

# Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



## ***“Catholic, Virtuous and Black”***

As members of the Church, we know well that the month of November commences with the familiar Solemnity of All Saints: the commemoration of all the holy men and women of every time and place, who by the witness of their lives testified to Christ Jesus the Lord, and now live forever with Him in the glory of heaven. The Saints are for us models and exemplars of virtue, intercessors who pray for us, and heavenly friends who encourage us on our earthly pilgrimage.

November, not coincidentally, was designated in 1990 by the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus of the United States, as Black Catholic History Month, to celebrate the long history and heritage of Black Catholics. In fact, two commemorative dates of saints of African descent fall within this month: the birthday of Saint Augustine (November 13) and the Memorial of Saint Martin de Porres (November 3). In this month when we honor Saints of every race and time, we honor without prejudice saints of African descent. November marks as well a time when we pray for all the holy souls, including of course those of African descent, asking that all our beloved dead might share forever in the glory of heaven.

This year, to celebrate Black Catholic History Month, and with a view to promoting the dignity of every person and racial harmony, to rooting out racism and addressing ongoing racial discord; I am excited to invite you to mark this November by attending “Tolton: From Slave to Priest,” a powerful one-man multi-media play on the life

of The Venerable Father Augustus Tolton, the first African American priest (1854-1897). Saint Luke Productions will be presenting the live drama here in our diocese from Thursday, November 12th thru Thursday, November 18th, 2021. You can find more information about the performances, dates, times and locations here: [www.reconnecttoledo.org/tolton](http://www.reconnecttoledo.org/tolton). My hope is that Tolton’s witness may inspire, heal and transform lives.



“A colored child born April 1, 1854, son of Peter Tolton and Martha Chisley, property of Stephen Elliott.” That is all his baptismal record says. Born a slave to Peter and Martha Tolton, of Brush Creek, Missouri, seven years before the American Civil War, he grew up to become the first recognized African American Catholic priest.

Ten years later, his father went off to fight for the Union Army but died during the Civil War. His heroic mother risked her life to escape slavery. With her three young children, Martha Tolton crossed the Mississippi in a dilapidated rowboat. After fleeing slavecatchers and

Confederate soldiers, she and her children then ran all the way to the town of Quincy, in the free state of Illinois. There they made their home, and Augustus Tolton grew in Catholic faith and virtue and in the conviction that God was calling him to be a priest.

Ever the victim of racial prejudice, he was cast out of the local Catholic school and, eventually, he went on to study for the priesthood in Rome, because local seminaries would not accept him. Yet he persevered in charity, in

fidelity and in hope. He was ordained on April 24, 1886 in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, with the intention of heading for Africa as a missionary. But God had other plans, and Father Tolton was assigned to return to the hostile environment of his own hometown of Quincy, Illinois.

His sermons and priestly presence there were inspiring and charismatic. Black and white persons alike flocked to his church, to whom he ministered without prejudice. This aroused the resentment of some Catholic priests and laity in the area. Protestant Black ministers were also envious and felt he was stealing people away from their congregations. Many in Quincy, his hometown, became so hostile that he had to leave.

Father Tolton was transferred to Chicago where he set about establishing a parish. First, his tiny congregation met in the basement of "Old Saint Mary's" Church. Then he began the work of building Saint Monica Church, named for the African mother of Saint Augustine. Father Tolton's reputation for holiness grew. The phenomenon of a Black Catholic priest, who was a terrific preacher, known for his virtue and holiness, placed a demand on him to travel the country. This he did tirelessly, evangelizing and raising money for his struggling congregation. Returning from a priests' retreat, Father Tolton collapsed from heat exhaustion and was taken to Mercy Hospital in Chicago. There he died on July 9, 1897, at the age of 43.

It was on June 11, 2019, that Pope Francis issued the declaration that Father Augustus Tolton lived a life of heroic virtue, thus bestowing on him the title

“Venerable” Father Augustus Tolton. Here is a fellow pilgrim on the path to sainthood, a model for all of us and for our times, who was Catholic, Virtuous and Black.

In fact, Father Augustus Tolton is just one of many Black Catholics currently in line for sainthood, “including Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1776-1853), a former slave who became an entrepreneur and philanthropist; Mother Mary Elizabeth Lange (1784-1882), foundress of the Oblate Sisters of Providence; Venerable Henriette Delille (1813-1862), foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family; Julia Greeley (@1833-1918), a former slave who promoted devotion to the

Sacred Heart of Jesus; and Sister Thea Bowman (1937-1990), who converted to Catholicism as a child and entered religious life as a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration” [CatholicPhilly.com Aug 2020].

This November, as we celebrate and turn to all the Saints, we are blessed to have the opportunity to learn more about and be inspired by a saint in the making, to attend the production “Tolton: From Slave to Priest.” As we encounter the person of the first African American priest, and beg his intercession for our own challenging times, we are compelled to recognize in him a model and exemplar of virtue, an intercessor who prays for us, and a friend who encourages us on our earthly pilgrimage.

*+ Daniel E. Thomas*

Most Rev. Daniel E. Thomas  
Bishop of Toledo  
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