

# Augustus Tolton



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Augustus Tolton was born in Missouri in 1854 into slavery. He was baptized and raised Catholic. At the beginning of the War Between the States, his family became runaways. His father fled to join the Union Army. When his mother heard there were slave traders in the area interested in children, she managed a harrowing escape with her three children to the free state of Illinois. Augustus was seven years old.

By age nine, Augustus joined his mother and older brother working in a cigar factory ten hours a day, six days a week. His mother sent the children to the all-white Catholic school during the months each year that the factory closed. The parish rebelled and the children were tormented. After trying several other schools, Augustus was tutored by the sisters and later by priests. Augustus attended daily Mass before going to work at the factory. He wanted to be a priest, but seminary after seminary and various religious orders said “no.” Augustus never lost hope. He finally was accepted at the Urban Pontifical Seminary in Rome.

In Rome, Augustus was prepared for the mission countries of Africa and the United States. Knowing the racist attitudes at home, he expected to go to Africa and therefore studied many African cultures and languages. Two days before ordination Augustus was told by the Cardinal Prefect that he would serve in the United States. The Cardinal said, “America has been called the most enlightened nation. We will see if it deserves that honor. If the United States has never before seen a black priest, it must see one now.” A dismayed Fr. Augustus Tolton, the first American priest publicly known as black, sailed for home.

He said his first Mass in the United States at St. Benedict the Moor Church in New York. The pews were crowded with black Catholics. The celebration was glorious. Fr. Tolton was greeted with cheers in Quincy, Illinois. He soon became well known for his eloquent sermons and beautiful singing voice. Black and white people attended his services. White persons contributed to the church and parish school. Soon there was jealousy and bigotry among some area priests. Fr. Tolton was told he could only serve black people. The situation became intolerable.

Fr. Tolton was transferred to Chicago. There he was assigned the care of all the black Catholics. His congregation met in the basement of a church, then they moved to a store front. Again, both black and white persons came attracted by his homilies and his spiritual wisdom and advice. The neighborhood was very poor. Fr. Tolton spent many hours walking the back alleys and visiting the hovels and tenements. He brought spiritual and material assistance.

His pastoral sensitivities brought hope and comfort and mitigated the sorrow and suffering. Fr. Tolton's reputation spread and he was asked to speak across the country to audiences of both races. This he did reluctantly, but his parish needed the money he raised.

*"We open the door to the Church. We do not tell people to go out."*

Worn out from his pastoral concerns, Fr. Augustus Tolton died at age 43. When his body was taken to Quincy for burial as he requested, no eulogy was given. The people said his life was its own eulogy. Fr. Tolton wanted to be a priest sharing the "Good News" with everyone without distinction. Faced with prejudice and resentment, he returned no criticism or bitterness and welcomed all. He said, "We open the door to the Church. We do not tell people to go out." Fr. Tolton brought people together in service and praise of God. He reminded people that the Catholic Church deplores a double slavery, that of mind and that of the body, and that the Church wants to free us from both. At the centennial of his death he was lauded as a man who was surrounded with racism and its tragic consequences yet believed there was no way to stop the movement of the Lord and power of the Spirit.

In 2010 the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois proposed Fr. Augustus Tolton for canonization. In June of 2019, Pope Francis gave him the title of Venerable.

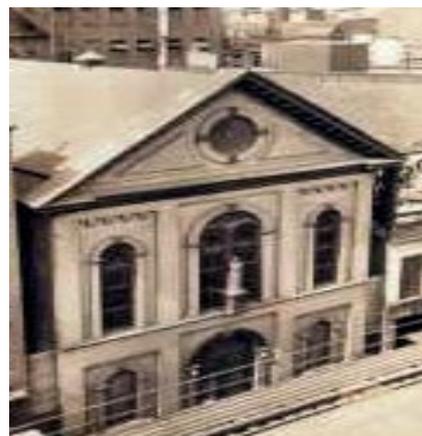
## Venerable Father Augustus Tolton

You served in a nation where racial equality was elusive. This is true of our nation and world today. Help me to recognize goodness in everyone and to welcome the grace of inclusivity. Together we can be one human family. This I believe as you did.

Amen



Church of the Nativity  
of Our Lord



St. Benedict the Moor Church - NYC