Opinion

Guest Voices



The Missouri pilgrimage group in September 2025 at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Jefferson City. (Linda Lysakowski)

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In mid-September, 13 pilgrims from St. Bernadette Catholic Church in Kansas City, Missouri, and Nativity of Mary Church in Independence traveled on a pilgrimage to honor Venerable Augustus Tolton and pray for his canonization. Tolton was the first openly African-American priest in the United States. For those who are unaware of Fr Tolton, a little background is in order.

In the 19th century, Missouri was a slave-holding state that encouraged Southern enslavers to migrate there with the African Americans they held in bondage. In the Monroe County census of 1860, there were 11,722 whites and 3,063 slaves. White owners who were Catholic often baptized those they enslaved into the Catholic faith. John Augustus Tolton was baptized "Augustine" in St. Peter's Catholic Church in Brush Creek, Ralls County.

Tolton had been born into slavery in 1854. When Augustus was 10 years old, his father, Peter Paul, escaped to join the Union Army amid the Civil War. Records show that his father died in Arkansas of dysentery. Shortly after his father's escape to freedom, "Gus" and his mother Martha Jane, younger brother, and infant sister escaped Missouri to Quincy, Illinois.

In their new home, Tolton and his mother worked various jobs but even though they were "free," Augustus still felt the sting of discrimination even at the Catholic school he attended. However, Fr Peter McGirr, pastor of St Peter's Church in Quincy, and others saw in him a vocation to the priesthood. The Franciscans offered him a scholarship to Quincy College, where he studied philosophy and liberal arts.

Because there was no seminary in the United States that would accept a Black man, the Franciscans intervened with the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith to have Tolton accepted into a seminary in Rome, where he studied and was ordained. When he returned to Quincy as a priest, he was not well accepted by his fellow ministers (Protestant or Catholic), though he was beloved by the laity. Tolton was eventually transferred to Chicago to minister to Black Catholics there, and he served until his death in 1897.

Tolton is now being considered for sainthood and in 2012, Pope Francis named him “Venerable,” the second stage in the process. Tolton preached that the Catholic Church was the chief means for the improvement of the circumstances of the Black population in America, and he is an inspirational model for how we as Christians can handle persecution and hardships along life’s path.

Our pilgrimage in honor of Tolton began with Mass at St Bernadette Catholic Church in Kansas City, where Fr. Bryan Amthor of Nativity Church in Independence, Missouri, led us in this prayer for all priests:

> Lord Jesus Christ, eternal High Priest, You offered Yourself to the Father on the altar of the Cross and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit gave Your priestly people a share in Your redeeming sacrifice. Hear our prayer for the sanctification of our priests. Grant that all who are ordained to the ministerial priesthood may be ever more conformed to You, the divine Master. May they preach the Gospel with pure heart and clear conscience. Let them be shepherds according to Your own Heart, single-minded in service to You and to the Church. and shining examples of a holy, simple, and joyful life. Through the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, your mother and ours, draw all priests and the flocks entrusted to their care to the fullness of eternal life where You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Our first stop was at the newly renovated St. Joseph Cathedral in Jefferson City, where beautiful stained-glass windows depict Tolton being baptized, ordained, hearing Confessions, and anointing the sick. The cathedral also has room set aside for a future shrine to Father Tolton, with a beautiful statue and other memorabilia, once he is beatified and canonized. At the church, our pilgrimage group prayed fervently for his canonization.

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We then visited Holy Rosary Church in Monroe City, which also has windows honoring Tolton. From there, we drove by the farm where he was born and visited St. Peter’s Church in Brush Creek. The current church has been restored to preserve his memory. One of the most memorable sites there for many of the pilgrims was

the cemetery behind the church. There is a typical cemetery where the White people of the church are buried, but also a field of white crosses, each saying “Unknown,” where the bodies of enslaved African Americans were found in a mass grave. They were later disinterred and buried with honor in separate graves, each with a simple white cross. At this site, our group prayed for an end to racial injustice.

Although many in our country and in our Church would like to believe that racial injustice is a thing of the past, reality tells us differently. In his book, “Racial Justice and the Catholic Church,” Fr. Bryan Massingale explains what racism looks like today and reminds us that it is still very much alive, even if it is of a different sort than that experienced before, say, the Civil Rights Movement. Some of us are old enough to remember segregation in the South and the sit-ins, other protests, as well as dogs and guns being used to suppress them.

On this topic, Servant of God Thea Bowman—another African-American candidate for sainthood—gave a stirring address to the U.S. bishops in 1989, beginning with an emotional rendition of the spiritual, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” She ended with a powerful moment, in which all the bishops stood and held hands, crossing their arms just like the civil rights workers did to protect themselves from dogs and tanks, singing “We Shall Overcome.”

But is that someday here yet? Massingale reminds us that racial injustice is just as alive today as it was when Jesus was persecuted by his own people and by the Romans. Even in the Church, there are leaders who are afraid to speak out for racial equality and who still do not understand “White privilege.”

Indeed, we still have racial injustice in our country, even in our justice system. The Prison Policy Institute reports that Black Americans are twice as likely to be incarcerated as the general population, followed closely by Native Americans and Hispanics. Knowing that the Black prison population is five times the percentage of Whites tells us something about how far we have not yet come.

Our pilgrimage ended with a visit to St. Columban Church in Chillicothe, where we prayed the official prayer for the Season of Creation. Therein, we confessed “how estranged we have become from one another” and recommitted ourselves to the Jesus who teaches us to “stand in solidarity with the woundedness of others.”

After the journey, our pilgrims arrived safely home, forever changed by this experience. We continue to pray for an end to all injustices in the world, for all

priests who dedicate their lives to shepherding their people through the trials and tribulations of life, and for the canonization of Venerable Augustus Tolton.

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