

Cause for Canonization of AUGUSTUS TOLTON (1854-1897)

(Story from Catholicism.org)

“They’re watching me,” he wrote to Saint Katharine Drexel, his confidant and benefactor.

Father Augustus Tolton was a priest who, for the love of souls, tore down a racial barrier, reluctantly and single-handedly, on direct orders from Rome.

Augustus was born of the marriage union of two slaves, Peter Paul Tolton and his wife Martha Jane, in Ralls County, Missouri, April 1, 1854. The slaveholders, the Elliots, had all their slaves baptized, including the Toltons and their four children. With the outbreak of the War between the States, Peter Paul hoped to gain freedom for his family and escaped to the North where he served in the Union Army. He was one of the 180,000 blacks who were killed in the war.

A courageous Martha Tolton, now widowed, decided that she would see her husband’s quest for freedom realized in his children. She set out one day, her little ones in tow, and began walking to freedom. After managing a crossing of the Mississippi River she made her way to Illinois and settled in the small town of Quincy. Here the devout woman began attending a Catholic Church. However, things were not going to be easy. Even though the family had escaped from physical slavery, the prejudice against Negroes in the North was just as bad as in the South. No, there was no problem attending Mass with whites, the pastor was fine with that, but when her children attempted to attend Catholic school, parents of the other school children were not so accommodating. To avoid a messy situation that would have been a scandal to the children, the School Sisters of Notre Dame decided to tutor the Tolton children privately.

As Augustus grew older he began displaying an interest in the priesthood. His parish priests,

Fathers McGuirr and Richardt, encouraged the young man in this aspiration and tried, without success, to enroll him in several diocesan seminaries. Well, you might think that these two priests would just give up and accept the fact that a full-blooded Black was not going to be tolerated as a parish priest in the United States. They did not give up. They were disheartened, but they kept trying. If the seminaries would not have him, they would begin Augustus’ education in theology themselves. And so they did. Finally, in 1878, the Franciscan College in Quincy accepted the unacceptable seminarian as a special student, and two years later his paternal patrons succeeded in getting him enrolled at the college of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome.

After completing his courses there, Augustus Tolton was ordained on April 24, 1886. All these six years he had assumed that the Propaganda, which was the dicastery in charge of foreign missions, would send him to Africa. What was his surprise when the Cardinal in charge of the Propaganda told him that he was going to be sent back to the United States and work in a parish in Illinois. “America needs Negro priests,” he said to the newly-ordained, “America has been called the most enlightened nation, we will see now whether it deserves the honor. If the United States has never seen a Black priest, it must see one now. Can you drink from this cup?” “Posso,” replied Father Tolton in Latin, “Yes, I can.”

Father Tolton’s first assignment was Saint Joseph’s church in his home town of Quincy. During his two years there he gained enormous respect from many of the German and Irish parishioners, who flocked to Saint Joseph’s to sit with their black brothers and sisters in Christ and hear his inspiring sermons. Other pastors invited the gifted preacher



to give sermons at their churches as well, and his religious instruction classes were filled with enthusiastic catechumens. However, there were those who were jealous of his success in the area, and these were not just some Protestant ministers, but a local Catholic pastor, Father Weiss. This fellow pastor, and other bigots, gave Father Augustus such a hard time with their racial slurs and backstabbing that Archbishop Feenan of Chicago decided to take the victim away and give him a poor parish on the south side of the city, where there were many Black Catholics who would surely honor a Black priest.

Saint Augustine's church, which consisted of a basement chapel, would later become Saint Monica's. This would be Father Tolton's parish for life, and it also became the center from which he ministered to all the Black Catholics of Chicago. So poor was Saint Augustine's that there was no room to quarter the priest. Friends had to raise money and lease an apartment nearby, into which his mother and sister also moved.

Father Tolton's reputation as a preacher earned him many pulpits and podiums from which he expounded upon the truths of the Faith and the vocation of all to sanctity. He addressed the First Catholic Colored Congress in Washington DC in 1889. Unfortunately he did not do much writing, nor did he keep a diary. Only a few of his letters survive, and most of those were rather painful missives, which he sent to Mother Katharine Drexel, the saint who gave her life and fortune to the Catholic education of the Negroes. She it was who financed a school for Black children that Father Augustus opened near his parish. Mother Drexel seems to have also become Tolton's confidant. He could open up with her in confidence about the trials of being the first Black priest in North America.

There were other priests in the United States that had Negro blood, but Father Augustus was the only full-blooded one. The Healy brothers come to mind, one of whom served as President of Georgetown and Bishop of Portland, Maine. These three priests actually preceded Father Tolton. However, though their mother had been a Black slave, their father was Irish and, as the saying goes, they "passed" for white. (In fact, Bishop Healy refrained from making much ado of racial issues – the Catholic Colored Congress, he declined the invitation to attend it.) As one writer put it, Father Augustine had the "kiss of Africa" on his skin and there was no "passing" for any other race. Tolton had to take all the whacks, all the insults, and keep his dignity, and the holiness of his priesthood. He never complained, except to Mother Drexel. "They're watching me," he once wrote her in what may have been a sardonic humor.

