

# Fr. Augustus Tolton, former African American slave, advances toward sainthood



Venerable Augustus Tolton. Credit: New York Public Library.



By [Courtney Grogan](#)

Vatican City, Jun 12, 2019 / 05:03 am (CNA).- Fr. Augustus Tolton advanced along the path to sainthood Wednesday, making the runaway slave-turned-priest one step closer to being the first black American saint.

Pope Francis recognized the heroic virtue of Fr. Tolton June 12 making him “venerable” within the Church, only two steps away from canonization. With the decree, Catholics are now authorized to pray directly to Tolton as an intercessor before God.

Venerable John Augustus Tolton was born into slavery in Monroe County, Missouri in 1854. He escaped slavery with his family during the Civil War by crossing the Mississippi River into Illinois.

“John, boy, you're free. Never forget the goodness of the Lord,” Tolton’s mother reportedly told him after the crossing.

The young Tolton entered St. Peter’s Catholic School in Quincy, Illinois with the help of the school’s pastor, Fr. Peter McGirr. The priest went on to baptize Tolton, instruct him for his first Holy Communion, and recognize his vocation to the priesthood.

No American seminary would accept Tolton because of his race, so he studied for the priesthood in Rome. However, when Father Tolton returned to the U.S. after his ordination in 1889, thousands of people lined the

streets to greet him. A brass band played hymns and Negro Spirituals, and black and white people processsed together into the local church.

Father Tolton was the first African American to be ordained a priest. He served for three years at a parish in Quincy, before moving to Chicago to start a parish for black Catholics, St. Monica Parish, where he remained until his death in 1897.

The Congregation for the Causes of Saints also recognized the heroic virtue of six other new “Venerables” June 12. Five Italians: Father Enzo Boschetti, Brother Felice Tantardini, layman Giovanni Nadiani, and Mother Maria Paola Muzzeddu.

The Filipino foundress of the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Rosary of the Philippines, Maria Rosario of the Visitation, was also declared venerable, and the martyrdom of Servants of God Maria Colón Gullón Yturriaga and two companions was recognized. Yturriaga and her companions were laypeople killed for their faith in Somiedo, Spain in 1936.

After two miracles through their particular intercession are verified by the Vatican, Father Tolton and the other new venerables can be declared saints.

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*I am aware of my manifold iniquity, sin, transgression and the forgiveness of Christ. I never could approach sainthood like Fr. Tolton, but I can ask his intercession for me to continue on the journey toward heaven, toward holiness, toward sainthood as a deliverance by Jesus from the evils that surround me.*