

The first US Black Catholic priest is believed to be Father Augustine Tolton. He was born into a black Catholic slave family in 1854 near Rensselaer, MO in Northeast Missouri. There is some dispute as to how his family became free. Some report that his owner, Stephen Elliot, freed his slaves at the start of the Civil War. Augustine's account is that his father escaped with plans to later return to free his wife and 4 children. After escaping, his father joined the Union Army and died of dysentery before he could return. His mother escaped with the children and crossed the Mississippi River with the help of sympathetic Union soldiers. She eventually made her way to Quincy, IL, where she, Augustine and his brother worked in a cigar factory.

During the winter months, when the factory was closed, an Irish immigrant priest, Father Peter McGirr allowed him to attend St. Peter's school. Augustine was extremely bright and fell in love with the Catholic faith. He endured many rebuffs, and, while working as a janitor spent long hours praying in the church. He attended clandestine classes taught by friendly priests and nuns who saw in his eyes a deep love of God, the Church, and his people. Unfortunately, due to the extreme racism within the American Catholic Church, even though he passed all entrance exams, he was denied theological training in the US. His friends and supportive priests helped him to travel to Rome where he attended seminary and was ordained and said his

first public mass in St. Peter's Basilica on Easter Sunday in 1886.

He had wanted to go to Africa as a missionary, but instead was sent to the US to minister to Black Catholics. His first assignment was in Quincy, IL, however, he lacked support from the white community and pastors of Quincy. When he tried to serve Black Catholics, he found there were very few and Protestant ministers were afraid he would try to convert their parishioners. He subsequently became the pastor of St. Monica's Church in Chicago. There he established a flourishing center that was the focal point for Black Catholics in Chicago for 30 years. The parish grew from 30 to over 600 parishioners.

Augustine was a fluent and inspirational speaker with an exceptionally sweet singing voice. He was respected by his white colleagues in Chicago and was often invited as a guest speaker. One Sunday in 1893, he was a guest at Holy Family parish whose members were primarily struggling Irish immigrants. The pastor noted that Father Tolton requested a special collection for St. Monica's at all the masses and collected over \$500 (\$14,000 in 2020). He was able to overcome many obstacles, including racism within the Church, to become a beloved and well-respected priest.

Father Augustine Tolton died of heat stroke in the heat wave of July 1897. He was buried in the Priests Lot at St. Peter's parish in Quincy, IL. The cause for

his canonization was started in 2010. In 2019, Pope Francis authorized the promulgation of a "Decree of Heroic Virtue", advancing the cause of Sainthood and granted Augustine Tolton the title, "Venerable".