

Growing up in the Church, Saints were part of our everyday lives---especially in Chicago. There were patron saints of your parish, your name, your occupation, your ancestors' home country, and always your grandmother had a favorite. But how is it decided who or when an individual is a formally canonized saint? There is a process.

Our Fr. Bill Woestman, a canon law expert, is emphatic in telling us the process begins with the people, not the Church. When the public cries out that the life a person (after their death) gave evidence of heroic virtue, an inquiry about the holiness of that individual begins.

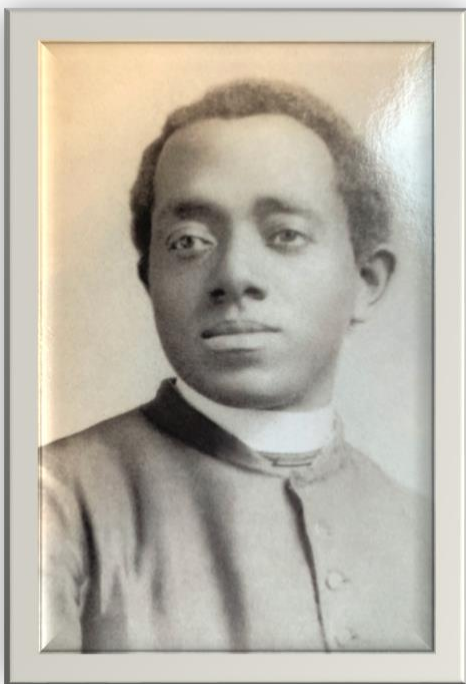
At least five years after a candidate's death, the bishop of the diocese where the person died is responsible to begin an investigation. After a series of consultations, a diocesan tribunal may be formed to investigate the life of the candidate. Witnesses are called and documents are examined. When completed, all of this is sent to the *Congregation for the Causes of Saints* to be examined by 9 theologians. During this investigation, that person is given the title Servant of God. If the majority are in favor, the cause is passed on to a committee of Cardinals and Bishops. If also favorable, then it passes on to the Holy Father. If approval is given, the person is now declared Venerable (Blessed if a martyr).

It is necessary for a miracle (attributed to the person's intercession) after his death to be verified, and then proven by a canonical investigation. With this decree, the Pope grants

beatification and the title Blessed is given with limited public veneration (usually only in the diocese).

Another miracle is needed attributed to the intercession of the Blessed individual having occurred *after* the beatification. Canonization allows for veneration by the Universal Church. The title of Saint is given. And the feast day assigned is the date of death or of a significant event in the person's life (Note St. John Paul II).

With that as a background, today is a good time to reflect upon a Chicago candidate for Sainthood, Venerable Augustus Tolton, the first African American priest in the United States.



Born April 1, 1854 in Brush Creek, Missouri, the second of three children for his parents, slaves Peter Paul and Martha Jane Tolton. Augustus was baptized on May 29, 1854 in the same church his parents were married, St. Peter's in Brush Creek. After the birth of their third child, Peter Tolton escaped to join the Union Army, never to be seen again by his family. Fearful that her

children would be taken from her, Martha escaped with the three (Charley 8, Augustus 7, Anne 20 months), leaving Missouri for Quincy, Illinois. From the farm to Hannibal was 20

miles, to cross the river to Illinois. And then another 21 miles to Quincy.

In Hannibal, they encountered Confederate officials and Union soldiers. The Union men helped her find a dilapidated rowboat and with no experience with oars, they crossed the river and made it to Quincy

Martha and her 2 sons worked in a tobacco factory as stemmers cutting the stems from the leaves. In 1863, 10-year-old Charley died of pneumonia; Augustus was only 9.

The Toltons attended St. Boniface Church in Quincy, a large parish of mostly German immigrants. Sermons were in German, but a summary was given in English. During this time, Augustus learned German. Augustus was enrolled in the all-white parish school. With threats, insults, taunts and torments in the first month, he withdrew from the school.

Not giving up on their faith, the Toltons now worshipped at another Quincy parish, St. Lawrence O'Toole (later to be named St. Peter). The pastor was Fr. Peter McGirr. Having met Gus (as he was known), Fr. Peter insisted that he attend their parish school while still working at the factory. At St. Lawrence, Gus learned Latin to serve daily Mass before going to work or class. Since Gus was known as such a devout young man, Fr. McGirr discussed the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood.

No seminary or religious order in the United States would accept Augustus because of his race. Since his formal

education had been limited due to his factory work, the priests of Quincy together began to tutor him. In 1878 St. Francis College (now Quincy University) accepted him. During this time, Gus started a Sunday School for the Black Children and advocated a temperance movement.

But still the vocation to the priesthood was in his heart. Numerous inquiries were made to different seminaries and religious communities. And through the dedication of 2 Quincy priests, Gus was accepted at the Propaganda Seminary in Rome, training priests for mission work. On Feb. 15, 1880, he left Quincy for Chicago, then to Jersey City, to the port of Hoboken, on a boat to LeHarve, France and a train to Rome. His education would last for 6 years. There were 70 seminarians there and prejudice was totally absent. Assuming that he would be sent to missionary work in Africa, he learned Africa's geography, history, languages and culture.

