

Official organization for
the promotion of the
cause of canonization of
Father Augustus Tolton

Spring 2018

Father Tolton Guild

Cause receives positive news from Vatican

The canonization cause of Servant of God Augustus Tolton received important approval from the Vatican's historical consultants in March, moving the cause forward.

Tolton, a former slave, is the first recognized American diocesan priest of African descent. Cardinal Francis George opened his cause for canonization in 2011.

On March 8, the consultants in Rome ruled that the *positio* (equivalent to a doctoral dissertation on a person's life) is acceptable and the research on Tolton's life is finished, said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry, postulator for Tolton's cause.

The fact that the historical consultants approved the *positio* unanimously is a positive sign, Bishop Perry said.

"They have a story on a life that they deem is credible, properly documented. It bodes well for the remaining steps of scrutiny — those remaining steps being the theological commission that will make a final determination on his virtues. Then it goes to the cardinals and archbishops who are assigned to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints," Bishop Perry explained. "Once they approve it then the prefect of that congregation takes the case to the pope."

If the pope approves it, Tolton would be named venerable, the next step on the way to canonization. The last two steps are beatification and canon-



Cardinal Francis George signs the final documents in the dossier for Father Tolton's cause during a prayer service at the Archbishop Quigley Center in Chicago on Sept. 29, 2014. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)

ization. Approved miracles through Tolton's intercession are needed for him to be beatified and canonized.

In rare cases, popes have waived the requirement for a second miracle and approved a canonization. This happened most recently when Pope Francis approved the sainthood of Pope John XXIII without a second miracle in 2014.

Six historical consultants ruled unanimously on the Tolton *positio*, compiled by a team in Rome led by Andrea Ambrosi, based on hundreds of pages of research completed in Chicago.

While working on the document, Ambrosi's team asked Bishop Perry why it took so long to open a cause for Tolton, who died in 1897.

"We told them that African Amer-

icans basically had no status in the church to be considered at that time. Some people didn't think we had souls. They were hardly poised to recommend someone to be a saint," Bishop Perry said. "And then in those days there were hardly any saints from the United States proposed."

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The cause is scheduled to go before the theological commission in February 2019.

Two miracles through Tolton's intercession have been sent to Rome.

"We're hoping and our fingers are crossed and we're praying that at least one of them might be acceptable for his beatification," Bishop Perry said.

People of interest in Tolton's life

■ RYAN, Bishop James

Bishop of the Diocese of Alton in Illinois (now Springfield) 1888-1923; ordained a priest 1871; consecrated a bishop May 1, 1888; died July 2, 1923.

He was the bishop who reprimanded Father Tolton for ministering to white people in his parish of St Joseph, Quincy, Illinois, upon repeated complaints of the area dean, Father Michael Weiss.

Bishop Ryan ultimately told Father Tolton to look elsewhere to work as a priest after answering an inquiry of the Propaganda Fide in Rome inquiring into the situation. Bishop Ryan answered the inquiry indicating that Father Tolton was a good priest in every way but was guilty of creating a social situation that was unacceptable.

■ SIMEONI, Cardinal Giovanni

Born July 12 1816; ordained a priest 1839; consecrated a bishop April 4 1875, and created a cardinal the same year.

He was a professor of philosophy and theology at the Urban Athanaeum of the Propaganda Fide in Rome and held several other prestigious posts at the Holy See including Vatican secretary of state.

He took an interest in Augustus Tolton; was prefect of the Propaganda Fide during Tolton's seminary training in Rome. It was rumored that since Tolton could not be a success in the United States because of his background and race, it was

thought that he would be sent to Africa as a missionary priest.

The day before his priestly ordination, Cardinal Simeoni changed those assignment orders telling Tolton that if it was true that the United States was the most enlightened country on earth, as it was thought, the country should be able to receive a black priest. So, the Cardinal told Tolton that he should return to his diocese of Alton In Illinois.

Cardinal Simeoni died Jan. 14, 1892 at 75.

■ SLATTERY, Father Joseph

This Mill (Josephite priest) was a pen pal with Father Tolton.

Several letters Father Tolton wrote to him are found in the



Photo: Josephite Archives

Acts of the Cause wherein Tolton described his struggles establishing some semblance of a Catholic church among

blacks in Quincy and in Chicago. He also shared his dreams for a better society and Catholic Church that would establish a better situation for post-Civil War-post-Emancipation and post-Reconstruction era blacks.

