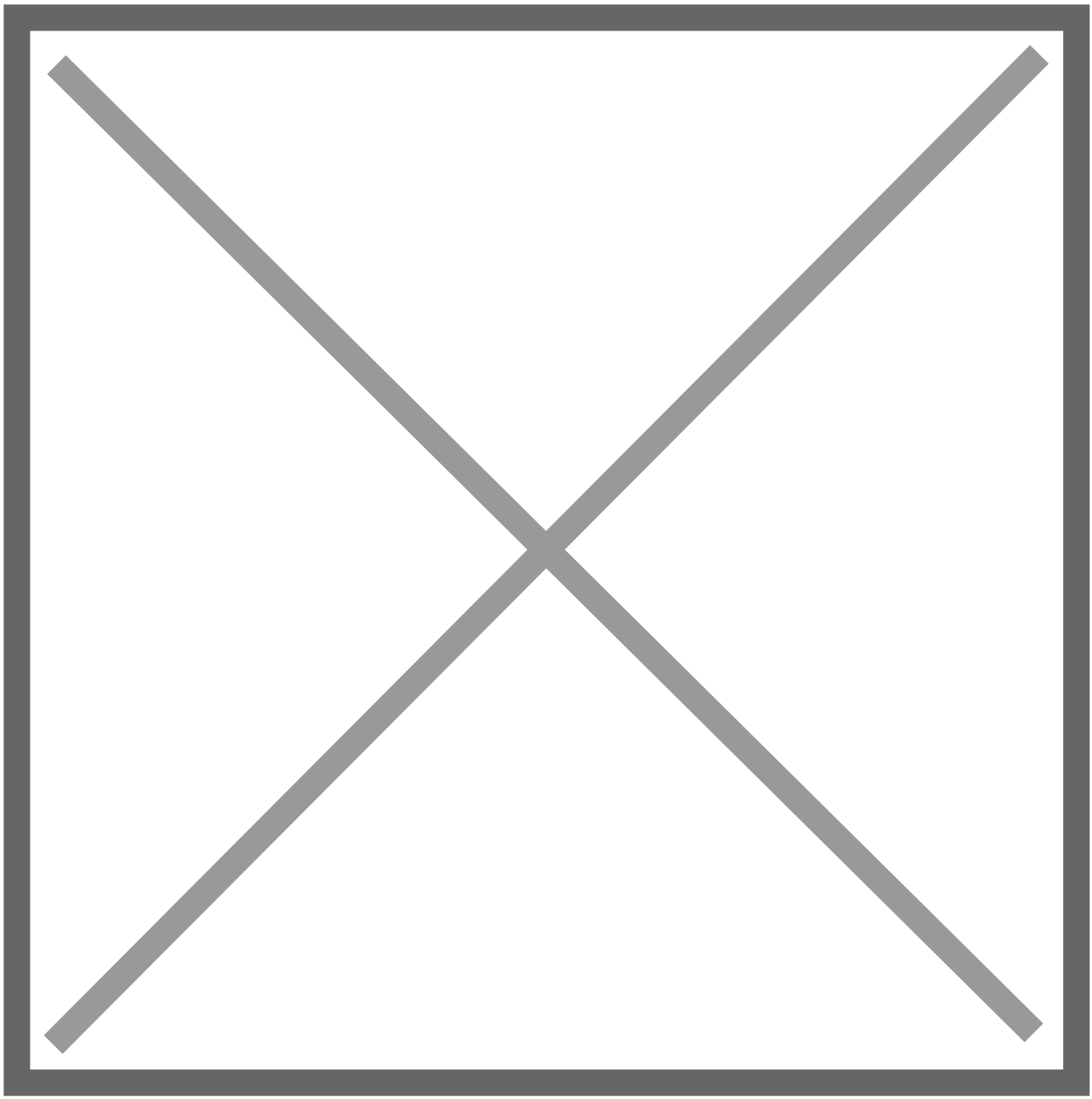
News



Retired Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry smiles during a Nov. 14, 2023, session of the USCCB's fall general assembly in Baltimore. Perry is the vice postulator of the cause to canonize Venerable Augustus Tolton (1854-1897), the first publicly recognized Black Catholic priest in the U.S. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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South Bend, Ind. — July 17, 2025

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Near the anniversary of his sudden and early death from a heat stroke on a hot, steamy Chicago street in July 1897, supporters of Venerable Augustus Tolton (1854-1897) gathered in South Bend to pray, discuss and recommit to promoting his cause for sainthood.

This was the third National Convocation of the Tolton Ambassadors Corps, cosponsored by the University of Notre Dame's Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism. It was a small gathering but drew an exceptionally committed Catholic group of 30 Tolton ambassadors from around the country to Indiana.

