



TOLTON



The Father Tolton Guild Newsletter

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Father Augustus Tolton and Daniel Rudd

By Bishop Joseph Perry, postulator

History is a powerful venue for reflecting on our evolution as a people, as a society. History can also serve as a guidebook to our present as well as a compass pointing to our future.

Here I offer some reflections on two 19th-century personages operative at the cusp of the black Catholic experience, two men who have indelible places in the annals of African American Catholic history in the United States: one a priest-pastor, the other a lay Catholic businessman-entrepreneur-social activist. The two men are contemporaries, knew each other, collaborated with each other for the benefit of the black race in this country.

I speak of Daniel Arthur Rudd and Father Augustus Tolton; Rudd as the founder of the Black Catholic Congresses, first known as the Colored Catholic Congresses. He was strategic in programming the first five such congresses, and was founder of the American Catholic Tribune for black Catholics; and Father Augustus Tolton whom history dubs as the first black Catholic priest to serve in this country. Tolton courageously crossed boundaries set between black and white to present a Church useful to and embracing of God's dark children, and was pastor of the first black Catholic church in Chicago, St. Monica.

These two men proved prominent at a time when the baptismal summons of the laity and lay ministry were not quite imagined. Both men lived through our Civil War, fought to repair a nation torn to shreds between north and south — grey and blue, burdened by a subtext about the morality and expediency of black uncompensated servitude.

By time of the war, (1861-1865) the descendants of the African slave trade had been circumscribed in brutal bondage approaching 250 years. The lines of demarcation between black and white were by then encoded in the nation's DNA such that anyone and anything black was generally deemed inferior and destined to serve the lives of whites who had already robbed the lands of its original Native



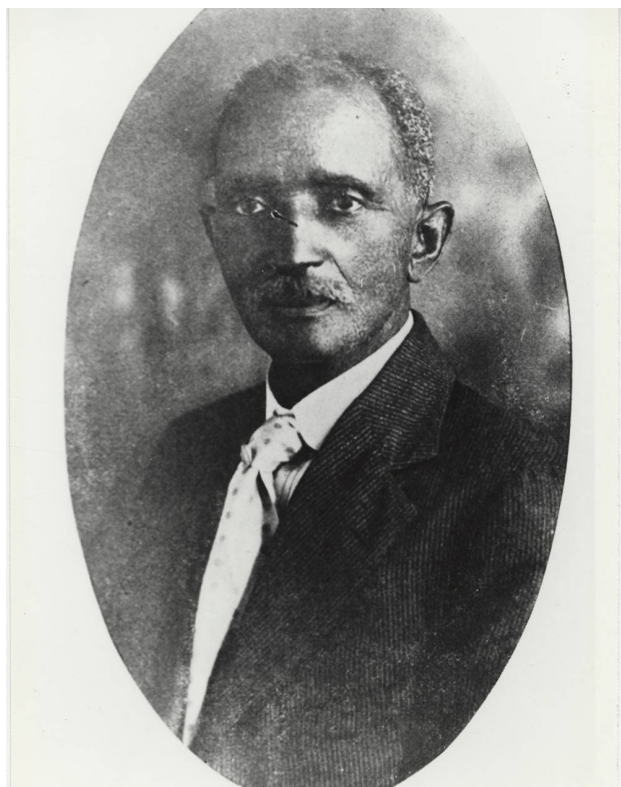
1892 Colored Catholic Congress. Wikimedia Commons

inhabitants and were poised through various army campaigns and government edicts to lend a Final Solution to the Indian problem.

Rudd and Tolton both were born in the year 1854 — Rudd Aug. 7 on a plantation in Bardstown, Kentucky and Tolton April 1 on a farm in Brush Creek Missouri. Both lived out their youth during the campaign of the Civil War. Both were given the Catholic religion in childhood, both proved devout Catholics and, in their adulthood, devoted their lives to advancing the cause of freed people of color and promoted Catholicism in their life's work to the benefit of emancipated blacks.

