

Servant of God Augustus Tolton: Canonization moves forward for country's first black priest

February's celebration of Black History Month in the United States traces its roots back to the 1920s, although it gained more formal recognition in the '70s. All during February, we'll be sharing stories of holy and often unknown black Catholics.

Father Augustus Tolton knew what it meant to be abandoned and unwanted. Born the son of slaves, Tolton went on to be ordained the first African-American priest from the United States. But the path was not easy. He had to overcome many obstacles, including rejection from seminaries because of his race.

His family made a harrowing escape into Northern territory, settling in Quincy, Illinois. Father Peter McGirr, pastor of St. Peter's Church in that city, took the young Augustus under his wing, granting him entrance to his parish school against the wishes of many in the parish. As a student at Quincy College, Franciscan priests assisted Tolton as he sought the priesthood despite finding many doors closed in his face.

With heroic determination to fulfill the will of God, Tolton pressed on toward ordination despite the fact that no American seminary would accept him. Eventually ordained in 1886, after attending the Pontifical Urban College in Rome, Tolton expected to serve as a missionary to the African continent. However, he was assigned back to the United States – the Roman cardinal who ordained him noted, "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.”

Father Tolton’s arrival in his hometown – about 20 years after the end of the Civil War – was met with racial prejudice by laity and clergy alike. The bishop’s delegate even told him white people should not attend his parish. Father Tolton persevered in humility and obedience and was eventually granted the opportunity to minister in Chicago by Archbishop Patrick A. Feehan in 1889.

In the Windy City, Father Tolton provided priestly care to a growing black Catholic community, which formed into St. Monica Church. He poured out his life in service to his people – in care for the poor and in a church building project, among other things. This strenuous work undoubtedly was a contributing factor to his death at the age of 43. After returning to Chicago by train from a retreat, Father Tolton collapsed in the street on a hot summer day and died on July 9, 1897.

Tolton’s canonization has been progressing since it was inaugurated in 2010 by the late-Cardinal Francis E. George, OMI, of Chicago. Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry of Chicago – vice postulator of Tolton’s canonization cause – defines his legacy:

“His was a fundamental and pervasive struggle to be recognized, welcomed and accepted. He rises wonderfully as a Christ-figure, never uttering a harsh word about anyone or anything while being thrown one disappointment after another. He persevered among us when there was no logical reason to do so.”

Another step forward toward Tolton’s canonization was taken in December, when his remains were exhumed at his grave in his adopted hometown of Quincy, Illinois.

▪ [More about Father Augustus.](#)

- [Read more about the contributions of black Catholics to the U.S. Church.](#)