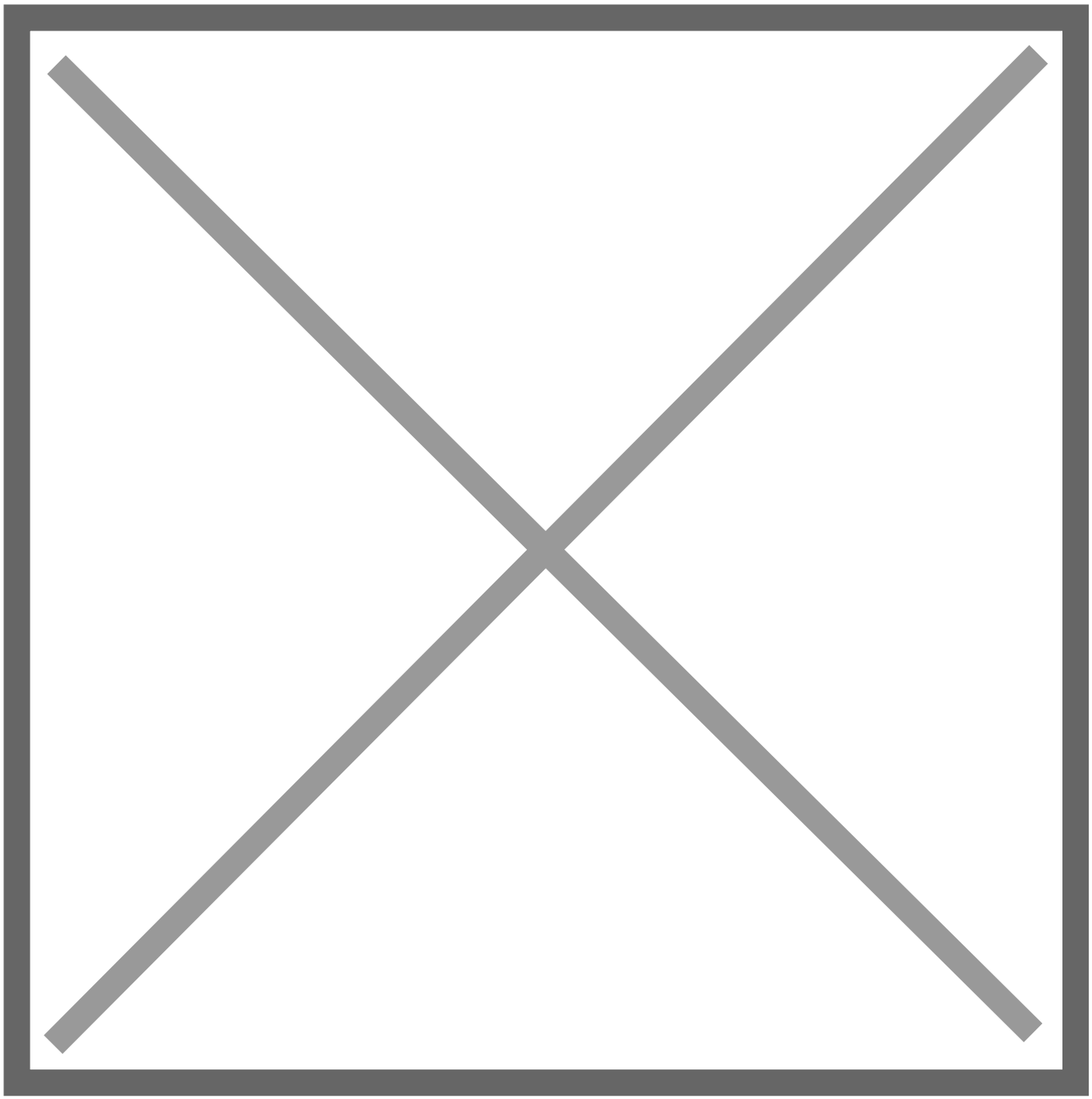
News



Retired Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry sits next to a portrait of the first African American priest of the U.S., Fr. Augustus (Augustine) Tolton, during the announcement April 29, 2026, on the shrine to the priest planned for St. Boniface Church in Quincy, Ill. (OSV News/Courtesy of the Diocese of Springfield)



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Quincy, Ill. — May 5, 2026
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The first publicly recognized Black Catholic priest in the United States — who has already had 40 potential miracles through his intercession investigated — is now getting his own national shrine in western Illinois where he grew up and once served.