Rudd was freed of enslavement as a young adult and moved to Springfield, Ohio. Tolton grabbed freedom as a youngster with his mother and two siblings crossing the treacherous Mississippi River through the secret Underground Railroad to freedom in Quincy, Illinois.

Both were destined to pick up the pieces of freedom following Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, navigating further the choppy waters of racial acceptance. Both were staged to chart what freedom possibly meant for the sons and daughters of the



Daniel Rudd

enslaved in a land hesitant and without methods to adjust blacks in society who had been robbed the benefits of resources, education and development with which to withstand a democracy seen to be tailored for persons exclusively of the white race.

During the active adult years of these two men, virulent anti-Catholicism and Nationalism were rampant resulting in American Catholics being physically threatened through terror spelled as arson attacks on churches and convents, and denunciations of the Catholic religion in popular press and public speaking events. Complicating the social situation further was the debate about the morality and expediency of slavery defining the economic system of the country.

Rudd believed the Catholic Church would effectively take up the cause of Black Americans and end the color line following numbers of black religious conversions. He believed that by reason of eventual mass conversions of freed blacks to the Catholic Church, the Church would therefore benefit from numbers of blacks as adherents.

That was his great hypothesis, according to historian Fr. Cyprian Davis OSB. Tolton in various speeches delivered around the country stated frequently that the Catholic Church had the means and the desire and the wherewithal to assist the black race. Tolton spoke of this as the Church forbidding double slavery — slavery of the mind and slavery of the body where the Church endeavored to free us of both ... "the Catholic Church (is) the true Liberator of the race," Tolton said.

Rudd and Tolton were in sync with each other believing that the Catholic Church was the great hope for blacks in this country. At a Church in Janesville, Wisconsin, 1891, Tolton lectured that:

"The Catholic Church teaches all nations, there is no color line there ... she is the one that has all nations in her fold, all nations offering up sacrifice, she alone always and has been to this day the true teacher, true emancipator of the colored race ... Jesus came to teach and to die for not this race or that; he came to form not this class of men or that but all mankind and all races of men wrapped up in the darkest slavery of sin and ignorance ... we should go to that

church since it teaches that all men are equal in the sight of the Almighty.”

It was an era where there were no visible social or governmental programs for blacks in particular or for poor peoples. There was no strategy for the assimilation of freed blacks following the degradations of slavery and the surprise that came with the Emancipation edict and what it possibly meant for a disenfranchised race. Blacks were thus left to be haphazardly treated by a society responding with ambivalence toward them — on one side of the equation sectors of the population vehemently angry at Emancipation and its prospects, and on the other side, abolitionists many of them intellectuals and religiously motivated persons who opposed slavery largely on moral grounds. Meanwhile, North and South were poised to slaughter each other over this issue to the tune of 650,000 on the various battlefields and uncounted others off the battlefields.

Although he never dwelt on the title, Tolton turned out the first Catholic priest of African descent to be ordained for service anywhere in the United States and bore the cross for being so. Tolton as a youth enjoyed the tutelage of German and Irish priests and nuns who prepared him for higher studies following unsuccessful attempts to educate him in Catholic elementary and public schools. Noticed to have a religious tone about him, he was gradually brought up to par with the academic basics and Franciscan friars of the U.S. Sacred Heart Province maneuvered his acceptance to a seminary in Rome to study for the priesthood. In Rome he found overwhelming acceptance amidst a multi-racial/multi-ethnic environment of other young men preparing for the holy priesthood to be launched to missionary outposts around the world.

Rudd appears to have had a smoother road with education though we don't know the specifics. He later was conspicuous as a journalist, writer, editor, printer and businessman and used these avocations for purposes of communication and information disseminated to black communities across the country. Tolton was a priest-pastor preaching and offering sacraments to both black and white when it was socially unacceptable if not unlawful to do so, and which unfortunately

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raised the ire of fellow priests and ministers of other faiths who turned on him seeing him as an intruder upon the racial status-quo in mid-state Illinois. Tolton was referred to by a fellow pastor and Dean of the area as that “Nigger priest” and his parish that “Nigger Church.” He was ordered more than once to keep whites from voluntarily coming to his church.

