

ZE10032210 - 2010-03-22

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-28721?l=english>

1st Black Priest in US Might Be Recognized a Saint

Archdiocese of Chicago Opens Cause for Father Tolton

CHICAGO, MARCH 22, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- After being born into slavery and living a priestly ministry overshadowed by racism, the first U.S. priest of African descent might become one of the Church's canonized saints.

Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago, announced at the beginning of this month that the cause for canonization of Father Augustine (also called Augustus) Tolton has been introduced.

"We need his prayers and his help, especially to become a more united Church," Cardinal George said in *Catholic New World*, the archdiocesan paper. "Secondly, his example of priestly dedication, his learning and preaching, are great examples for our seminarians and priests and should inspire the laity."

Suffering with Jesus

Augustine Tolton (1854-1897) was 9 years old when his mother escaped slavery with him and his two siblings. The family went to Quincy, Illinois, where he was eventually enrolled in St. Peter's Catholic school. It was there that he began to feel God was calling him to be a priest.

However, he was rejected by every seminary in the United States, and was eventually sent to Rome for his studies. It was thought he would be a missionary priest in Africa. He was ordained at St. John Lateran in 1886, but the day before his ordination, he was told he would be sent back to the States.

Father Tolton knew the sacrifice this would imply but united his sufferings to those of Jesus.

He returned to Quincy, but racism inhibited his ministry and he appealed to move to Chicago, a request that was granted in 1889.

Father Tolton began ministering to the community of black Catholics there and soon they needed their own church. It opened in a storefront in 1891, later to be known as St. Monica's.

During that time, Father Tolton corresponded with the future St. Katharine Drexel, and her community provided financial support for his new parish.

He worked exhaustively for his parish, and at just 43, died from a heat stroke while returning from a priests' retreat.

Collecting data

Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry is organizing Father Tolton's canonization cause. Though the cause is considered "ancient" because there are no living witnesses, Bishop Perry said in the diocesan newspaper, "I

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think we have enough material for Rome's initial examination."

"Father Tolton worked valiantly in this city and in Quincy and through it all remained a faithful and dutiful priest and Catholic," the bishop said. "He didn't leave. He stuck with it. [...]"

"His quiet witness is a challenge to our prejudices and narrow mindedness that keeps us insulated from the variety in the kingdom of God."

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On the Net:

A biography of Father Tolton:

www.amazon.com/Slave-Priest-Biography-Reverend-Augustine/dp/158617097X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=

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