

# FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

## FROM SLAVE TO CATHOLIC PRIEST....

*Many years ago in grammar school, I distinctly remember a funny story that my fourth grade teacher told us. This teacher, along with her family, were vacationing in the south, I think in Georgia in the early 1960's. One day they decided to wash their clothes at the laundromat in the town. The teacher told the class that she saw a sign in the laundry that read "colored only".*

*Not knowing, she brought her colored clothes to that particular room only to find out to her chagrin that the sign did not refer to clothes at all but to black persons. Coming from New York City where there was nothing like this, she and the family were very embarrassed to say the least!*

*Well, a great many things have changed in the United States since 1960. Thanks to the equal rights movement, great strides have been made in the United States so that all of us might truly enjoy the benefits of freedom. I suppose that racism and discrimination will always be with us as we're all affected by original sin. It's sad to say, but racism also existed within the Catholic Church in this country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

*You might never have heard of a priest by the name of Fr. Augustus Tolton. Fr. Tolton was the first black priest ordained in the United States. John Augustus Tolton was born as a slave in Brush Creek, Missouri on April 1, 1854. He and his family escaped slavery during the civil war by bravely crossing the Missouri River into the free state of Illinois. According to one biographer, when they reached freedom, the future priest's mother tuned to him and said, "John Boy, you're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord."*

*Maybe it was those inspiring words of his mother that gave Augustus Tolton the courage to give his life for God and the church. Growing up in Quincy, Illinois, Tolton was allowed to attend St. Peter's Catholic School which was an all white parish. A priest by the name of Fr. Peter McGirr took an interest in the young man and gave him instructions in the faith. Tolton was baptized and received Holy Communion.*

*Fr. McGirr recognized that the Lord had great plans for this young black man. He decided to become a priest. Unfortunately, no American seminary would accept him. Despite this, Tolton graduated from the local high school and then went on to college. In 1880, he entered the seminary in Rome and was ordained a priest six years later.*

*Fr. Tolton expected to be sent to an African parish. Surprisingly, his superiors assigned him to the United States. He eventually became the pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church and School in Quincy, Illinois. Later on, because of racial tensions in that city, Fr. Tolton was reassigned to Chicago.*

*There in that city at St. Monica's Parish, he wore himself out with his labors for God and for souls. He helped the poor and the sick, fed the hungry and brought many souls to the Lord. He was known as "Good Father Gus." Unfortunately, the priest exhausted himself with all his good work. He died unexpectedly on retreat at the early age of only 43 years in 1897.*

*Even though Fr. Tolton suffered terribly because of discrimination, he persevered in his vocation and exhibited an inner peace rooted in his great love for Jesus Christ. He may someday be canonized a saint. On June 12, 2019, Pope Francis signed a decree advancing the cause of the servant of God, Augustus Tolton and promoting his heroic virtue.*

*Through the love of Christ in his heart, Fr. Tolton was able to overcome many obstacles in his life. Maybe there is a lesson here for each of us - black, brown, red, yellow or white!*

*Sincerely in Christ,*

*Fr. Jerome*