The local bishop, counseled by the local dean and Tolton's nemesis, proved unable or unwilling to effectively intervene with fairness with the situation and eventually advised Tolton after three years to go elsewhere. The kindly Archbishop of Chicago, Patrick Feehan, hearing of Tolton's crisis invited him to come and assist with thirty-some freed blacks, escaped slaves, freed people of color who worshipped in the basement of a downtown Catholic Church.

Both Rudd and Tolton managed to minister to black Catholics and the wider community despite the disparities, incongruities and paradoxes associated with race prevalent at that time. Tolton benignly ministered to whomever came to him for counsel or the sacraments. Even Protestants summoned him to their death beds. He felt free to do this in Chicago, albeit being confined to an area of the city that was overwhelmingly populated by the abject poor, black and white. He accomplished building the first level of a Church, St. Monica, on the south side's 36th & Dearborn streets. He would not live to see its completion due to lack of funds.

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Tolton carried on regular correspondence with Mother (now Saint) Katharine Drexel and Josephite Father James Slattery and officials of the Vatican who stood as his superiors to whom he reported on his progress as a young priest and the pastoral challenges of racial confinement, while raising funds for building a church and yet unable to take a salary due to the poverty of his congregation.

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Rudd elicited the assistance of Father Tolton who addressed the first Colored Catholic Congress held in Washington DC 1889 with 200 men delegates. In the course of the meeting, delegates were treated to an audience

with President Grover Cleveland at the White House.

Rudd would direct the Congress movement until 1894-Baltimore before these annual conventions went into hiatus for stretch of about a hundred years. In the intervening years, the black community more than likely was distracted by the terror entailed in Jim Crow and other lawless customs that continued to marginalized and disenfranchise the African American community.

They would not be reactivated again until 1987 in Washington, D.C. Father Tolton collaborated with Rudd as chaplain to at least the first three Congresses before he took ill and spoke formally at a couple of them about the hopes and dreams for the advancement of blacks. Congress participants found Tolton intriguing and always wanted to discover what his journey was like reaching the exalted ranks of the Catholic priesthood. Tolton always gave tribute to those who helped him along the way, the priests and nuns and white benefactors of his first mission church in Quincy and now in Chicago.

Tolton was a news sensation for the black community while he was an anomaly for the wider community. We have on file the minutes of the first three Colored Catholic Congresses.

The Congresses turned out to be to this day the primordial assembly of black Catholics. One address delivered at the 1893 Congress is interesting because it included participants' feelings about their attitudes toward and their understanding of what it meant to be black and Catholic. They insisted on mentioning how proud they were to be Catholic, how grateful they were to the Church and then went on to say that they were compelled to speak out against race prejudice because they viewed this contrary to Catholic teaching.

These words are interesting in that a social justice consciousness was emerging in church context that really was nowhere else evident until the impact on the Church made by the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Rudd and Tolton singlehandedly led the black Catholic cause of their day. There were no others that have reached recorded history

of that period. Both were devout Catholics who saw rightly, if not optimistically, an affirmative future for blacks following slavery and championed a role for the Catholic Church in that future. Like their civic counterparts in the name of the racial struggle the two men had but mere snippets of support from the wider community.

The visible role of the Catholic Church with racial justice would feature individual charismatic priests and nuns, sympathetic bishops and lay Catholics. Lacking was a more corporate pastoral strategy needed for freed blacks to effectively participate throughout the broad venues of American and ecclesial life.

