


JOYCE DURIGA

# AUGUSTUS TOLTON



*The Church  
Is the True  
Liberator*

DISCUSSION GUIDE

## About the Book

Father Augustus Tolton was the first identified black American ordained to the priesthood in the United States. He was born into slavery and escaped to freedom with his mother and siblings under harrowing circumstances. Throughout his life he displayed a great devotion to the Lord and the Catholic faith despite facing racism within the Church at nearly every turn. Still, he clung to his, and the Catholic Church's, conviction that all people are children of God, regardless of race. He committed himself to sharing this truth through his preaching, often arguing that the Catholic Church was the true church for African Americans in the United States. In *Augustus Tolton*, Joyce Duriga brings to light his quiet witness as a challenge to prejudices and narrow-mindedness that can keep us insulated from the universal diversity of the kingdom of God.

## About the Author

Joyce Duriga has served as editor of *Chicago Catholic*, the official newspaper for the Archdiocese of Chicago, since 2007. Prior to coming to Chicago, she was the associate editor of *Our Sunday Visitor*, a national Catholic news-weekly. She is also the author of *Helen Prejean: Death Row's Nun* (Liturgical Press), and her work appears regularly in local, regional, and national publications.

# Discussion Guide

## Chapter One

1. How do we begin to understand the lives of slaves like Martha Jane Chisley? What details from this chapter can aid us in appreciating their experiences?
2. If you could, what would you ask Martha about her life and experiences? What would you ask Stephen and Ann Elliot?
3. We see evidence in this chapter of moral blind spots that nineteenth century Catholics carried, due largely to the culture in which they lived. What moral blind spots might faithful Catholics carry *today*, thanks to the influence of the culture in which we live?

## Chapter Two

1. What evidence do you see in this chapter of the deeply ingrained racism that remained even in the hearts of practicing Catholics, though the Civil War was over and slavery was illegal?
2. Following from the previous question, what evidence do you see of virtue and goodness in those same Catholics (perhaps demonstrating the fact that both light and darkness co-exist in every human heart)?
3. “It is impossible to be admitted as a student in any seminary in America, the same reasons do not exist in Rome,” wrote Bishop Baltes in his letter seeking Augustus’s acceptance to the Urban College. Your thoughts?
4. Consider the fact that Augustus expected, after several years of training in Rome, to be sent to minister as a priest in Africa. What does this say about his personality and his faith?

## Chapter Three

1. What did Augustus mean by his conviction that “the Catholic Church is the true liberator of black Americans”? Why did he think this was so? What evidence confirms this? And in what ways was this not quite as true as it ought to have been?
2. Consider Archbishop Spalding’s thinking on slavery and freeing the slaves. How do his arguments sound today?
3. For what purpose were the Second and Third Councils of Baltimore called? And how well did their outcomes reflect that?

## Chapter Four

1. What are your reactions to the fascinating story of the Healys? What do you think when you consider the story from the viewpoint of Michael Healy? From the viewpoint of Eliza Healy? From the viewpoint of their three priest sons?
2. What important elements of culture, law, and race came together to shape the story of Michael Healy, his slave Eliza, and their children?
3. Why was the Catholic Church the object of nativist suspicion and attacks in the U.S. in the nineteenth century?

## Chapter Five

1. “America has been called the most enlightened nation. We will see if it deserves the honor,” wrote Cardinal Simeoni. How must America have seemed from the viewpoint of the Cardinal and others at Propaganda Fide?
2. Were the doubts about Tolton’s success held by Urban College officials justified?
3. What was Augustus Tolton’s experience in Rome like? How must Rome have seemed to him, after previously living in the United States?

## Chapter Six

1. What does the nature of Fr. Tolton's welcome in Quincy, and the celebration of his first Mass, say to you about the people of the city? How might this occasion have gone differently?
2. What does Duriga describe as "the secret of [Tolton's] pastoral success," and how do you see this in his life and ministry?
3. How does Augustus' experience in Rome seem to have shaped his ministry?



## Chapter Seven

1. What were the reasons for Fr. Tolton's frustration in his ministry as a priest?
2. What difficulties did he face that white priests serving Catholics in the same city did not?
3. What is most striking to you about these years of Tolton's life?

## Chapter Eight

1. Are you familiar with Daniel Rudd? What did he mean when he wrote that the Catholic Church “offers to the oppressed Negro a material as well as spiritual refuge, superior to all the inducements of other organizations combined”? How might you consider further corporal and spiritual works of service for members of your community? (For more on Daniel Rudd, check out another book in the People of God series, Gary B. Agee’s *Daniel Rudd: Calling a Church to Justice*.)
2. Are you familiar with the National Black Catholic Congress (the present-day name of the “Colored Catholic Congress” whose inaugural 1889 event included Mass celebrated by Fr. Tolton)? Did you hear about, or perhaps participate, in its 2017 gathering? If so, what was your experience like? If not, consider looking at the organization’s report on it, photos from the gathering, or the beautiful mural commissioned especially for the celebration (which includes an image of Augustus Tolton) at <https://www.nbccongress.org/>.
3. Tolton and Rudd both understood the Catholic Church as the best suited institution to overcome racial division, discrimination, and oppression. In your opinion, how well does today’s Church live up to this vision? How could the Church do this better?

## Chapter Nine

1. In this chapter, we see how one contemporary journalist wrote of Fr. Tolton's "poverty and humility." How do you see these realities operating in his life and ministry?
2. What would have been the greatest challenges Fr. Tolton faced in his move to Chicago?
3. Why would St. Augustine and St. Monica (whose names were given to the organization, and later the parish, intended to serve black Catholics in Chicago) be fitting patrons for that community?

## Chapter Ten

1. This chapter narrates Fr. Tolton's contact with a woman who would one day (in the year 2000) be canonized a saint, Mother Katharine Drexel. This is all the more interesting since Augustus Tolton's own cause for canonization has recently been advancing within the Church. How are these two people alike, and how are they different?
2. In what ways is the holy intersection of their lives interesting? And how can reflecting on their connection and their shared priorities help us grow in our own lives of faith, love, and justice?
3. In what ways are you familiar with St. Katharine Drexel, her witness, and her legacy? A quick internet search will provide some very helpful and interesting resources.

## Chapter Eleven

1. What is your reaction to the story of the episode at the Tremont House?
2. Fr. Tolton was able to make his accusation against Tremont House publicly, and the owners of the place denied it and defended themselves against it. What does this say about American (or at least Midwestern) society in the early 1890s?
3. What is your reaction to the passages quoted from Tolton's "What Is Woman?" lecture?

## Chapter Twelve

1. What does the turn-out of people at Tolton's funeral in Chicago and burial in Quincy suggest about the way people in those cities viewed him?
2. How were Archbishop Mundelein's apparently well-intentioned words and work stained by racism? What well-intentioned things do we say and do today that may seem similarly marred many decades from now?
3. If you had the opportunity to tell a friend or loved one about Augustus Tolton, what would you share about his life and legacy?