This is part of a series introducing people of importance in Tolton's life.

How do people react to his life story?

Since the cause began, Bishop Joseph Perry and his team have given more than 130 presentations on Father Tolton around the country.

They also have received inquiries about Tolton from the faithful in countries such as the Philippines, Germany, Australia, Italy and France, and countries in Africa.

People receive Tolton's story well, Bishop Perry told the Chicago Catholic in a recent interview.

"There's also the element of surprise — surprise in the story that people register. People always presume that we had black priests. There's an element of surprise at how the church handled some of these more naughty issues of reception and acceptance," he said. "They thought that this was pretty usual but they were surprised to see that there were certain individuals who were not so receptive to a person like Tolton and others."

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Tolton did not speak out publicly against the racist abuse he encountered from his fellow Catholics. Rather, throughout his ministry, he preached that the Catholic Church was the only true liberator of blacks in America.

"I think people generally are touched by his story, especially regarding his stamina and perseverance given what appears to be a different mood today. People don't accept stuff thrown in their faces anymore," Bishop Perry said.

Tolton's life told through play 'From Slave to Priest'

Father Tolton's story is now immortalized on stage with the new play "Tolton: From Slave to Priest," produced by St. Luke Productions from Battle Ground, Washington. The 90-minute, one-person play that premiered Nov. 5, 2017 at DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago.

For over 30 years, St. Luke Productions has produced other plays about holy men and women, including St. Faustina, St. Maximilian Kolbe and St. John Vianney.

Leonardo Defilippis, president and founder of St. Luke Productions, first learned of Tolton from a priest in the Diocese of Springfield, which includes the town of Quincy where Tolton served and is buried.

Defilippis researched Tolton's life and hung a photo of him in his office. When deciding which play he would produce next, he noticed the photo again and started praying to Tolton. Defilippis said he felt the Holy Spirit was asking him to make a play of Tolton's life.

Once decided, the producer reached out to Cardinal George, who opened Tolton's cause for canonization during the Year of the Priest. Cardinal George directed him to Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry, postulator of Tolton's cause. Defilippis said he and his team worked closely with Bishop Perry on the play.

"It's exciting to do something in complete conjunction with the canonization process. It's a tool that can be used for this," he said. "It's one of the most unique shows right now in theater because it's a multi-media show, which means you have characters on a screen that are interacting with a live actor."



Actors portray Father Tolton and Martha Tolton in the play "Tolton: From Slave to Priest," during its premiere Nov. 5, 2017, at DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)

Defilippis has created a "very unique art form" that makes it easy for groups anywhere to host the play because of the simple setup.

When writing the script, Defilippis, who co-wrote the play with his wife, pulled from themes in Tolton's life — perseverance, trust in God, incredible forgiveness and his priesthood.

Defilippis believes the time Tolton spent studying for the priesthood in Rome opened him up to the universality of a priest's ministry. He studied with men from all over the world and saw the church's history in places like the catacombs, the Coliseum and St. Peter's Basilica.

"Once he becomes a priest he's a priest for all. This is not a segregated situation, it's not a segregated mindset," Defilippis said.

The play doesn't shy away from the

harsh realities Tolton faced, such as severe prejudice against him from fellow priests in Quincy. The post-Reconstruction period was a troubled time for the United States, and tensions and violence were real. Tolton himself often spoke of being watched.

Defilippis believes that telling Tolton's story through art is a way to bring light into today's seemingly dark world.

"The highest form of art is when you not only entertain and inspire, but bring it to another level, of what we call evangelization of what actually touches hearts in a deep and impactful way that actually changes lives," he said. "That's what we've seen with these plays."

For more about the play, visit st-lukeproductions.com.

Archdiocese of Chicago
Cardinal Meyer Center
3525 S. Lake Park Ave.
Chicago, IL 60653
312.534.8367
www.toltoncanonization.org

St. Peter Church in Brush Creek, Missouri, the historical site of Father Tolton's baptism is part of the September tour. (Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic)



Save the dates

Pilgrimage from Chicago

Sept. 28-29, 2018

Visit sites in Brush Creek, Missouri, and Quincy, Illinois, important in Father Tolton's life

Annual Tolton Gala

Oct. 21, 2018

Navy Pier, Chicago

Call 312.534.8367 for more details on both events.