The Catholic Church in the name of its bishops began making official statements decrying racism in 1958 and made at least ten such statements over the years on up to the most recent the 2018 "Open Wide Our Hearts." These 10 documents are remarkable and unique for their erudite exploration of the race problem in this country with current statistical analyses, sociology and theology and anthropology and their moral summons of the wider Catholic community. The compendium of Social Justice Teaching of the Church alongside the Catechism of the Catholic Church appeared during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II in the 1980s that defined in clear terms the human, civil and ecclesial rights of persons.

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Individual bishops were also found to write pastoral letters to their flocks on topics of race relations over the years. But what happened in individual parishes and schools was here and there something different reflective of the conflictual mood of the broader society regarding race.

It continues to be a struggle to see how rights and privileges in the Church are guaranteed when the larger surrounding civil society continues to exhibit hesitancy in the name of rollbacks of civil rights, voter rights, affirmative action and overturning disparities in areas such as education, decent housing, economic opportunity and health care. Noted, the Catholic Church has stepped into these areas with its organized charities, education and campaign financial assistance to minister to the black community and other marginalized groups along the way.

Much remains to be done to overhaul a society's mindset which for centuries has suffered visual and emotional dissonance when peoples of dark complexion enter the spaces that European-Americans have amassed for themselves.

A year and a half following his migration to Chicago 1889 at the invitation of the Archbishop Patrick Feehan, Father Tolton began to lay plans for the construction of a parish church for blacks. Back then, parishes were organized along ethnic and linguistic lines. Every language group had their own parish and a pastor speaking their language. There was no cultural diversity to speak of, no multi-cultural mixing as such. And blacks in most instances could not secure a welcome in white churches outside sitting in pews located in the rear or in balconies, if that.

In 1885, Rudd founded the first newspaper printed by and for black Americans called The Ohio Tribune. It was a local weekly with limited scope and did not do well. The paper later was re-founded as The American Catholic Tribune, the first black-owned national Catholic newspaper. Rudd worked to make the paper important for promoting the Church as a transformational institution that was capable of bringing equality and social justice for African Americans.

Rudd is quoted as saying: “the Catholic Church alone can break the color line. Our people should help her do it.” But the paper folded in 1897 during an economic recession that hit the nation to say nothing of increased competition from other businesses, and the newspaper industry in places like Cincinnati and Philadelphia did not help. 1897 was also the year Fr. Tolton died due to complications of heat stroke July 9 during a heat wave that hit Chicago with sustained temperatures over the stretch of days in excess of 100 degrees that killed some sixty people in the city.

Rudd’s efforts with the papers followed a Frederick Douglas-like advocacy that was aimed at protecting the civil rights of African Americans in the period of Reconstruction when white supremacists were surfacing bent on retrieving losses due to the War and rolling back the positives following Emancipation. Rudd believed that the press played a large role in black advancement. Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore and the bishops of Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Covington, Columbus, Richmond, Vincennes and Wilmington all lent their endorsement of the Tribune.

Rudd was a good businessman who knew how to reach out to others who thought like him and wanted to push for change for blacks. He needed funds the source of which he ended up relying on his own genius by using the Tribune to promote his own printing school. This allowed him expansion of his business ventures printing custom cards, letterheads, envelopes, invoices, pamphlets, books, legal documents and advertisements. African Americans noticed his passion to fight for something that he as well as they believed in. Bishops, priests, laity and even Protestants gave him financial support in this vein.

But the larger pressing issue of rights and equality for blacks lingered.

The efforts with the Congresses were meant to lift Catholic African Americans in the eyes of God and in humanity. Rudd’s advocacy reached farther than simple equality and justice and addressed national issues and problems such as legalized segregation. The infamous 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court decision

endorsed as constitutional Jim Crow with impunity; thereby the nation looked the other way while the nefarious problem of lynchings held sway unabated by the law, and while unemployment, labor strife and public-school segregation festered.

Tolton functioned on the church side, inside the Church, the pastoral side, creating some semblance of Catholic Church for blacks, constructing a church building with chiefly black labor as a monument to emerging black Catholicism parallel with other ethnic groups of European origin.

