

The Father Tolton Guild

OFFICIAL ORGANIZATION FOR THE PROMOTION OF
THE CAUSE OF CANONIZATION OF FATHER AUGUSTUS TOLTON (1854-1897)

The Exhumation of Father Tolton's Remains:

Connected with beatification and canonization processes for an individual or group of people, the Church has maintained interest in the decedent's remains especially in times of persecution, to save the person's remains from further profanation by enemies of the Church or from simple deterioration over time, and for purposes of amassing relics of the holy individual(s) for later veneration. Establishing where the person is buried also gives credence to the fact that the person existed and was not a figment of someone or some group's imagination. Lastly, and perhaps more remarkably, the Church is interested in determining whether the deceased is incorrupt as one indication of holiness of life as some saints have been discovered over the stretch of history.

The canonization rite has a part therein whereby a relic of the new saint(s) is presented to the Holy Father.

In accord with the Church's venerable tradition the bodily remains of the faithful are handled with reverence given that the body in life is baptized, anointed and sacralized through reception of the Holy Eucharist and following death is destined for resurrection. Any surprised discovery of the bodily remains of Saints and Blesseds, for example, in various catacombs around the world and other places has hastened the Church to preserve those places or at least collect the remains of the faithful found there. The remains of the deceased faithful are never just discarded.

21 June 2016 the Congregation for Causes of Saints at the Vatican issued the nihil obstat to Bishop Thomas Paprocki, bishop of Springfield in Illinois, for the opening of the grave of Father Augustus Tolton at St. Peter Cemetery, Quincy, Illinois, 33rd & Broadway & Maine Streets. Cooperation between the two cemetery staffs of the Diocese of Springfield and the Archdiocese of Chicago plus the assistance of a forensic pathologist, medical examiner and archeologist comprised the staffing for this unique task.

Monsignor Patrick Pollard and Mr. Roman Szabelski of the Chicago Archdiocese Cemeteries Office advanced many of the preparations and brought down necessary supplies and equipment, arranged for meals, hotel stays, etc. Journalists and camera people from the two diocesan papers were aboard. All the people involved couldn't have been more cooperative and aware of the sacred task before us.

Cemetery officials had done some advanced work beforehand with ground



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penetrating radar to locate the two reported burials on the little mound, Father Augustus Tolton and Father Patrick Kerr. The actual grave site was built up with earth about two-and-a-half feet higher than the actual level of the ground when Tolton was buried – this to support the great weight of the cruciform grave stone. The archeologist noted that Father Tolton had been originally buried at most three to three and a half feet down, probably because back then they did not have sophisticated equipment to dig deeper than that, and Father Tolton's grave more than likely was dug by hand. Hence, two to two-and-a half more feet of earth would add even greater weight and thereby eventually press the coffin more quickly into the earth.

It has been 119 years since Father Tolton's death; hence, we weren't sure how much if anything might be left in his grave following so long a time. Prep work had opened the grave to within inches of the coffin on December 9th – a cold day in 20 degree temperatures. Ground equipment emptied the grave area to about six-and-a-half feet down and ten-to-eleven-feet wide to accommodate several specialists and workers lowered into the space.

Police were assigned on site overnight to make sure curiosity seekers were kept away.

Saturday, December 10, proved to be an overcast day, in the 20s again and quite frosty. Tents were set up over the grave site and adjacent for resting, meals and warmth. The Diocese of Springfield prepared a morning prayer service that got us started at 7.30am. An air of reverential quiet descended upon everyone. Franciscan priests came over from Quincy University where Augustus attended college and from Chicago – friars of the same province that succeeded in getting Augustus in a seminary in Rome, also a priest representative from the Diocese of Jefferson City, Missouri where the Tolton family labored as slaves at Brush Creek.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the hole in the ground.

The weight of the earth and the work of nature's years had obviously settled the soil pressing down on the coffin. Wooden sections of the coffin, rectangular in shape, were deteriorated. Slowly but surely, the handles on the casket were emerging one-by-one. It was a glass-top coffin typical of that time as evidenced by many large pieces of broken glass collected that had crashed in on the bodily remains.

We were getting closer to meeting Augustus through his physical remains.

The soil was taken away to about six inches above the remains before everyone took a break. Afterwards, the remaining soil was removed by hand and taken away in buckets. This allowed the archeologist, anthropologist and an autopsy-pathologist using spatulas, brushes and scrapers to arrive at the actual skeletal remains. The earth had caved in on the body of Father Tolton pressing him into the earth – no doubt we do return to the earth from which we came!

Painstaking work took over with delicate hand scraping and brushing. Suddenly the top of Father Tolton's skull began to emerge, it was found cracked under the earth's pressure in several places. Any cloth material that decorated the interior of the coffin and Father's burial clothing had disintegrated. The corpus of a crucifix from inside the coffin emerged, a much larger corpus of a crucifix apparently from atop the coffin was also found, and about a four-inch section of Father Tolton's Roman collar was located – the only part of his clothing salvaged; apparently he had a rosary in his hands, the tiny cross of which was recovered.

Work involved lifting Father's Tolton's skeleton from the embrace of the earth. His femurs, rib bones, spinal vertebrae, collar bones, collapsed pelvis, portion of the arm bones, ankle bones and other smaller bones were all brought forward. All bones were encrusted with the earth and proved to be delicate such that the specialists decided not to wash the bones as had been originally planned.

The skeletal remains were laid out on a table that had been prepared first with an alb, white Roman chasuble and maniple, amice and cincture – the Diocese of Springfield wanted to wrap his skeleton in a new set of vestments typical of the 19th century.

