

# A shining light of leadership

Whom shall I send? Who should go before me? A voice in the wilderness name John Augustus Tolton said: "Here I am Lord, send me!" Father Augustus Tolton and his entire family were born slaves, but through divine intervention Father Tolton became the first known and recognized African-American priest. His family escaped from slavery. Father Tolton was ordained on April 24, 1886, in Rome.

Augustus Tolton lived a faith-filled life fortified with principles, namely, a life of collective works and responsibility, self-determination, cooperative economics, creativity, unity, purpose and faith. Father Tolton's pastoral ministry in Quincy, Ill., at St. Joseph's Church proved to be one of collective works and responsibility. Father Tolton was such a fine preacher, that the German and Irish Catholics attended Mass with black Catholics. Father Tolton demonstrated an unyielding attention to the spiritual and human needs of his people. His success and his popularity were challenged by the hidden racism and jealousy of both Catholic and non-Catholic clergy in Quincy. His foes stopped at nothing in order to belittle his manhood, priesthood, humanity and dignity. The theme of Father Tolton's pastoral ministry of collective works and responsibility can be summarized in the Negro spiritual "Walk Together Children Don't You Get Weary" - the spiritual says "there's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land." However, Father Tolton was determined to do the will of God that he remembered what Paul said: "I have strength for everything through him who empowers me" (Philippians 4:13).

Father Tolton was transferred from Quincy to Chicago. In Chicago, Father Tolton ministered in a basement of St. Augustine that would eventually become known as St. Monica's Church. Father Tolton's ministry exemplified the belief of cooperative economics and perhaps can be articulated by John 12:24: "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." In 1891, while ministering to a small congregation, he was busy seeking donations to build a church. Construction was started on the church, and Father Tolton's ministry grew to 600 parishioners. Two of the hallmarks of Father Tolton's ministry were his ability to be creative and his ability to unify people. Father Tolton would have preached "there is neither Jew nor Greek ... for all are one in Jesus

Christ” (Galatians 3:28, Romans 10:12). His popularity led him to speaking at important gatherings and lectures impacting black Catholics, especially the First Catholic Colored Congress in Washington, D.C., in 1889. Father Tolton’s desire to become a priest surfaced early in life. The School Sisters of Notre Dame and the parish priest tutored and assisted Father Tolton as he began to consider his vocation to the priesthood more deeply. One could imagine Father Tolton talking to Jesus in these words: “If I can help somebody as I pass along.” He was admitted into the Franciscan College in Quincy as a special student before leaving for Rome to study at the Propaganda College because seminaries in the United States would not admit blacks. Because Father Tolton realized his purpose, he did not let the inexpressible cruelties of racism, bigotry and hatred manifested by some in the Catholic Church in America hinder his determination for priesthood. Father Tolton’s entire life, though short, was undergirded by faith. It was the faith passed down to Father Tolton from our foremothers and forefathers and the faith of his parents that led Father Tolton to take his rightful place in the Roman Catholic Church, thus becoming the first black Catholic priest in these United States of America in 1886. On July 9, 1897, Father Tolton was stricken by a heat stroke; that night he heard the voice of Jesus say to him: “Well done my good and faithful servant!” Father Tolton died at the tender age of 43, but his memory continues today in the form of leadership programs, lectures and symposiums.

*Dr. Kirk P. Gaddy, a parishioner of the historic St. Francis Xavier in Baltimore, is an adjunct assistant professor at the Institute of Black Catholic Studies in New Orleans.*