By 1892, Rudd’s newspaper reached 10,000 copies. His success led to the established Afro-American Press League — a consortium of two hundred some black newspapers published in the country for which he was nominated president.

By the time both men died (Tolton in 1897 and Rudd in 1933) neither Rudd nor Tolton lived to see the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams for the freed black race. The nation left unsolved the question of black slavery and for this reason a bad situation morphed into sustained racial segregation, terror and discrimination for another hundred years of a nefarious system of

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Jim Crow keeping blacks away from spaces that whites occupied.

Following Tolton's death, Rudd moved to the South and worked in Mississippi and Arkansas as a lumber manager, accountant and teacher. By this time, he had become disappointed with the very slow pace of the movement toward equality. Jim Crow had taken over that seemed to prompt him to look sympathetically at Booker T Washington's self-help philosophy instead of relying on religious faith and the Church to be allowed to effect social change. 19th century America was stuck in a social narrative that insisted black people were less worthy and less human on all counts. The stigma of blackness gripped the lives of former slaves leaving in its wake a visual and emotional dissonance suffered by whites whenever a black person encroached, lawfully or unlawful wise, the spaces where whites were invested.

Rudd suffered a stroke and died December 3, 1933, at the age of 79. Tolton had died of heat stroke at the age of 43 earlier in 1897. Rudd is buried in St. Joseph Cemetery; Bardstown Kentucky. Tolton is buried in St. Peter Cemetery in Quincy Illinois. Both men died as devout Catholics.

Rudd said of himself: "I have always been a Catholic and, feeling that I knew the teachings of the Catholic Church, I thought there could be no greater factor in solving the race problem than that matchless institution whose history for 1,900 years is but a continual triumph over all assailants... the whole Christian religion is based on the unity of the human race. Destroying this and fundamental laws are swept from existence. The Catholic Church has always taught this

truth and by that teaching has made present civilization possible."

Both Rudd and Tolton made great impact on American Catholicism and black Catholicism in particular. Both are described as highly intelligent and prepared men for the social struggle of their times, Rudd a good businessman, Tolton, a distinguished priest and pastor. Both Rudd and Tolton were fluent in several languages. Both harbored unbreakable faith in their Catholic upbringings and roots. Both men summoned the Church as well as society to be more – become – more than they were at the time. Both were prophets for their time. In 1888 an optimistic Rudd is quoted as saying:

"For a long time, the idea prevailed that the Negro was not wanted beyond the altar rail and for that reason no doubt hundreds of young colored men who would otherwise be officiating at the altar rail today have entered other walks. Now, that this mistaken idea has been dispelled by the advent of one full-blooded Negro priest, the Rev Augustus Tolton, many more have entered the seminaries in this country and Europe."

Two stalwart giants, black Catholic men, who by their lived example, continue to challenge and inspire black priests, brothers and laity to work with and support one another in a shared mission to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Both men to this day enjoy our profound respect and deepest gratitude for laying the first stepping stones upon which we step today in faith and hope for a better tomorrow and a better Church.

Sources:

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National Catholic Reporter, 25 July 2022 "Life of Black Journalist Daniel Rudd"

Tolton ambassadors gather at University of Notre Dame

By Deacon Mel Tardy, Tolton Ambassadors of Indiana

The Tolton Ambassador Corps. held its third national convocation July 7-9, 2025 at the University of Notre Dame, through the generosity of the Cushwa Center for American Catholicism. The ambassadors support the cause of sainthood for Venerable Augustus Tolton.

The convocation convened nearly 30 ambassadors in person for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic and since the untimely passing of the founder of the ambassador group Norbertine Father A. Gerard Jordan.

Seven of its nine regions sent ambassadors, including Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Washington, D.C.; South Bend, Indiana; Louisiana and Missouri. Bishop Joseph Perry, vice-postulator for Tolton's cause for sainthood, attended the entire convocation.

The convocation, held at the Morris Inn on the university's campus, included business meetings, the new Tolton biopic, regional reports and discussions of how to better live the four tasks of Tolton Ambassadors, which is to pray, catechize, evangelize and support Tolton's cause.

