

A SAINT FOR OUR TIME: FR. AUGUSTUS TOLTON

On Saturday, January 19, 2013, at 11:00am in the Cathedral, Archbishop Sartain will celebrate a Mass in thanksgiving for the life and witness of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and in celebration of the presence of African-American and African Catholics in the Archdiocese of Seattle. Save the date!

Father Augustus Tolton (1854-1897) was the first Black American born into slavery to be ordained a Catholic priest. Augustus was baptized in the Catholic Church by the family that owned him. His mother escaped with him from Missouri to Illinois through the Underground Railroad.

In Chicago, Augustus' attempts to obtain a Catholic education were met with bigoted scorn, racial threats and expulsion. Finally, though, a Franciscan priest recognized his giftedness and tutored him in the catechism, the classics and languages. Impressed by Augustus' intelligence and piety, several priests and nuns tried to get him into an American seminary, but these efforts failed. Blacks were still being treated as less than fully human, and Augustus was subjected to mockery and insults as he pursued his desire for ordination, year after year. Finally, in 1880, he became a seminarian in Rome and six years later he was ordained a priest at the Basilica of St. John Lateran.

Given the state of race relations in the United States, coupled with a strong anti-Catholic mood, Father Tolton was sent back home as a missionary. His Cardinal insisted, "America has been called the most enlightened nation; we will see if it deserves that honor. If America has never seen a black priest, it has to see one now."

In 1886, Father Tolton arrived in Quincy, Illinois, and was assigned to a small black parish. Soon, whites also began to seek him out for his counsel and for his rousing sermons, but this was determined to be an unacceptable mingling of the races. Father Tolton endured years of physical and emotional suffering as he sought to spread the truth about being Black and Catholic.

In 1889 the Archbishop of Chicago through the intercession of Mother Katherine Drexel, invited Father Tolton to build a new parish in the impoverished area of the south Chicago slums. Here Father Tolton accomplished much despite the insurmountable odds of the evils of racism and



discrimination. He demonstrated that Blacks can be ministers of the Lord and that Black Catholics have much to offer the Church if given the opportunity to use their talents and abilities. Tragically, Father Tolton died mysteriously of "heat exhaustion" on the streets of Chicago in 1897, at the age of 43.

Currently, Bishop Joseph Perry, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago, is heading up the Vatican's process for the beatification of Father Augustus Tolton. Please pray for a miracle through Father Tolton's intercession, so that he can become the first Black American born into slavery to become a priest... and a saint.

*Essay by Greg Lind, St. James Cathedral parishioner
& member of the Archdiocesan Black Catholic
Advisory Council*