

The Father Tolton Guild

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

Fr. Tolton Closing Ceremony

On September 29th, 2014, the Archdiocese of Chicago brought to a close the diocesan phase of the investigation into the life and virtues of Father Augustus Tolton (1854-1897). Within sung midday prayer for the feast of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, celebrated in St. James Chapel of the Archdiocesan office center, before a filled chapel assembly of people and church officials from the Dioceses of Springfield in Illinois and Jefferson City, Missouri and the Archdiocese of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George led the postrema sessio with his remarks on the significance of the pursuit of the cause for sainthood of Father Tolton. Bishop Joseph Perry gave a report on the progress of the four-year study that involved the assistance of canon lawyers, archivists, theologians, historians and testimony of a number of bishops, priests and laity about the reputation of Tolton's holiness in the community over the last century and beyond. The dossier was bound with red-ribbon and officially stamped with the seal of the Archdiocese in melted wax, to be dispatched to the Congregation for Causes of Saints at the Vatican.



ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

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“Father Augustus Tolton’s Spirituality”

Saints arise from the exigencies of the eras within which they live. Saints are of human stock but have the genius to step forward and bring the gospel message to the contradictions of their time. In the case of Augustus Tolton, it is the long period of black slavery in this country, and the nation’s Civil War foisting a resolution to uncompensated black servitude and the tumultuous period of Reconstruction of a nation torn to shreds over this issue.



Without a national program to assist the assimilation of freed slaves into the fabric of the country, schools, social and educational institutions and politics were generally off limits to blacks especially where whites were invested. What Tolton experienced in that time of social ambivalence is stuff we read about only in history books or view in certain documentaries. Augustus witnessed mistreatment of his people and became a victim himself of such mistreatment.

His earliest schooling was interrupted by the protests of his peers and adults or while having to work as a laborer in bottling and saddle-making factories or as a janitor to help his mother support their family. Religiously inclined in his boyhood, nurtured by promptings of his mother, Martha Jane, he was found spending long hours in between work in the church in prayer. He attended secret classes taught by friendly priests and nuns who saw in his eyes the bright spark of the love of God, a tender devotion to the Church



and a determination to serve people, whether black or white. As a young man he taught religion classes to the black children of Quincy. Denied seminary training in this country because of his race these same sympathetic priests and nuns helped him to receive a proper education and even seminary education in Rome.

Although the Servant of God, Augustus Tolton (1854-1897), lived over a hundred years ago, his spirituality still speaks to us with incredible clarity and inspirational vitality for our times.

By liturgical norm, a crucifix is to be displayed in Catholic sanctuaries where the Mass is celebrated; either a crucifix conspicuous for all to see or a processional cross brought in to the start of Mass ceremoniously placed near the altar where the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is commemorated. The crucifix is our primary banner of faith.



The crucifix is not only a sign of our redemption by the spillage of the blood of Christ who underwent savage



brutality the likes of which is unimaginable for most of us. Revelation told through the sacred writ informs us that God the Father used his only begotten Son's passion and death granting it merit with which to reconcile us with God. Ever since, Christians have tried to understand the Lord's suffering in order to find meaning in each their own suffering experience in life. The many men and women saints show us a variety of ways how to work a triumph with this mystery in our lives, as did they.

We live in a society that rejects the very idea of deriving meaning from setback, suffering, misery and tragedy. We are taught to believe the rubrics of the good life are supposed to deliver blessing and abundance. Finding blessing in life's misfortunes is a stretch of the imagination for most people. Yet, this is the story line of salvation. This is the Good News of the Gospel we try to grasp each Sunday and days in between.

Father Augustus Tolton shows us in his own life's pattern that we can find blessing in everything, even what is most painful. The saints model for us how to embrace the joys and the sorrows of life. Similarly, Father Tolton's story is one of suffering service. Through his experiences of racial negation by a society that would separate black and white by force of the law and lawless custom, Tolton found the love of God, found his own vocation and ultimately has received his reward from God as a pioneer figure of Christian faith in action, indiscriminate love of neighbor and pastoral charity despite the bigotry that was thrown at him. The record of his life is absent any show of retaliation

toward anyone or anything. Mild mannered and self-effacing as he was, Father Tolton survived enormous odds during a particularly difficult period of US history that saw him an anomaly as an achieving black man, former slave and Catholic priest. He shows us how to wrestle through fear, doubt, hurt, disappointment and sadness and see these experiences through the prism of the Lord's own sufferings to redeem a people.

Tolton is a model Christian and priest during a time of contradiction, an era of social deficits that attempted to derail his priestly ministry. Tolton faced an opposition notably from within the Christian community, the one institution he should have been able to rely upon for compassion and support. The 19th century church in this country, in its many denominations, aligned itself with the prevailing mood of the times. Blacks were considered inferior and were begrudgingly accepted, if at all, in the social groupings and institutions that made up America. *continued on back page*



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Father Augustus Tolton's Spirituality continued from inside

We are inspired by Tolton's courage and innocent determination in face of incredible race prejudice typical of that bygone era but for which we now take as a source of inspiration for the work that remains in the 21st century.

That passage from the letter to the Hebrews must have resonated in his heart:

"Recall the days gone by when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a great contest of suffering. At times you were publicly exposed to insult and trial; at other times you associated yourselves with those who were being so dealt with ... do not, then, surrender your confidence; it will have great reward. You need patience to do God's will and receive what he has promised. (10, 32-33; 35-36).

Among our liturgical festivals we celebrate the exaltation of the Holy Cross. We display the cross in our homes and around our necks in wood and gold and silver. The meaning imbedded in the cross shows up in a variety of ways for all of us. We are a people who live the paschal mystery. We work through death and resurrection in our liturgies in order to understand that life is a strange mixture of good experiences and bad experiences, suffering and joy, death and resurrection, as was the Savior we love and admire.

Tolton's legacy says to us that transformation is possible through suffering. His story of deliverance from physical slavery and race discrimination offers imagery for all those who find inspiration in his life when suffering persecution or mistreatment because of one's faith or one's race.

The saints are people who model for us how to get through the set-backs, the sorrows and joys of life with our faith, hope and love intact.

Bishop Joseph N. Perry

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