News
Spirituality



Fr. Augustus Tolton is pictured in an undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy of the Chicago Archdiocese Archives and Records Center)



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St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Chicago has received a $1 million grant from the Lilly Endowment to help establish a new spirituality center named for Fr. Augustus Tolton, the first U.S. Catholic priest publicly known to be Black.

Inspired by Tolton's legacy and spirituality, the Tolton Spirituality Center will look for opportunities to create programs to benefit people in Chicago, said Norbertine Fr. Canon A. Gerard Jordan, the center's executive director. The center will also facilitate educational exchanges between parish leaders in the Chicago Archdiocese and beyond, and lead conversations about racial injustice.

On Feb. 13, the center hosted the second virtual event in its four-part educational Black History Month series focused on the lives of current Black candidates for sainthood. The event's presentations and discussion spotlighted Henriette Delille, who founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans in 1836, and Tolton himself. Cardinal Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C., spoke in a recorded message about Tolton's life and work, and about his influence on Gregory's own ministry. Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry, who is the diocesan postulator for Tolton's canonization cause as well as the episcopal moderator for the new center, presented biographical information about Tolton's life.

The series, co-sponsored by the Tolton Spirituality Center, the Denver Archdiocese and the dioceses of Columbus, Ohio; Birmingham, Alabama; and Richmond, Virginia, marks the center's first official public event. The next event, on Saturday, Feb. 20, will highlight Julia Greeley and Thea Bowman, and the final event on Saturday, Feb. 27, will focus again on Tolton. Register for free here.

As the center moves forward with planning its programs, all parishes in the Chicago archdiocese will be invited to join as members and to have a say in the center's programming, Jordan said. The center initially extended invitations to parishes on Chicago's South Side to seat representatives on its board of directors, but six of those seven parishes are now being merged into one through the archdiocese's "Renew My Church" project, which is closing churches and combining parishes throughout the city.

In the Bronzeville/Hyde Park/Washington Park grouping on the South Side, six parishes are being merged, including St. Elizabeth Church, the modern home of the Black parish community with whom Tolton established St. Monica Church as its inaugural pastor in 1889. The only South Side church retaining its independence is St. Thomas the Apostle in Hyde Park, near the University of Chicago.

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Jordan hopes the center will strengthen parishes so that future mergers and closures will not be necessary.

"The intention is to help us build connections so we can learn in these parishes, and the parishes that once survived from week to week will now begin to thrive and learn to live in COVID, because we don't want our parishes to die anymore," he told NCR. "We appreciate the Renew My Church process, but we don't want to go through it again."

Currently, Jordan said, the center's board of directors is made up mostly of laypeople. Board members do not necessarily need to represent parishes, he said, as long as they have strong connections to Tolton spirituality. One notable board member is Joyce Duriga, editor of the archdiocesan newspaper, the Chicago Catholic, who published a Tolton biography in 2018.

In planning the center's programs, the board will look for opportunities to support youth ministry, evangelization, worship and development, and to partner with existing community organizations working to meet needs in the community.

"If the need is afterschool programs, let's go. If the need is homes for pregnant women who are single, let's go," Jordan said.

"We're trying to take Tolton spirituality and live it in the context of today's demands and needs, and today's concerns," he explained.

Some of the $1 million from the Lilly Endowment grant will fund staff salaries and benefits, Jordan said, but the majority of the money the center has been awarded and will raise in the future will go toward programs and projects for the needy.

Because of the pandemic, programming will be online for the foreseeable future, which means it will be accessible to those outside Chicago, Jordan said. The center does not plan to build or buy any physical space, but will rely on parishes and partners to host eventual indoor events.

In keeping with Tolton's example, Jordan said, the center will strive to facilitate courageous conversations around racial justice. "We have to have a multicultural conversation that says, 'We're all invited into the church — have a seat,' " Jordan said. "Racism, sexism, ageism, all these ills exist in the church," he said.

"We can no longer be silent," he said. "The confirmation class is the one standing up to injustice, while we're quiet in our pews."