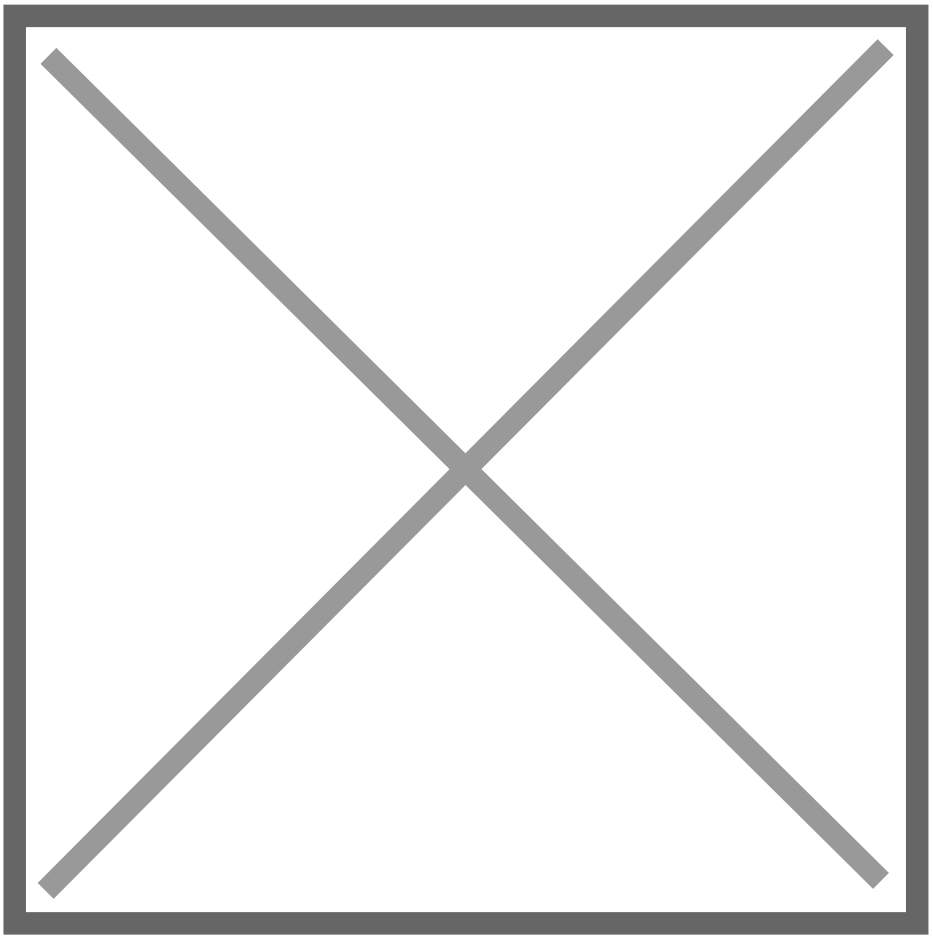
Appropriately, the convocation's opening Mass was celebrated at St. Augustine Church, the city's only historically Black Catholic church, founded in the 1920s. Bishop Joseph Perry, who served as an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Chicago until his 2023 retirement and is vice postulator of the Tolton cause, came to

South Bend to greet and encourage the ambassadors.

"We're not always aware of the power of prayer, but some of you have had prayers answered by God," Perry told the group after the opening Mass. "So, I ask for your prayers for Venerable Tolton's cause. We need that miracle! We're not talking about the Golden Globe Awards or the Congressional Medal of Honor for him.

"We're talking about a person who lived the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an extraordinary way in the difficult conditions of his time," he said. "We need that miracle to make him 'Blessed.'"

Perry reminded the group that the Tolton cause was opened in 2010 after the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago read a biography of Tolton published in 1973, giving the priest the title of "Servant of God." Archives of the archdiocese were then scoured for documents and correspondence connected with Tolton's life and ministry. They were sent to Rome — 3,000 to 4,000 pages.



Venerable Augustus Tolton is pictured in an undated photo. Born under slavery in Missouri, he was ordained a priest April 24, 1886, in Rome and offered his first Mass

at St. Peter's Basilica. Tolton is the first publicly recognized African American priest ordained for the Catholic Church in the U.S. and is a candidate for sainthood. In 2019, Pope Francis declared he had lived a "virtuous and heroic life," giving him the title "Venerable." (CNS/Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Chicago Archives and Records Center)

On June 12, 2019, Pope Francis promulgated a decree recognizing Tolton lived a life of heroic virtue, advancing his cause and granting him the title of "Venerable." In general, for beatification, one miracle needs to be accepted by the church as having occurred through the intercession of the sainthood candidate. A second such miracle is needed for canonization.