The ambassadors celebrated Mass at the historically Black St. Augustine Parish as well as the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at Notre Dame and, in the spirit of Tolton took part in outreach to residents in need at the Food Bank of Northern Indiana. The Indiana ambassadors donated \$2,667 toward Tolton's cause for canonization.



Tolton Ambassadors pose with Bishop Joseph Perry on the steps of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart at the University of Notre Dame on July 8, 2025.

At the closing Mass, Bishop Perry inducted four new ambassadors, including three from South Bend. The convocation caught the attention of local and national Catholic media, helping to foster awareness of Father Tolton's cause for sainthood.

Venerable Augustus Tolton's life is a Catholic story of faith, an American tale of hope and a human drama of love that resonates with many. May his life of holiness inspire us to seek out and learn about all seven of the U.S. Black Catholic candidates for sainthood: Venerable Pierre Toussaint, Venerable Henriette Delille, Venerable Father Augustus Tolton, Servant of God Mother Mary Lange, Servant of God Julia Greeley, Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman, and Servant of God Martin de Porres Maria Ward. O.F.M. Conv.

Venerable Father Tolton: pray for us! Amen.

Pilgrimage brings woman closer to Father Tolton

By Tanya Sanders, Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago

This summer, I shared an amazing spiritual journey with other Chicago Catholics on the Father Augustus Tolton pilgrimage to Quincy, Illinois, led by Bishop Joseph Perry. The pilgrimage had been on pause for several years after COVID.

We traveled by bus from Chicago to Quincy. There was a level of excitement and awe at what lay ahead. Our first stop was at the gravesite of Father Tolton in Quincy.

It's one thing to read, pray and learn about a person and a totally different experience

to stand at their gravesite, a physical acknowledgement of their life.

There is a large stone crucifix in the center of St. Peter's Cemetery that draws you to Father Tolton's grave. We prayed for Father Tolton and the Very Reverend Patrick McGirr, Father Tolton's mentor also buried at St. Peter's. Afterward we returned to the hotel to view Tolton Speaks, the documentary on Father Tolton based on his letters.

The next day we traveled to St. Peter's Catholic Church in Brush Creek, Missouri (near Rensselaer, Ralls County, Missouri) where Augustus Tolton was baptized. It is a tiny stone church built in 1845. There is a room behind the altar with pictures of Father Tolton and the first pilgrimage to this church led by Bishop Perry in 2017.

In back of the church is a gravesite. The Elliott family who owned the Toltons are buried there. Their names are on a large upright memorial. Hundreds of feet across from the Elliott's grave are the graves of countless slaves. Their names unwritten and unknown. The stark difference in acknowledgement of life even palpable after death was overwhelming, yet filled me with gratitude for the souls who lived before us.

We next traveled to Hannibal, Missouri, and said a prayer in front of the Mississippi River where Martha, Tolton's mother, escaped to freedom with Augustus and his two siblings. On our return to Quincy, we visited St. Joseph Church to view a marker at the corner of Seventh and Jersey Street where Father Tolton was pastor of St. Joseph's Church for about three years.

We toured Dr. Richard Eell's House in Quincy. Dr. Eell was a physician and abolitionist who helped escaped slaves in the Underground Railway. He was arrested and convicted in 1842 for housing Charles, an escaped slave who swam across the Mississippi River from Missouri to Quincy. Dr. Eell's home currently contains many artifacts from slavery including shackles, whips, bills of sale and articles detailing the horror of slavery.

Our next stop was St. Boniface Church where Father Tolton and his family attended Mass when he was a child and where he later celebrated his first Solemn High Mass after becoming a priest.

In the afternoon, our group attended vigil Mass at St. Peter's where Bishop Perry was co-celebrant. St. Peter's Church has a memorial wall with several metal plaques depicting the life of Father Tolton. We were warmly welcomed by the congregation. The evening ended over a shared meal at Tiramisu Italian restaurant with an abundance of food and conversation.