Other than what can be found on this website, I don't have any more information at hand to share about the virtues of Father Augustus Tolton. However, considering the type of suffering he endured, patience, humility, and courage were certainly habitual acts. He made Black Catholics proud of their religion in spite of the weaknesses of some white co-religionists who just couldn't free themselves of their parochialism and prejudice. No one has the right to be "proud" of anything that they are or have achieved. Everything first reaches us as a gift, and the greatest gift is the grace of the true Faith. This is why the Blacks of the late nineteenth century were so proud of Father Tolton. He was a devoted priest of Jesus Christ, who just happened to be Black.

On a very hot day in July, 1897, Father Augustus got off a train on Chicago's south side after attending a retreat with a group of fellow diocesan priests. As he was walking to his apartment, he fell over on the sidewalk from a heat stroke. He was rushed to Mercy hospital. North America's first Black priest died that night. He was only forty-three years old.

STAGES ON THE ROAD TO SAINTHOOD



Blessed Augustus Tolton

Usually, the process of recognizing a saint starts no earlier than five years after a person's death. Usually, the potential saint's pastor presents the case to the bishop. Specific stages are met on the path to being declared a saint:

- **Servant of God:** As soon as the person is accepted for consideration, they are called a *Servant of God*.
- **Venerable:** After the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints determines that the servant of God lived a life of heroic virtue, they are granted the title of *Venerable*. *Heroic virtue* doesn't mean a person was perfect or sinless, but that they worked aggressively to improve themselves spiritually and never gave up trying to be better and grow in holiness.

- **Blessed:** After the Church establishes one miracle, the venerable person's cause is presented to the pope to see whether they are deemed worthy of being called *blessed*. This step is called *beatification* and is the next-to-last step.
- ***Saint:** Another miracle and the blessed person's cause is presented to the pope again for his judgment. If they determine that the evidence is clear and that contrary reports aren't credible, he may initiate the canonization procedure. If all goes well, the candidate is publicly recognized as a saint.

The Process

Only people whose existence can be verified and whose lives can be examined are possible candidates for canonization. Candidates for sainthood undergo an investigation:

- Informative inquiries are made into the person's life, reputation, and activities while they lived on earth.
- Proof that no one has proclaimed or is already proclaiming and honoring the person as a saint before it's been officially declared
- A thorough examination of the person's written and spoken (transcripts) works

If the thorough background check leads the investigators to declare the candidate venerable, evidence of miracles attributed to the candidate's intercession with God is sought. Miracles

need to be documented and authenticated, so eyewitnesses alone are considered insufficient. Medical, scientific, psychiatric, and theological experts are consulted, and evidence is given to them for their professional opinion. If a scientific, medical, or psychological explanation exists for what had only appeared to be a miracle, then it isn't an authentic miracle. Only immediate, spontaneous, and inexplicable phenomena are up for consideration as authentic miracles.

A group of Italian doctors (*Consulta Medica*) examine the healing miracles. Some of the doctors aren't Catholic and some are, but all are qualified and renowned physicians. They don't declare a healing a miracle, but instead say, "We can find no scientific or medical explanation for the cure."

- **Incorruptibility:** Long after the saint is dead, the body is found free of decay when exhumed from the grave. The Church considers St. Catherine of Siena to be an example. She died in 1380, and 600 years later without any embalming, her flesh hasn't decomposed.
- **Liquefaction:** The dried blood of the saint, long dead, miraculously liquefies on the feast day. The Church considers St. Januarius (*San Gennaro* in Italian; A.D. 275?–305), the patron saint of Naples, to be an example. According to the Church, a vial of his dried blood liquefies every year on September 19.
- **Odor of sanctity:** The body of the saint exudes a sweet aroma, like roses, rather than the usual pungent stench of decay. The Church considers St. Teresa of Avila (1515–82) to be just such an example. The Church believes her grave exuded a sweet fragrance for nine months after her death.

The actual act of beatification, in which a person is declared *blessed*, or of *canonization*, which is officially recognizing a saint, usually takes place in St. Peter's Square outside the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica. Sometimes, though, the pope beatifies and canonizes in the country where the person lived and died, as in the case of St. Juan Diego. He was an Aztec peasant, and the Church believes Mary, as Our Lady of Guadalupe, appeared to him in Mexico in 1531. In his case, 12,000 people were present in the Basilica in Mexico City, and 30,000 waited outside, watching on video monitors.

Saints' Feast Days

The pope alone decides who is publicly recognized as a saint [and assigned the saint's feast day] in churches all over the world. Some saints' feast days are only celebrated in the particular saint's town or country. Others are internationally celebrated.