

Servant of God Augustus Tolton

The first African American priest born in the United States was Augustus Tolton. He was born a slave on April 1, 1854; his parents, Peter Paul and Martha Jane Tolton, were owned by the Eliots of Ralls County, Missouri. The Eliots were Catholics, and they had all of their slaves baptized.

When the Civil War began, Peter Paul escaped to the north and joined the Union Army. He was one of 180,000 blacks who were killed in the war. Martha Tolton decided to follow her husband's wishes and seek freedom. With four children in tow, she was able to cross the Mississippi River. She settled the family in Quincy, Illinois, and began to attend Mass. The pastor was very accommodating, but when the Tolton children were enrolled in the parish school, the white parents balked at the integrated classrooms.

The community of sisters at the parish, members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, tutored the Tolton children privately. As he matured, Augustus began to feel called to be a priest. His local parish priests tried to get a diocesan seminary in the United States to accept him, but they didn't give up when they were unsuccessful. Finally, in 1878, the Franciscan College in Quincy did accept him; two years later his parish priests secured his admission at a Church-sponsored college in Rome. Fr. Augustus Tolton was ordained on April 24, 1886.

Fr. Tolton expected that he would be sent to Africa to serve the missions, but the cardinal in charge of the seminary in Rome surprised him with an assignment back in Quincy. "America needs Negro priests," he was told. "America has been called the most enlightened nation; we will see now whether it deserves the honor."

Fr. Tolton was assigned as pastor at St. Joseph's Church in Quincy. Though it was a black parish, many German and Irish Catholics joined in order to be able to hear the dynamic Fr. Tolton preach. Some pastors and other neighboring parishes invited Fr. Tolton to preach at their Masses. However, at least one local pastor was jealous of Fr. Tolton's success. Racial comments and innuendo disturbed his work in Quincy to the point that Archbishop Patrick Feenan of Chicago assigned Fr. Tolton to St. Augustine Church (later renamed St. Monica's) on the south side of Chicago. The parish was so poor that there was no place for Fr. Tolton to live. Friends and parishioners raised money to rent an apartment for Fr. Tolton. His mother and sister also lived with him.

On July 9, 1897, after a week-long retreat in Bourbonnais, Illinois, Fr. Tolton returned home to Chicago. The temperature that day was more than 100 degrees. Walking the one block from the train station to the rectory, Fr. Tolton collapsed and died of heatstroke. He was forty-three years old.

Spearheaded by the Archdiocese of Chicago, Fr. Augustus Tolton's cause for canonization was opened officially by the Church in 2011. He was designated as "Servant of God" and can now be referred to as Servant of God Augustus Tolton.

Reading Comprehension

1. How was Fr. Tolton's faith instilled in him as a young man, even while he and his family were living under the yoke of slavery?
2. What obstacles did Fr. Tolton face while pursuing his vocation to the priesthood?
3. What was surprising about Fr. Tolton's priestly assignment in Quincy, Illinois?
4. What incidents led to Fr. Tolton's reassignment to Chicago?

Writing Task

Research the current progress of Fr. Augustus Tolton's cause for canonization. Write a three-paragraph summary updating the process through today.

Explaining the Faith

What unique roles do Catholic schools fill in American society?

The world is filled with different educational models, both in the public and in the private sectors. In the United States today, there are many types of schools: traditional “brick and mortar” public schools, online schools, charter schools, and religious schools of many kinds. Many children today are educated at home school and taught by their parents.

Catholic education holds a strong place in today’s educational landscape. Catholic schools fill unique roles in the United States. For example, Catholic schools

- allow students to learn more about Catholicism, to express their faith, and to dialogue with others about matters of faith in an open way;
- invite students to consider “the bigger picture” of life and to discuss the eternal truths regarding the Kingdom of God;
- show students ways to bring Christ’s teachings into the world both before and after graduation through a thought-provoking academic curriculum; and
- enrich students’ faith lives by centering their studies on the Gospel and reinforcing what they ideally learn about at home.

Catholic schools in the United States are truly American, instilling national pride and educating students to be good and productive citizens.



Further Research

What is the importance of schools, especially regarding Christian education and formation? Base your answer on Pope Paul VI’s document *Gravissimum Educationis* (*Declaration on Christian Education*), found at www.vatican.va.

Chapter 8 Teacher Resources

Faithful Disciple: Servant of God Augustus Tolton

Reading Comprehension

1. How was Fr. Tolton’s faith instilled in him as a young man, even while he and his family were living under the yoke of slavery? *His family’s owners were Catholics and had their slaves baptized. When the Civil War began, his family escaped, and ultimately his mother began attending Mass with her children in Quincy, Illinois, where they settled. Fr. Tolton and his siblings were tutored by the community of sisters at the parish.*
2. What obstacles did Fr. Tolton face while pursuing his vocation to the priesthood? *White parents wouldn’t accept him and his siblings at the parish school. For quite a while, no diocesan seminary would accept him, despite the efforts of his local parish priests.*
3. What was surprising about Fr. Tolton’s priestly assignment in Quincy, Illinois? *First, it was surprising to Fr. Tolton that he was assigned there, as he expected to be assigned to a mission in Africa. Then many German and Irish Catholics began to join his black parish to hear his dynamic preaching. He was even invited to preach at other local Masses.*
4. What incidents led to Fr. Tolton’s reassignment to Chicago? *Jealousy from other local pastors led to racial comments and innuendo that disturbed his work in Quincy to the point that the archbishop reassigned him to Chicago.*

Writing Task

Research the current progress of Fr. Augustus Tolton’s cause for canonization. Write a three-paragraph summary updating the process through today. *Students might begin their research at the official website for Fr. Tolton’s cause for canonization (www.toltoncanonization.org), which offers a great deal of information. Accept student summaries that provide an accurate and clear history of the process, from the time it was opened in 2011 until today.*

Additional Background Information

The official website for Fr. Tolton’s cause for canonization is found at www.toltoncanonization.org. The website includes a “What Can I Do” link under “The Cause.” One request made is for people to offer the special canonization prayer found at tolton.archchicago.org/prayer.

Fr. Tolton was featured as part of a *National Catholic Reporter* series on black saints. See his biography as well as links to those of other featured saints at “Black Saints: Augustus Tolton,” *National Catholic Register*, November 20, 2013, www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/black-saints-augustus-tolton.

Here is a news article describing a major step forward in the canonization process: “Father Tolton’s Remains Exhumed, Verified; His Cause Takes Step Forward,” *National Catholic Register*, December 28, 2016, www.ncronline.org/news/people/fr-toltons-remains-exhumed-verified-his-cause-takes-step-forward.

Explaining the Faith

What unique roles do Catholic schools fill in American society?

Further Research

What is the importance of schools, especially regarding Christian education and formation? Base your answer on Pope Paul VI's document *Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education)*, found at www.vatican.va. *Student responses will vary. The document emphasizes that parents are the primary educators of their children and that their unique call to form their children in the Faith is one that should be supported by schools as well as by the Church. Even nonreligious schools should support the primary rights of parents, but Catholic schools in particular are called to "create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith."*

Additional Background and Resources

The Alliance for Catholic Education at the University of Notre Dame has summarized Church documents and research studies that articulate the importance of Catholic schools and reasons why the entire Catholic community should support efforts to sustain and strengthen these institutions. Visit "Why Catholic Schools?" at ace.nd.edu/advocates/why-catholic-schools to find a number of helpful links and statistics.