

## **V. John Augustus (Gus) Tolton**

### **Biography**

John Augustus (Gus) Tolton was born on April 1, 1854, to parents who were enslaved by a white Catholic family in Missouri. Early in his childhood, the Civil War broke out and his father, Peter Paul Tolton, escaped slavery to join the Union Army. John and his mother remained enslaved until 1862 when they escaped by crossing the Mississippi River into Illinois.

Tolton and his family were introduced to Catholicism by their enslavers, and, despite the awful circumstances that they were subjected to, John developed a deep personal relationship with Jesus. It's said that, after escaping into Illinois, his mother told him, "John, boy, you're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord."

Tolton attended an all-white school in Illinois, St. Peter's Catholic School, where he was noticed and mentored by the school's pastor, Fr. Peter McGirr. As he matured, he intended to go to seminary, but no American seminary would accept him due to the color of his skin. With Fr. McGirr's support, Tolton attended seminary in Rome, instead, and began his formation for the priesthood. While there, he learned many languages and studied music! He was ordained a priest at the age of 31.

Although his experience of acceptance and racial harmony in Rome was transformative, he still expected that he would be assigned to an African nation for his service within the Church. To his surprise, though, he was instead sent back to the United States where he celebrated his first public Mass at St. Boniface church in Quincy, Illinois. He is considered to be the first priest in the USA who was publicly known to be black. He became the pastor of St. Joseph Catholic church and school in the same city but, after racial tension continued to escalate in the area, he transferred to Chicago at the invitation of Chicago's Archbishop Patrick Feehan.

In Chicago, Tolton led the development of St. Monica's Catholic Church in Chicago's South Side. After four years of hard work, the Chicago Tribune covered the church's dedication, printing on January 15, 1884, that, "St. Monica's Church was dedicated yesterday with impressive services. It is the first Catholic church in this city to be built by colored people. More than this, it is the first church of the kind constructed in this State and probably the only Catholic church in the West that has been built by colored members of that faith for their own use. The pastor of St. Monica's is the Rev. Father Augustus Tolton and the handsome edifice at the corner of Thirty-sixth and Dearborn streets will stand as a monument to his untiring labor on behalf of the Church of his adoption."

As pastor of St. Monica, Tolton served the poor, fed the hungry, ministered to formally enslaved families, shared his beautiful singing voice and talent for playing the accordion, and led many to the faith. Locally he was known as Father Gus and his congregation grew rapidly, frequently being recognized in the newspapers and other greater Chicago publications.

In 1897, at age 43, Fr. Augustus Tolton died of heat stroke. The sudden tragedy left his whole community shocked and saddened. His legacy, however, lives on and he was declared Venerable by Pope Francis in June of 2019.

**Prayer**

Venerable Father Tolton, when confronted with the hatred of a brother and the taunts of a few, you imitated the Lamb of God and did not open your mouth against them.

Help us, Father Gus, to follow your example of long-suffering compassion and silent perseverance, to love our enemies and to pray for our persecutors.

Teach us to be noble servants of Christ until he calls us into the presence of his majesty, there to look upon the Master's loving face.

Who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever.

Amen.

*(Prayer Source:*

<https://tolton.dio.org/prayer.html#:~:text=A%20Prayer%20to%20the%20Venerable%20Augustine%20Tolton&text=Teach%20us%20to%20be%20noble,Amen.>)

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