

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

The Spectator Online

Newspapers

11-23-2022

2022-11-23 Tolton: From Slave to Priest to Saint

Emma Ferguson
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online>

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Emma, "2022-11-23 Tolton: From Slave to Priest to Saint" (2022). *The Spectator Online*. 810.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/spectator-online/810>

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Newspapers at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Spectator Online by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.



The Spectator • November 23, 2022 • <https://seattlespectator.com/2022/11/23/tolton-from-slave-to-priest-to-saint/>

Tolton: From Slave to Priest to Saint

Emma Ferguson , Staff Reporter

A man born into the horrific institution of chattel slavery is now a candidate for sainthood, and Catholics across the city of Seattle are working to make his story known.

In honor of Black Catholic History Month, Seattle University hosted the multimedia performance of “Tolton: From Slave to Priest” on campus Nov. 19 in partnership with the Black Catholic Advisory Circle (BCAC) and the Archdiocese of Seattle.

“Tolton: From Slave to Priest,” chronicles the life and death of Venerable Father Augustus Tolton through songs, a minimalist stage design and multimedia video performances projected on a screen behind the stage. The play follows Tolton’s journey escaping slavery as a child, the challenges he faced in schools, his experience in Rome becoming a priest and later his difficulties coming back to the United States to head his own congregation.

The only live actor in the show was portraying Tolton, changing outfits and mannerisms to show how the character aged. Simple gray boxes were set around the stage as the actor interacted with only them and the video performances, heightening the raw emotions and ups and downs of Tolton’s life for the audience.

St. Luke’s Productions had done a series of “Tolton” performances in 2018 and was invited back again by Deacon Carl Chile, the director of Multicultural Ministries for the Archdiocese of Seattle and advisor of the BCAC, to celebrate Black Catholic History Month.



Jake Nelson

Jim Coleman as Fr. Augustus Tolton in Saint Luke Production’s “Tolton: From Slave to Priest”, performed in the Pigott auditorium.

“I think the importance of Tolton being played is that we don’t have any American born, Black Catholic saints. In order for Tolton to be elevated to sainthood, to be canonized, people really need to know him and know his story and know what he had gone through in order to have the confidence and faith in praying to him and asking for his intercession,” Chile said.

Tolton is one of six people on their way to becoming the first Black American saints in the Catholic Church.

The process of canonization has several steps, including an initial vote within the diocese of the deceased candidate which is then sent to the Vatican to be approved by the pope who kickstarts the investigation into the candidate's life. The Cardinals assigned to the Congregation for Causes of Saints voted to send a recommendation for Tolton's canonization May 21, 2021.

Pope Francis issued a decree June 11, 2021 stating that Father Augustus Tolton had lived a life of heroic virtue, advancing him to the title Venerable. To promote him to the next title, Blessed, the Vatican has to attribute two miracles to Tolton's intercession, something they began investigating earlier this year.

Jim Coleman, who has portrayed Tolton in the “Tolton: From Slave to Priest” for four years now, stressed the significance of the priest being on his way to becoming the first Black American saint.

“I think it's time, and not just because he is a Black American, but because he persevered, because he escaped slavery as a child—which is a miracle—to integrate schools 100 years before Brown v. Board of Education, to go to Rome and study and then come back and have a Black Catholic Church in the 1800s, it's a miracle. His life is a miracle,” Jim Coleman said.

Barbara Coleman, unrelated to Jim Coleman, a member of the leadership team of the BCAC alongside her partner Deacon Joseph Connor, has seen the play several times now. She was thrilled that young people have the opportunity to see this performance.

“There were so many young children in the audience. So I am just excited to see them because this is a wonderful educational experience for them,” Barbara Coleman said. “Some of them, I am sure, have never seen a Black priest, so that was great.”

Hearing stories like Tolton is a first step for the Catholic Church and its participants to start correcting the long problem of whitewashing its religious figures. This is something that Seattle U's Campus Ministry, including Campus Minister for Pastoral Care Megan Kush, had in mind when working to bring the production to campus.

“I think that my hope, and shared amongst the team, is that people get to see themselves, and that they get to work towards a campus, a Church, a world community where everybody is able to be honored as their whole selves,” Kush said.

Learning about Tolton and other Black Catholics is not just pertinent for those within the Church, though.

“For other people, for people who don't identify as Black or Catholic, [it is great for them] to be able to learn about the history of Tolton, to learn about history of the Catholic Church and its relation with slavery, and to understand what it means for them, from their own positionality,” Kush said.

Venerable Father Augustus Tolton and his journey to sainthood poses the opportunity for the Catholic Church and individual communities within it, like Seattle U, to put in the work to reflect the diversity of the Church. Whether integral change in the culture of the Church will be made is to be seen.

