

AN HOUR WITH AUGUSTUS TOLTON

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SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY

Augustus Tolton began his life enslaved to a white Catholic family—during a time when it was acceptable to identify a child by his lot in life as opposed to his birth name. In the quaint rural town of Brush Creek in Ralls County, MO, Augustus (also called Augustine) was born to Peter Paul and Martha Jane on April 1, 1854. The couple, considered the property of plantation owners Stephen and Savilla Elliot, could not marry until their masters granted them permission in 1859. Named after his maternal grandfather, Augustus was the youngest of three children. About a month after he was born, Fr. John O’Sullivan baptized him at St. Peter’s Catholic Church. His owner’s name and the slave master’s wife (recorded as godmother) were listed on his baptismal record; Augustus

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was identified as “slave child.”

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This African American boy would grow to overcome racial barriers and answer his call to a priestly vocation. As noted in the Washington, DC, *Evening Star* newspaper of October 15, 1886, Augustus would come to be known

as “a man of fine intellect and...an eloquent preacher....” He was the first recognized black priest in America.

Unfortunately, Peter Paul wasn’t able to share in his son’s accomplishments. At the onset of the Civil War, when Augustus was a young boy, his father joined the Union army to escape slavery. He died less than a year later in a military hospital in Arkansas.

Given the uncertainty of their future, Martha Jane courageously gathered her children in the dark of night and walked twenty miles, hoping to cross the Mississippi River into Illinois, a free state. Escaping the brutality and inhumanity of slavery was treacherous. Bounty hunters and Confederate soldiers were constantly in search of runaway slaves. Fortunately for the Tolton family, at the first sign of opposition, Union soldiers intervened, saying they had reached Union-controlled ground. They helped the family secure a rowboat and allowed them to cross the mile-long stretch of river into Illinois without further incident.

Martha Jane Tolton’s faith and determination

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Meditation

- How much maltreatment can you endure before you say, “Enough is enough”?
- Have you had the grace to endure rejection? What did you do?

GRACE OF PERSEVERANCE

“The unmistakable will of God,” he moaned in times of extreme desolation. “How can this divine will be opposed and hindered by the will of men—churchmen?”

Augustus Tolton, *From Slave to Priest*

Imagine being denied for no logical reason. Racial prejudice kept Tolton from attending any seminary in America because of the color of his skin and the laws that prevented integration of the races. While frustrated by the oppression and rejection, he didn't lose hope.

He knew that God's will for his life was greater than laws and racism; and thus by God's grace he persevered.

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Closing Prayer

O God, we give you thanks for your servant and priest, Fr. Augustus Tolton, who labored among us in times of contradiction, times that were both beautiful and paradoxical. His ministry helped lay the foundation for a truly Catholic gathering in faith in our time. We stand in the shadow of his ministry. May his life continue to inspire us and imbue us with that confidence and hope that will forge a new evangelization for the Church we love.

Father in heaven, Fr. Tolton's suffering service sheds light upon our sorrows; we see them through the prism of your Son's passion and death. If it be your will, O God, glorify your servant, Fr. Tolton, by granting the favor I now request through his intercession (mention your request) so that all may know the goodness of this priest whose memory looms large in the Church he loved.

Complete what you have begun in us that we might work for the fulfillment of your kingdom.

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Not to us the glory, but glory to you O God,
through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord;
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are our God,
living and reigning forever and ever.

Amen.

Most Reverend Joseph N. Perry, JCL
Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago and
Diocesan Postulator of the
Cause for Canonization of Augustus Tolton

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