfortunately no seminary would accept him. At that time in the United States there was prejudice not only against blacks but also against Catholics. The administrators of seminaries and religious orders thought that it would be imprudent to accept a black seminarian because this would cause even more hostility

toward Catholics. They usually responded by saying: "We are not ready for a negro student."



For several years Augustus had to work odd jobs while local priests and sisters gave him lessons in German, Latin and Greek. He served at daily Mass. He taught catechism to the black children of Quincy and eventually used an abandoned Protestant church building to establish the “St. Joseph School of Black Children.”

He encouraged blacks who abused alcohol to join the parish’s “Temperance Society.” He was doing wonderful work as a layman, but still he felt called to the priesthood. During this period the local priests continued to try to find a seminary that would accept Augustus and finally he was sent to Rome where there were seminary students from all parts of the world. In Rome the Catholic Church is truly “universal”. Rome prepares priests to be sent into every country of the world.

Augustus Tolton studied in Rome for six years at the “Propaganda Fidei,” a special seminary for missionaries, which had the right to send the graduates to any country that had need of priests. He studied African languages and culture because he expected to be sent to Africa. Shortly before his ordination he wrote in a letter: “My seminary studies are about over now, and I will go on to Africa right after my ordination in April.” On Good Friday 1886, the day before the priestly ordination ceremony, Cardinal Simeoni surprised Augustus by telling him that it had been decided at a committee meeting that he should be sent to Africa, but that at the end of the discussion, Cardinal Simeoni had overruled the committee announcing, “America has been called the most enlightened nation in the world. We shall see whether it deserves that honor. If the United States has never before seen a black priest, it must see one now.” Augustus was assigned to his home diocese in Illinois. At first Augustus was disappointed at the news, perhaps because of his bad experiences and fear of bigotry in America. But he obediently and courageously accepted the decision. He was ordained a priest on Holy Saturday, April 24, 1886. Newspapers all over the United States ran the story. A few months later he left Rome and returned to Quincy, Illinois where he was welcomed like a conquering hero. The townsfolk in Quincy were proud of their well-educated native son and when he arrived at the train station a huge crowd welcomed him along with a brass band and a choir which sang “Holy God We Praise thy Name” and negro spirituals. He arrived at Mass “in a flower-draped four-horse carriage ... wearing a black Prince Albert and a silk hat.” Father Tolton served in Quincy at St. Joseph’s Parish and School which had been established to serve the Negro community. Many whites came to his parish to hear his moving sermons, and their generosity helped support his parish financially. However this caused jealousy in the priests of the neighboring parish which was only a block away. After a few years Fr. Tolton asked to be transferred to Chicago where in 1893 he opened a parish for black Catholics, dedicated to St. Monica. Fr. Tolton did not have to suffer for very long the hardships of being a black priest in 19th century America. Perhaps he had suffered enough. According to the mysterious design of God, Father Tolton collapsed during a hot day and died from sunstroke at the age of 43 on July 9, 1897. He was declared a “Servant of God” in 2011. In March it was announced by the Vatican that Father Tolton will soon be declared “venerable,” which is the next step in the canonization process to make Fr. Tolton a saint.

For a full biography go to the website:

**[www.toltoncanonization.org](http://www.toltoncanonization.org)**