Tolton is one of the "Saintly Seven" — seven African American Catholics who are up for sainthood.

"I grew up in New Orleans," Deacon Mel Tardy, of St. Augustine Church, told his fellow Tolton ambassadors as the convocation opened and introductions were proceeding. Deacon Tardy and his wife, Annie, had organized and carefully planned the convocation. "It took me a while to recognize that the church had not yet recognized as a saint anyone in the U.S. who looked like me — who was African American."

Tardy, also an academic adviser at the University of Notre Dame for more than 20 years, said that it was especially interesting and gratifying to learn about Tolton when he and his wife first joined St. Augustine.

"They had a Tolton Society, and then one day we heard that his cause for sainthood was being started," he said, adding that they invited Perry and he "came in a blinding snowstorm" to be there.

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Augustus Tolton, as the deacon and his wife learned, was born into a family enslaved under a white Catholic family in Brush Creek, Missouri. In 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, his mother escaped with him and two other children, crossing the Mississippi River to freedom in Illinois. The Toltons settled in Quincy, Illinois.

Though in a free state, Augustus, a loving but extremely intelligent child, endured the racist rejection and belittlement of his day — in Catholic schools, and in and outside of the Catholic Church. As he grew up, it seemed clear to his pastor that he had a vocation and exceptional gifts. Since no American seminary would accept him, he entered a seminary in Rome and was ordained in 1886.

Though seminary officials in Rome had expected to send Tolton to Africa as a missionary priest, plans were changed at the last minute. The cardinal prefect of the seminary decided to send the young priest home to the U.S. and what was then the Diocese of Alton (now the Diocese of Springfield), Illinois. Tolton would become the first publicly recognized Black priest ordained for the Catholic Church in the U.S., although everyone knew that his priesthood wouldn't be easy.

Back in Quincy, the city where he'd grown up, it was soon clear that Tolton's pastoral gifts and homilies were exceptional. He was assigned to St. Joseph's Church, a small, desperately poor Black community. Soon, white Catholics from around the city were also attending St. Joseph's, raving about Tolton's sermons and his gift of welcoming everyone. Some fellow Catholic priests, however, grew jealous. Their complaints to the local bishop eventually forced Tolton to transfer to the Chicago Archdiocese in 1889.

Tolton started over and became the founding pastor of St. Monica Parish on Chicago's South Side and an active evangelizing apostolate to Black Americans in the city. It was a time of grievous racial discrimination, with even the trains segregated in Chicago.

Personal exhaustion, the poverty of his parish perpetuated by systemic denial of opportunity for Black families on account of their race, and failing to care for his own health were likely factors behind Tolton's tragic death on July 9, 1897. He was just 43, but his virtue and example were remembered by many in his own era and beyond.

To "Pray, Catechize, Evangelize, Support" are the "Four Pillars," or practices, that today's Tolton ambassadors follow in Tolton's memory, Annie and Deacon Tardy explained. They were reflecting on this year's convocation and the encouragement they believe ambassadors seemed to be taking back to Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, and Louisiana as well as to Oakland, California, and other cities.

"We discussed how Tolton's life can teach us about the Gospel seen through the prism of racism that he experienced so much," Deacon Tardy added. "If you live the Gospel as he did and experience racism, then you respond with love and mercy. He never said anything bad about anybody; he just kept on serving."

That's what Tolton ambassadors must do too.

Annie Tardy explained that ambassadors are going back home to spread the word about Tolton in different ways. They are, as Perry advised, asking for prayers for the miracles needed to move the priest closer to sainthood. In addition to fund-raising to support the cause, many groups are also regularly giving talks about Tolton's life and virtues.

Several excellent films have been produced to tell his story, including one shown at the three-day convocation: "Tolton Speaks: The Life and Letters of Fr. Augustus Tolton." The South Bend Tolton ambassadors have also sponsored pilgrimages to the places where Tolton lived and served in Chicago and Missouri.

Stefanie Miles, an ambassador from Washington, reported that she first heard about Tolton sometime in 2010. Later, she added, "Every time I heard his name, I heard something new and inspiring about him. Then, I was approached and asked to become involved as an ambassador to promote his cause."

The Archdiocese of Washington is pretty big, she admitted, "but we're going throughout the diocese and to neighboring dioceses to churches, schools, vacation Bible schools to educate Catholics about his life. Sometimes, our presentations are paired with panel discussions or with one of the films about his life."

Miles explained that she gradually developed enormous respect for Tolton's courage.

"He did shed light on things that would have otherwise been in the shadows," she said. "It's a miracle that he survived for as long as he did. He wrote to the Vatican, to his superiors. He used his voice and 150 years after him, we want to make sure that the story of his life is known."