Deacon Tolton was ordained a priest on Holy Saturday April 24, 1886, in St. John Lateran in Rome. The night before, the Cardinal announced to Gus that his decision was not to send him to Africa, but back to the United States. He said *'America has been called the most enlightened nation in the world. We shall see if it deserves that honor'*. So on Easter



Sunday, April 25, 1886, Fr. Augustus Tolton celebrated his First Mass at Peter's Basilica. On June 13, he left Rome to return to Quincy in the Diocese of Alton, Illinois, where he would be welcomed by hundreds of people.

Assigned to St. Joseph Church, Fr. Gus was very accomplished. Every Sunday the Church was filled to capacity and his sermons were well liked. With the constant presence of white people attending his Masses, going to him for Confession and seeking his spiritual advice, the new pastor at St. Boniface became jealous at the success and popularity of Fr. Gus. Several of his parishioners were very generous to support the outreach to the Black Community. So, as Dean, he informed Fr. Gus that he was allowed to minister to the Negro people only. With this growing resistance, Fr. Gus wrote to other dioceses, and Archbishop Patrick Feehan of Chicago assured him that he would find a warm welcome in his city. On Dec. 19, 1889, he left St. Joseph Church for his future in Chicago.

Upon arrival, Fr. Gus was appointed pastor of St. Augustine's Church, which had been meeting in the basement of St. Mary's Church at 9th and Wabash streets. In 1891, he was able to move to a storefront church, St Monica's Chapel at 448 36th Street. The congregation would grow from 30 members to 600.

So much of his time was addressing the poverty of his congregation; those who were working were in low paying jobs. Funds came from individuals and foundations as well as other

parishes. Mother Katharine Drexel (now herself a Saint), an heiress to an immense fortune, donated at least \$36,000.

Parishioners were aware that Fr. Tolton was wearing himself out by hard work and privation. On several occasions, he asked a server to bring him a chair because he could not stand to preach. Dressed in a tattered black cassock, he made his rounds every day walking the streets and alleys visiting his people. Fatigue and exhaustion took over.

In early July, 1897, Fr. Gus went on retreat to be held at St. Viator's College in Bourbonnais, 100 miles south of Chicago. About noon on Friday, July 9, he got off the train at 35th Street Station. It was already 105 degrees. He collapsed on the sidewalk and was taken to Mercy Hospital, 2536 Prairie Avenue. His fever mounted, his breathing became difficult; his mother and sister, the chaplain and the Sisters of Mercy gathered around him as he breathed his last. Good Fr. Gus, as he had been called, died on July 9, 1897, of heat stroke and uremia.

On July 11, his body lay in state in the basement of St. Monica's Church; that evening priests filled the Church to pray the Office of the Dead. On July 12 the Vicar General of the Archdiocese offered a Solemn Requiem Mass.

Fr. Gus wanted his burial at St. Peter's Cemetery in Quincy. He requested a Requiem Mass at St. Peter's Church, the Church of his First Communion, his Confirmation, where he served Mass and was a custodian, and where his vocation of priesthood was nourished. This took place on July 13th. The

Quincy Journal reported: *'There was seldom such a large funeral. The cortege was four blocks long...'*

Such a powerful story; but why a Saint? There are *four paths to Sainthood*: martyrdom, live a life of heroic Christian virtue, strong reputation for religious devotion, and sacrifice your life so that others may live. (Pope Francis added this last one).

Why should we know anything about Fr. Tolton? He died in the 19th century at the age of 43. No one is alive now who knew him. He lived before movies and videos and cell phones with cameras.

But the story of his *heroic virtue* has been alive since his death. He is a person who experienced prejudice and racism firsthand; he is someone who knew rejection and judgment by fellow American citizens and by fellow Catholics including clergy. But from his own writings and from the writings of those who knew him and wrote about him, there was no sense of retaliation, revenge, insult or anger. He role models the words of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Love your enemy; pray for your persecutor, turn the other cheek, forgive many times, etc.'" With these divisions still existing in our city and nation and world today, we need more Augustus Toltons in our lives.

The Friends of Fr. Augustus Tolton is one of our parish organizations meeting each month to be inspired to imitate this heroic virtue and to pray for miracles for his beatification and for his canonization. In the Archdiocese, there are an Academy

that bears his name (the former St. Columbanus School) and a scholarship program for Pastoral Ministry. In Colombia, Missouri, a Catholic High School is named after Fr. Gus. And, maybe one day, one of our archdiocesan parishes will be St. Augustus Tolton.

He is a role model for Black priests and all priests, for Black Catholics and for all Catholics. Join your prayers to ours that a miracle through his intercession will take place soon, maybe during this pandemic. Fr. Augustus Tolton is worthy of sainthood.