On April 29, the Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, announced plans for a national shrine for Venerable Augustus (Augustine) Tolton (1854-1897), one of the "saintly seven," referring to the group of African Americans recognized as "servant of God" or "venerable" who have active sainthood causes.

The diocese launched a fundraising campaign for the renovation of a long-dormant church on the site where Father Tolton, who was regarded in his day as the first African American priest of the country, celebrated his first Mass in the U.S. after his ordination in Rome in 1886.

Church leaders said plans would be underway for St. Boniface Church in Quincy, Illinois, to get a $5 million-plus makeover.

Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield blessed a plaque from the city of Quincy — the place where Tolton grew up, ministered and is buried — designating the church a landmark property.

The bishop told OSV News a lot of work was needed on the future shrine — a church left completely unused since 2020 — that he envisions will be a place for prayer and pilgrimages.

"We can't even go into the church because it's that bad," he said. "It needs repair (remediation) of a lot of mold, and has not had proper heating and ventilation for the last few years. And so, that's why it's going to cost so much to restore it. Since it was just recently designated with landmark status, we want to go ahead with creating the shrine there, renovating the building."

He said another $5 million to $7 million would be needed to include landmarks from Tolton's life and Catholic formation in Quincy as part of the planned pilgrimage experience in the area.

Quincy designated the "mid-century modern" structure designed by local architect John Benya as a landmark site at the end of 2024.

Quincy Mayor Linda Moore said the shrine will be "a significant draw to people" in the formerly predominantly Catholic town of 40,000 along the Mississippi River on Illinois' western edge.

"A former slave came to Quincy, became a priest, and then came back to Quincy, to say his first Mass, and now he is in line to be a saint," Moore told OSV News. "It's just such a wonderful story of somebody who passed through Quincy, but made a significant difference in the lives of not only Quincians, but of people all over the country and all over the world."

Tolton was born in Brush Creek, Missouri, in 1854 to devout Catholic parents who suffered the injustice of slavery. When he was 9, his mother, Martha Jane Tolton, escaped with her three children across the Mississippi, reaching the safety of Union Army lines, to save them from slave-traders. The family then settled in Quincy.

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After one month at St. Boniface School where white parents threatened to remove their children, young Augustine (as he sometimes signed his letters) transferred to St. Peter's Parish where priests (including German Franciscans) and religious sisters happily mentored him and nurtured what they saw was a vocation to the priesthood.

However, no U.S. seminary would accept a Black vocation to the priesthood — so his mentors sent him to study in Rome, where he reportedly was very well liked and did not experience any prejudice. Tolton was ordained at St. John Lateran Basilica, the pope's cathedral in Rome, in 1886. He expected to serve as a missionary in Africa, but instead was sent to Quincy, where he became pastor at St. Joseph Church, a mission of St. Boniface Parish.

At St. Joseph, Tolton ministered to both African Americans and white Americans, many of whom were drawn to him and preferred his preaching to that of St. Boniface's pastor, one block away. Tolton endured bitter opposition from that priest, whom Tolton said in a letter "abuses me in many ways."

He successfully sought a transfer to Chicago in 1889, where he served Black Catholics, mostly at St. Monica's Parish in Chicago's South Side, a part of the city known for its ties to Pope Leo XIV, who is also of African American descent. Tolton died there eight years later, aged 43, of heatstroke.

Retired Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry, vice postulator of Tolton's canonization cause, remarked on St. Boniface as the designated shrine site.

"It's something of a roundabout to see the shrine, established as the place that kind of rejected him as a school child," Perry told OSV News.

He said a shrine signals "the degree of intensity of interest that is out there, for him." He remarked how "absolutely remarkable" it is for a person still steps away from sainthood to have a designated shrine.

The bishop said on a weekly basis, since the late Chicago Cardinal Francis George assigned him as postulator of Tolton's cause in 2010, he has received requests for prayer cards and informational pamphlets on Tolton from around the country and the world.

To date, Perry said, 40 investigations of potential miracles attributed to Tolton's intercession have taken place.

Fr. Steve Arisman, pastor of St. Francis Solanus Parish in Quincy and head of the committee on the shrine, told OSV News he and his seminary friends regularly seek Tolton's intercession.

He said the committee is also looking to start an endowment to fund the shrine project, which he hoped would include several buildings, a prayer garden and other commemorative locations that had a significant role in his formation and life in Quincy.

"What we want this to be is not only a shrine for Fr. Tolton, but an opportunity for pilgrimage along Tolton's journey," he said, "so that people can fall in love with the Lord more and more through that story of Father Tolton and his path."