

## Fr. Augustine Tolton: Symbol of Faith and Life

When I first heard that pope Benedict XVI has chosen this year as “The Year of the Priest”, like many others, I was greatly surprised. Yet, upon closer reflection I can see why we should reflect and meditate upon the role of the priesthood within the Church. As African American Catholics, this topic is especially important. The number of priests from our community has always been extremely small. Today, there are less than 180 African American Priests living, of these, approximately 60 are “retired”. Within our community, less than 30 young African American Males nationally, are in formation for the priesthood. The Men of color we see in formation programs are from African, Caribbean and South American nations.

In order to encourage our young men to consider serving as a priest we must know what It is and how it functions within the Church and within our community. Pope John Paul II wrote a major document entitled: *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (I Will Give You Shepherds) March 22, 1992. However, this powerful document has little grounding within our African American Community today. In order for it to take deeper root and become a stronger part of our cultural identity, we need to renew our historical bonds with the spirituality and pastoral style of Fr. Augustine Tolton and other pioneer priests within our African American Catholic Community.

Let us review some of the highlights of the life of Fr. Augustine Tolton and see how this remarkable man could overcome such overwhelming odds to become a priest and a strong pastor. Augustine Tolton was ordained in Rome in 1886 as the first African American Priest in the United States. His ordination occurred over the objections of several American bishops and his reception by the Church in the United States was lukewarm at best.

Tolton’s life as a Catholic Priest in the United States forms an ideal model to look at the role of the priest within the Church and within the African American Community. Part of the fascination with Augustine was the fact that he had achieved a social role in society that was unreachable by the vast majority of white laymen of his day.

We must ask ourselves several questions about why Augustine sought to become a Catholic and later a priest. Why a Catholic? Because of the strong support his family received from the Immigrant catholic communities of Quincy, Illinois. Why a priest? It was the result of observing the ministry and life style of the local catholic priests and the Franciscan Friars at the local college.

<sup>1</sup> One of the first questions Augustine had to address as a candidate for baptism was: **What is a priest?** *A priest is a male who is configured to Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit by sacramental anointing of holy orders.* Another question; **where does the priest fit within the church?** *Pastoral ministry of Jesus Christ is the foundation of Christian priesthood. Priests are constituent essence of the Church itself. Ordained ministry arises with the Church and succeeds to the ministry of the apostles. Priests are the sacramental representation of Jesus Christ. Priests prolong the physical presence of Jesus Christ within the Church.* **What role does the priest perform in the church?** *Priests continue Christ's prayer, word, sacrifice and salvific action within the church. Priests promote the common priesthood of the People of God. Priests and bishops are united to each through bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and fraternity. Communion between priest and bishop is essential for sacramental order.*

As Augustine studied with the priests at Quincy, Illinois for baptism, his vocation to the priesthood took root and blossomed. Through the encouragement of these men and the catholic community, Augustine applied for the seminary and was eventually accepted as a student at Propa Ganda Fide Seminary in Rome.

Like most of us, Augustine had difficulties in formation and in his pastoral assignments. Yet he continued to reach out to the entire community in which he resided. Because of his generous nature, people responded and assisted him in his difficult assignments. As a result of these continued accomplishments, Augustine found himself frequently defending the laity, especially African American Catholics against the policies of the local bishop.

Realizing the need for "Colored Catholics" to assemble and develop their own **National Pastoral Plan**, Fr. Tolton worked with Mr. Daniel Rudd and other lay delegates to form **The National Federation of Colored Catholics**. This was the first Lay Catholic Organization in the United States. Fr. Tolton worked tirelessly with this organization and many other emerging community organizations, while at the same time kept responding to chancellery inquiries and news paper articles in local and national press.

<sup>2</sup> The constant back and forth between chancellery and local Colored Communities led to Fr. Tolton's sudden death at the age of forty-two. Throughout his adult life Fr. Tolton lived the life of an exemplary priest. It is an example set by Fr. Tolton and these other pioneering priests: **Bishop James A. Healy, Alexander S.F. Healy, Patrick F. Healy, S.J., Charles R Uncles, S.S.J, John**

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<sup>1</sup> Pastores Dabo Vobis,1992; John Paul II: pp.12-16

<sup>2</sup> Desegregating the Altar, Louisiana State University Press,1990; Stephen J. Ochs: p.456

**H. Dorsey, S.S.J., Adrian Esnard, C.I.C.M., Joseph C. Burgess, C.S.Sp., John J. Plantevigne, S.S.J., Stephen L. Theobald, John J. Alexander, S.M.A., Andrew N. DuKette,** and others who have brought us to our current situation. All of these men loved the church and our people. Each one of them endured countless years of insult, ridicule and rejection. They persevered through the graces they received through the Eucharist; just like we must.

**Brothers! Pickup your cross!! Christ the High Priest is calling!!!**