The specialist reading the bones immediately identified that they belonged to a man of about five feet/eight inches in height who had died in his early forties and that he was black. Father Tolton apparently had a good set of teeth. No traces of skin or flesh could be detected anywhere on the skeleton.

Bishop Paprocki and Bishop Perry proceeded to secure the newly vested skeleton in a white body-bag zipped up and funeral directors placed the bag in a new grey/silver coffin with an inscription – The Servant of God, Father Augustus Tolton, born April 1, 1854, ordained April 24, 1886 and death 9 July 1897. A document was placed on top of the body bag attesting to the work done that day. The entire coffin was red-ribboned and given the waxed seal of the



Diocese of Springfield by Bishop Paprocki. The coffin was in turn placed in a burial vault with an additional inscription atop listing Father's name and years of birth and death. In another vault was placed the broken glass and coffin parts, remains of the several crucifixes found and Father's priestly collar, and both containers were reinterred side by side in the grave and covered over with the soil, to await news of beatification.

A closing prayer closed off the sacred work finished just shortly after 11am. We sang "*Holy God We Praise Thy Name,*" the hymn that was sung and accompanied by a musical band when Father Tolton returned to Quincy for his first mass summer July 1886, and then sung at his funeral in Chicago.

Springfield Diocesan officials will draw up a required report to send to the Congregation for Causes of Saints at the Vatican.

Personages in Father Tolton's Life

Hilchenbach, Father Francis Solano, OSF:

Friar priest of the Sacred Heart Province of Franciscans, who visited Father Augustus Tolton in Quincy regularly for conversation and to speak with Tolton in Italian and German languages. Hilchenbach reported in several letters to friends and family the progress of the black apostolate in Quincy under Father Tolton's leadership. These letters are found amidst a host of other letters in a series of bound volumes stored at the Brenner Library of Quincy University.

McGirr, Father Peter

From Ulster in Northern Ireland, born June 29, 1833. Peter McGirr came to America during the potato famine at the age of 15. He and his brothers arrived in New York May 1, 1848 after a seven week voyage. His parents followed the boys to the US two years later. The McGirr boys settled in Worcester, Massachusetts. Peter studied for the priesthood at Holy Cross College and then to the Grand Seminary in Montreal, Canada, and was ordained a priest April 22, 1862 for the Diocese of Alton (USA). After a few months' assignment in Pittsfield, Illinois Father McGirr was assigned to St.

Lawrence O'Toole Parish in Quincy, a parish he pastored till his death in March 1893. He tutored Augustus Tolton and worked with Father Michael Richardt, OSF to support Tolton's effort to enter seminary. St. Lawrence was later named, St. Peter Church, Quincy and exists to this day. In the Catholic Almanac of 1843 the parish is titled, St. Hilary, undoubtedly named after its first pastor, Father Hilary Tucker of Perryville, Missouri. In another place the parish is called the "English Church". In the 1853 Almanac among the parishes in the diocese of Quincy, it is listed as St. Lawrence O'Toole and it retained that name until Father McGirr demolished the old building on Easter Monday 1868. He then built an impressive structure that was inaugurated on January 1, 1870 giving it the name, St. Peter. Father Peter McGirr graciously received Martha Jane and her children to St. Peter Church after Augustus was expelled from St. Boniface parish school upon the loud protests of students and parents who objected to a black boy being present in the school. St. Peter Parish is where Augustus made his First Holy Communion and Confirmation. Father Tolton traveled from Chicago to attend Fr. McGirr's funeral in Quincy. St. Peter Church is today the final stop on our annual tours to Missouri and Illinois visiting spots significant in the life of Father Tolton.

Ostrof (Astrof), Father Francis

One time pastor of the German church, St. Boniface parish, Quincy, Illinois. He kept up with Augustus Tolton during his seminary days at the Propaganda Fide in Rome and sent Tolton periodically pocket money on a pretty steady basis.

O'Sullivan, Father John

Ordained priest 1853, assigned to St. Paul Church, Rawls County, Missouri the same year and remained for a duration of four years. He baptized Augustus Tolton with the saintly name of Augustine, probably due to the pagan origins of the name Augustus, as was often the custom.

The Church and Slavery

We have born the scourge of our black skin that has marked us for mistreatment and hatred over the trek of history.

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HOLD THE DATE!

Sunday, October 22, 2017

TOLTON BENEFIT GALA

Navy Pier's Lakeview Terrace

3 pm-7 pm

Chicago, Illinois



The Exhumation of Father Tolton's Remains (continued from front)

Over time the Church has issued many bulls and encyclicals condemning slavery and the evils practiced therein. The Church also defended indigenous peoples of the North and South Americas against brutal discrimination prompted by belief that these peoples were savage and soulless. One of the earliest bulls written against slavery was *Sicut Dudum* issued by Pope Eugene IV 1435. He condemned the enslavement of black natives of the Canary Islands by European colonists who had raided the island. Pope Paul III, in his bull *Sublimus Dei* 1537 condemned the enslavement of the Indians and all other peoples discovered by Christians believing that indigenous people were less than human. He declared them to be truly men endowed with a soul and he attributed the slave trade to the enemy of the human race, Satan.

With the age of Discovery of the New World, these papal condemnations of slavery were largely ignored by many resulting in much scandal and human misery. For a thorough look at this subject, see *The Popes and Slavery* 1996 by Joel Panzer, who discusses how the Catholic Church has in the past and still does speak up decisively to halt infamous trading in human beings that continues even in these days.

Endowed with a spiritual soul, with intellect and with free will, the human person is from his very conception ordered to God and destined for eternal beatitude. He pursues his perfection in "seeking and loving what is true and good" (Gaudium et Spes 15, 2). No Human person is without a soul. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1711).