



TOLTON



The Father Tolton Guild Newsletter

FALL 2020

A Message from Bishop Joseph N. Perry

While researching his life and piloting the composition of his dossier for the authorities in Rome, it occurred to me that given the opportunity of an earlier life via time-travel I would have wanted to be a priest neighbor to Father Augustus Tolton. I would have wanted to go do fund-raising for him for his parish of St. Joseph in Quincy and the church construction of St. Monica Parish in Chicago. I would have wanted to coach him on how to deal with the apparent contradictions about race in that 19th century that crippled his ministry.

But, this is fanciful imagination, of course, for had I lived during Tolton's time I would have been part of his experience and experienced his isolation and been as poor as he was poor unable to move around comfortably navigating anxiously the choppy waters of racial acceptance as did he. Being the first, Father Tolton was terribly alone. No one knew what to do with him, about him or for him. Tolton had but few patrons who rebuked the conundrums of nationalist ideology and privilege that commandeered life in that day.

It is often asked about our first priest, *'what would Father Tolton think of these times, the 21st century, where some things have not changed.'*

I think it is important to see Father Tolton within his day and not our day. We understand him if we can study 19th century America for its

blessings as well as its deficits. But, for sake of the reflection, I can imagine Father Tolton, if he could peer into our day, being excited about what has changed with the plight of the black man through civil rights legislation while at the same time he would be surprised at today's racial unrest, racist assaults and prevailing attitudes that echo the situation of his day. I can imagine he would be troubled by the fact that people of color by and large remain strangers to people who hold the most influence to work for change; that some people are easily dismissed as abstractions with nothing to offer the experience of people of the dominant society.

In that time, Father Tolton was found a loving priest pioneer of reconciliation of the races. In our conversation with him we can ask him to look with compassion on our wounded nation from his place among the saints and angels and plead with him for holy assistance in our time of crisis.

Tolton stood alone. There were no civil rights then and but few discernible conceptions of universal human rights. Institutions were enmeshed in attitudes of white superiority believing the natural condition of black people meant that we/they were to be kept at arm's length. Words like *segregation, discrimination, racism* were hardly known in common parlance, until around World War II in this country when these terms began to emerge in the lexicon of social protest.

Tolton from a boy onward witnessed two faces of the Church in America, the Church represented by Fr. Peter McGirr and Notre Dame Sister Herlinde Sick, Fr. Michael Richardt, Vatican Cardinal Giovanni Simeoni, Archbishop Patrick Feehan of Chicago, people who were visionaries about what the church could be and should be. They knew that if the Church was to adequately minister to former slaves they deserved clergy and religious of their racial definition. They thought Tolton could be a part of that vision.

But those well-meaning priests and religious ran up against the unreadiness of society and the church satisfied with popular understandings of the natural condition of black people being subservient, of lesser status, and doubtful human dignity. That other face of the church was represented by Fr. Michael Weiss who called Tolton the *Nigger priest* and led a whispering campaign against Father Tolton. That other face of the Church included area ministers of other traditions who accused Tolton of making inroads with Romanism, adding fuel to the anti-Catholic sentiment in vogue at that time. And even his bishop, James Ryan, who eventually told him to go elsewhere because the visual of whites and blacks associating under the same roof was unacceptable, as he was impertinent to articulate in response to Rome's inquiry about Tolton's troubles.

So, Tolton's greatest suffering was probably his aloneness and loneliness and ecclesial abandonment that took a toll on his emotional and physical health. He had become used to absorbing racial taunts and slurs aimed at him and the people he served. His tranquil nature presented him unable to dole out what was dished out to him. On a strictly civic level, the courts had set in stone Jim Crow and the humiliations that go with it, the *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850, the *Dred Scott vs Sanford Decision* of 1857 and the *Plessy vs Ferguson Decision* of 1896. With the latter two rulings of the highest

court of the land blacks were left to be treated haphazardly with but few if any avenues of recourse.

Through it all, Tolton recognized in the Catholic Church the means of uniting people of every race and proclaiming the dignity of all people. With his insight and pastoral zeal he attracted men and women of every skin tone to his preachments and sacramental anointings which unfortunately got him into trouble in Quincy. In face of seminaries that gave him "no" for an answer or no response at all. In face of the denunciations of a fellow priest nemesis, Tolton forsook anger or resentment, choosing instead to assist the neediest at every turn with his priesthood while summoning the sons and daughters of former slave and of former slaveholders to put God's love into practice.

Tolton challenged the Catholic Church he loved to be and do its best by its dark children. The words of Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, that were spoken in tribute to the recently deceased Congressman and civil rights activist, John Lewis (d. July 17, 2020), can equally be said of Father Augustus Tolton, namely: "*Even though the world around him gave him every cause for bitterness, he treated everyone with respect and love.*" It is uniquely Christian to do so.

While we are in vigil for Rome to beatify him we plead with Tolton to fill our hearts with urgent passion to heal and assist, protect and serve and stand in solidarity with all people especially those prejudged or cast aside.

May Father Tolton help us open our eyes to the incalculable value of each of his sons and daughters. May we recognize in his heroic virtue an urgent call to listen, engage, understand, reconcile and give meaningful help at every opportunity both individually and collectively as church. May Tolton's example of conviction, tenacity, understanding, long-suffering and self-emptying service inspire us as we set about restoring and renewing our society and our Church.

