



Fr. Augustus Tolton: Servant of God

1854-1897

***Bishop Joseph N. Perry Imprimatur: Francis Cardinal George, OMI***

***Archdiocese of Chicago 2010***

Fr. 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 the death of the slave owner, Stephen Elliott, who left no will behind. His wife was obliged to have their farm and its holdings at Brush Creek, Missouri, including the slaves appraised in order to pay off indebtedness. The preserved appraisal document testifying to this fact listing the slaves and their monetary value more than likely injected fear in Augustus' parents who decided to flee sometime between July and September of 1863. Research has yet to clarify the details of this harrowing escape of Martha, her husband Peter and the children- whether Peter joined the Union Army in trade for freedom of his wife and children who crossed the Mississippi River to get to Illinois, her husband meaning to meet up with his family sometime later after inscription or whether this was a dream of Peter in concert with other black men who desired to be considered men by being allowed to fight alongside Union troops for the cause of black freedom. It is doubtful that Peter ever participated in the war's skirmishes. Some years later, Martha found his name on a list of Civil War casualties, and the death certificate indicates that Peter died in a hospital in Arkansas of dysentery. In any event, it appears Martha Jane parted her husband in Hannibal, Missouri and then made it to safety at Quincy, Illinois that harbored a station of the secret Underground Railroad. There, she settled with her children and

attempted to educate them in the town's parochial and public schools. Martha Jane and her husband Peter had been baptized Catholic by direction of their respective owners. Augustus was baptized at the Brush Creek Church. 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 under scholarship. Through it all, Augustus was subjected to subtle insults and derisive remarks because of his race. But with the help of priests and sisters who befriended him he was able to endure 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 to be 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 in far-away lands. There Augustus met other African seminarians and seminarians from all over the world anxious to serve the church as priests someday. At the age of 26, Augustus traveled to Rome in 1880 to pursue studies toward the priesthood. 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 given the climate of race relations and the anti-Catholicism prevalent in the U.S. 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 tutored 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 some fellow priests in the community and even certain Protestant clergymen 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 say him attempting to create a situation of an unacceptable mingling of the races. 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 by 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.

Slaves and former slaves of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 person 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’s 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 an 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 post-war 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.* Fr. 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 December 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 they could call their own. Father Tolton oversaw the construction of a stone church at 36<sup>TH</sup> & 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 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 9, Fr. Tolton got off the train to 105 degree heat that was scorching the city. According to the Chicago Daily News, "*the Reverent August Tolton, pastor of St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church, 36<sup>th</sup> & Dearborn Streets, died at Mercy Hospital at 8:30 pm, 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 this 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 Quincy's 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. 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.

## Timeline

April 1, 1854	Augustus born a slave
June 12, 1870	Tolton's First Communion & Confirmation at St. Peter Church, Quincy
February 21, 1880	Tolton leaves for Rome for seminary
April 24, 1886	Tolton ordained Priest, St. John Lateran Basilica, Rome
April 25, 1886	First Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, Rome
July 18, 1886	First Mass at St. Boniface Church, Quincy
July 25, 1886	Appointed pastor of St. Joseph Church, Quincy
December 19, 1889	Began priestly ministry in the Archdiocese of Chicago
July 9, 1897	Died at Mercy Hospital, Chicago
July 12, 1897	Funeral at St. Monica Church, 36 <sup>th</sup> 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 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.

