

Catholic commentator: Fr. Tolton knew freedom's real meaning

By Jay Nies **3453**
 "Our lives are like a book, and God is the author," says Rev. Mr. Harold Burke-Sivers. "We live page by page, but God knows the beginning and the end. So we need to have trust and fidelity. Even though we don't see how, He will use the situation we're in right now for His greater honor and glory."

Thanks to Franciscan Sister Caroline Hemesath, author of *From Slave to Priest*, important lessons can be drawn from every page of the life of Father Augustine Tolton, a man born into slavery in northeastern Missouri, who trusted God to help him overcome enormous obstacles and become the Catholic Church's first full-blooded African-American priest in the United States.

"Fr. Augustine is a wonderful example of the obedience of faith," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers, an African-American deacon, writer and TV personality who wrote, "A Study In Faithful Obedience," the foreword to a new edition of Sr. Hemesath's classic biography of Fr. Tolton. "He serves as a role model for those who seek to be configured more perfectly to Christ."

Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers said Fr. Tolton was a model of true humility, opening himself and pouring himself out in love, in imitation of Christ.

"Fr. Tolton shows us how to unite our sufferings to the teachings of Jesus," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers. "Everything we do out of that relationship is really a call to witness the beauty and truth of our faith."

Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers asserted in his foreword that Sr. Hemesath's book "is a poignant reminder that with God all things are possible."

Fr. Tolton, born into slavery in 1854 in Ralls County, Mo., was baptized by a Catholic priest in Brush Creek, Mo. His mother escaped to Illinois, a free state, with him and his two siblings after her husband joined the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War.

After searching for years for a way to answer his priestly calling from God—even though no U.S. seminary or religious order would accept him because of the

color of his skin—Fr. Tolton was invited to join the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and attend the Urban College in Rome. In 1886, he was ordained to the Holy Priesthood. He served until he was 43, when he died in Chicago of heat exhaustion.

Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers believes Fr. Tolton found freedom less from his family's escape from the Missouri plantation than from putting his trust squarely in the hands of God.

"True freedom is in line with God's holy will," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers. "We are truly free to be the people that God made us to be, in His image and likeness. Christ said, 'I have not come to do My own will, but will of He Who sent me.' That's something that Fr. Tolton understood."

Shortly before Fr. Tolton's priestly ordination, he found out that he would not be sent to serve in Africa, as he had hoped, but would return to the United States as a missionary.

"Rome, in its wisdom,

fluence of Fr. Tolton's mother, Martha Jane (Chisley) Tolton, was in his life.

"She always encouraged him," Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers noted. "Throughout the book, we see her telling him, 'Never forget the goodness of the Lord.' I think that stuck with him, to trust in the Lord even in the most difficult of times."

Fr. Tolton, said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers, understood the meaning and value of Christian humility.

"Humility does not really mean thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers. "And that's what he did. He went to school but took jobs to help take care of his family. He listened to and trusted the priests and sisters who were helping him when others would not. He let God speak to him through them."

That humility allowed Fr. Tolton to remain Catholic, even when Catholics and other Christians treated him hostilely.

"Despite the hypocrisy of people who are supposed to live what they believe," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers, "he saw that the teachings of the Church are still beautiful and true, and out of the obedience of faith, he followed the truth."

Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers pondered the words preached by Jesuit Father J-Glenn Murray at the 150th anniversary of Fr. Tolton's birth: "Neither brilliant nor clever, America's first recognized black African-American priest was a pastor, first and last, and justly merits the title of father of all the black African-American priests and—dare I say—the father of all black African-Americans who labor in love in the Catholic Church we call Roman. More than he ever realized in life, he was and is an inspiration for the remarkable movement of faith, even to this day and to this place."

"I love that sentiment of Fr. Murray," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers. "Fr. Augustine was just a pastor. That's all he wanted to be. He didn't try to start anything that would

outlive him. He just wanted to be faithful. He just wanted to serve. That's a wonderful



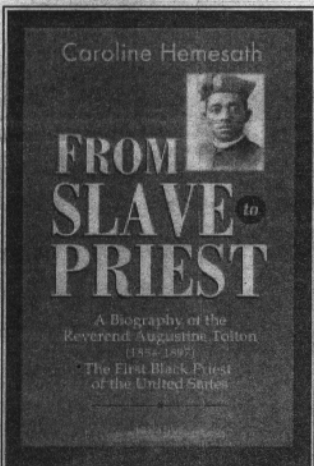
legacy, for all men called to the priesthood. It's all about committing yourself to serve God and serve the people—where they are."

While looking for a way to become a priest, Fr. Tolton made the most of his role as a layman, helping the sisters in Quincy catechize black children.

"For him, it wasn't just about doing stuff in church," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers. "The real battle in our culture, then and today, is living our Catholic faith with fervor and fidelity in the workplace, in the schools, in public and political life—places where priests and deacons don't necessarily reach."

"This has to come out of a deep love of Christ in our heart—not just in our hearts, but living that connection between what's in our heads and what's in our hearts—putting it into practice every day in the situations we find ourselves in at

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home, at work, wherever we find Christ to be," he said.

Before Fr. Tolton's priestly ordination, the prefect of the Urban College predicted that he would make "a good priest: reliable, deeply spiritual and dedicated."

"They saw in Rome what the Church in America failed to appreciate," said Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers. "Here is a man who was committed, who was dedicated, who loved the Church, who had a tremendous willingness to serve and answer his calling from God even though his calling was ignored in his own country."

Fr. Tolton and the other African-Americans who followed him into priestly and consecrated religious life opened many doors for African-Americans in the Church, Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers noted.

Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers believes Fr. Tolton died with hope in his heart, knowing that he had made every effort possible to improve the lives of the people he was sent to serve.

The deacon surmised that Fr. Tolton would not be concerned today about his own legacy but what people in his Church and in his country are doing to make things better.

"Fr. Augustine really understood the depths of the priesthood and lived from the cross of Christ," he said. "Wherever he went, he knew he was going there in *persona Christi*—in the person of Christ. The more we understand our faith, the more we really LIVE the Eucharist and BE Eucharist to the world, the better off we will be in living the faith as Fr. Augustine tried to live it."

Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers is host of "Behold the Man," on EWTN, a program about male spirituality.

He said being a "real man" means being a Christ-centered, loving servant, fostering and nurturing holiness.

"Men are not the boss," he said. "They are the chief servants in the image of Christ who came not to be served but to serve. How we can serve our wives and children and the Church? How can we develop an understanding of our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit? How can the Eucharist help us live out our faith every day? It's about living our faith according to God's holy Word, to become freer to become the people God created us to be in His image and likeness, in response to Christ's call to become perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect."



Rev. Mr. Harold Burke-Sivers

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From *Slave to Priest: The Inspirational Story of Fr. Augustine Tolton*, 255 pages hardback, including Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers' foreword, is published by Ignatius Press and is available in bookstores and on the Internet:

www.ignatius.com

More information about Rev. Mr. Burke-Sivers, including many of his writings, can be found at:

<http://auremcordis.com/media.cfm>