Canonization Timeline

MARCH 1, 2010

The Augustus Tolton Cause for canonization as a saint is announced by Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago

FEBRUARY 24, 2011

The Cause for the Beatification and Canonization of Augustus Tolton Proclamation and First Public Session is held at St. James Chapel at the Archbishop Quigley Center, Chicago

FEBRUARY 13, 2012

The Congregation for Causes of Saints at the Vatican grants the title "*Servant of God*" to Augustus Tolton and orders the Archdiocese of Chicago to proceed with the Diocesan Inquiry into his life and virtues.

SEPTEMBER 29, 2014

The Tolton dossier is completed and the Diocesan Phase of the investigation into the life and virtues of Father Tolton is ceremoniously brought to a close, is bound, ribboned at St. James Chapel and dispatched to the Vatican by diplomatic pouch.

MARCH 19, 2015

The official opening of the Acts of the Archdiocesan Inquiry into the life and virtues of Father Tolton at the Congregation for Causes of Saints, the Vatican

APRIL 17, 2015

The Congregation for Causes of Saints at the Vatican declared in the affirmative the juridical validity of the Archdiocesan Inquiry into the life and virtues of Father Tolton

DECEMBER 9–10, 2016

Staffs of Catholic Cemeteries of the Diocese of Springfield and the Archdiocese of Chicago, in the presence of Bishop Thomas Paprocki and Bishop Joseph Perry, exhume the remains of Father Augustus Tolton at St. Peter Cemetery in Quincy, Illinois. Tolton's remains are examined by a team composed of a medical examiner and forensic and anthropology specialists. The findings are documented, the body is enfolded within a new set of priestly vestments and is reinterred awaiting news of his approval for beatification. The report of the exhumation is sent to Rome.

MARCH 18, 2018

Historical Consultants to the Congregation for Causes of Saints review the official position on the Servant of God Augustus Tolton and voted unanimously that his Cause can move forward to eventually make its way to the desk of the Holy Father

FEBRUARY 5, 2019

Theological Consultants to the Congregation for Causes of Saints review the official position on the Servant of God Augustus Tolton and voted unanimously that his Cause can move forward to eventually make its way to the desk of the Holy Father.

MAY 21, 2019

The cardinals and archbishops assigned to the Congregation for Causes of Saints meet to garner their votes and recommendation to the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Causes of Saints to take to the pope.

JUNE 11, 2019

Pope Francis issues the declaration stating that Father Augustus Tolton lived a life of heroic virtue and advances him to the title, "*Venerable Father Augustus Tolton.*"

Q&A

QUESTION:

When – and how- can a “Servant of God” or “Venerable” or “Blessed be invoked in public prayer?

ANSWER:

When the Church invokes a saint in the public prayer – for example, during the Litany of Saints at an ordination – a member of the saints is being asked to pray on behalf of the whole Church. In fact, this is a fundamental aspect of the rite of canonization: the praying of the Litany of the Saints with the inclusion of the one being canonized. The newly canonized is thus invoked in an approved formula, in the name of the Church and through a legitimate delegation.

Blesseds “are usually venerated with celebrations on a local level in places where they were born, where they died, [or] where their relics are preserved” (Instruction *Calendaria Particularia*, Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, 25). When one is declared a blessed he may have shrines built in his name, churches placed under his patronage, and feast days established to honor what God has done in him. Nevertheless, the papal act of beatification “is permissive, not prescriptive, and is not infallible (although no beatification has ever been rescinded).”¹ That said, the blessed is worthy of emulation and able to “enjoy a public cult of praise,” and also a “public cult of authentic relics.”²

“Venerable” is a title bestowed by the pope that recognizes the heroic virtue of the person or that the person died a martyr’s death as a result of *odium Fidei* (hatred of the faith). While the Christian faithful may ask for the venerable’s intercession privately and even promote the cause for his canonization, the Church waits upon the Lord to confirm the person’s status

through a miracle before invoking him or her in public prayer. So, while “panegyric speeches about Servants of God... are prohibited in Churches,” it would seem that such speeches may take place after the person is declared “venerable.”³

A person is given the title of “Servant of God” when the cause for canonization is begun. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints is very clear that “one must also refrain, even outside of Church, from any acts which could mislead the faithful into thinking that the inquiry conducted by the Bishop into the life of the Servant of God and his virtues or martyrdom carries with it the certitude that the Servant of God will be one day canonized.”⁴

The public cult of Saint Teresa of Calcutta has been “formally extended to the universal Church. The feast of Blessed Solanus Casey (July 30), on the other hand, may only be celebrated in the Archdiocese of Detroit, his religious community, and a few other dioceses where part of his pastoral work took place. The *Venerable* Augustus Tolton may not have a public cult directed to him, though he may be publicly lifted up as an example to emulate, and people may pray for his intercession and canonization privately. The cause for the canonization of the *Servant of God*, Dorothy Day, is still underway and so there is, as of yet, no declaration of her as “Venerable.” Therefore, while the Servant of God might be known for her holiness, the Church patiently waits for the process of inquiry to take its course.

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¹ Dom Basil Watkins, ed., *The Book of Saints: A Comprehensive Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), 785.

² P. Molinari and G.B. O’Donnell, “Canonization of Saints (History and Procedure),” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 14 vols. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2003), 3:61-66, at 65

³ Congregation for the Causes of Saints, *Norms to be Observed in Inquiries Made by Bishops in the Causes of Saints* (07 February 1983), no. 36

⁴ *Ibid.*

Prayer

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 us
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 request 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 our God, living and reigning forever and ever.

Amen

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