The next day, we visited the site of Harris Tobacco Factory at Fifth and Ohio Street. Augustus and his mother worked at Harris Tobacco Factory for many years. We then returned to the gravesite of Father Tolton where we placed flowers, sang and said prayers.

The pilgrimage was an impactful, inspirational journey on the life of Father Tolton highlighting his faith, struggles and triumphs. We gathered from various Chicago Catholic parishes, some of us meeting for the first time yet, departed united witnesses on the life of Father Tolton.



The pilgrimage group poses for a photo at along the Mississippi River in Hannibal, Missouri, where Martha Tolton crossed to freedom with her children.

A look back at exhumation of Father Tolton's remains



Above, tents were erected over Father Tolton's burial site in St. Peter Cemetery in Quincy, Illinois, on Dec. 10, 2016, for the exhumation. Below the skull of Father Tolton as it is being uncovered. Photos by Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic

By Chicago Catholic

On the morning of Dec. 10, 2016 in a cemetery in Quincy, Illinois, Venerable Father Augustus Tolton's cause for canonization took one step further as his remains were exhumed and verified.

The exhumation of a holy person's remains as part of their cause for canonization is a reverent and well thought out part of church law."

"This goes back to a very ancient tradition in the church for a number of reasons. One was to document that the person really existed and wasn't a figment of someone's imagination or some group's imagination. Finding their grave was the telltale sign that the person lived, breathed and walked this earth," said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry, postulator of Tolton's cause for canonization.

The Catholic Church through the Vatican Congregation of the Causes of Saints is very specific about how the process must go.



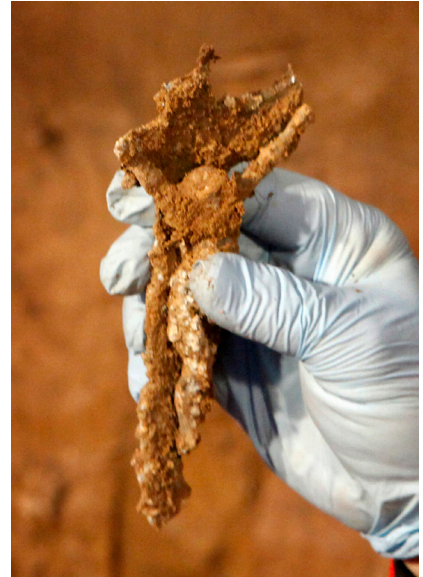
Workers must even swear an oath to diligence and professionalism.

Canon law also requires that dioceses employ a forensic anthropologist, a medical examiner and archeologist in the process.

As the remains were unearthed, the forensic pathologist laid them out on a table and he pieced the bones together anatomically.



Above, the forensic anthropologist, medical examiner and archeologist remove soil from Father Tolton's grave. Below left, funeral director P.J. Staab and Father Christopher House of the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, place an alb over Father Tolton's remains. Below right, one of the artifacts removed from the grave was the corpus from a crucifix. Photos by Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic



In addition to the skull, they found Tolton's femurs, rib bones, vertebrae, collarbones, pelvis, portions of the arm bones and other smaller bones.

At the end, Father Tolton's remains were vested with a white Roman chasuble and maniple, amice and cincture. Tolton's remains were then placed in a new casket, sealed and reinterred in the grave.

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Cardinal Meyer Center
3525 South Lake Park Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60653
312.534.8376
Fax: 312.534.5317
tolton.archchicago.org

Help support the canonization of Venerable Augustus Tolton by donating to the cause.

To donate online, please visit tolton.archchicago.org.

Mail checks to:

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A number of Father Augustus Tolton items, including prayer cards, books and brochures, are available for purchase at tolton.archchicago.org. All proceeds benefit the cause.

Signed and numbered prints of the Father Augustus Tolton Icon are available for purchase **on the website**. All purchases help fund the cause for canonization.