

The story of Father Augustus Tolton inspires Marquette Catholic High School and other students

by Steven Spencer, Staff Writer
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ALTON - The St. Serra Vocations Club and local parishes of the Riverbend helped bring special performances of "Tolton From Slave to Priest" Tuesday and Wednesday at Marquette Catholic High School.

The multi-media production combines video as well as a live performance to tell the story of Augustus Tolton, the first African American Catholic priest who was ordained in 1886 in Rome, portrayed by Jim Coleman. The show was performed by Saint Luke's Productions.

Coleman says the history of Father Tolton is one that deserves to be told.

Born as a slave in Missouri, Tolton and his family escaped to freedom in Quincy, Illinois, where the family continued to face incredible hardships while maintaining his faith and desire to become a Catholic priest.

"A colored child born April 1, 1854, son of Peter Tolton and Martha Chisley, property of Stephen Elliott." Those were the words written in the baptismal record for Father Augustus Tolton. Born a slave in Brush Creek, Mo., he grew up to become the first African-American Catholic priest. He bore the insults of racial prejudice, and even after his ordination suffered the jealousies of religious leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, who saw him as a threat to their congregations.

Last year, Deacon Bill Kessler of St. Ambrose in Godfrey, saw Father Tolton's story presented in Granite City. He resolved to bring this story to the people of the Riverbend Area by means of the St. Serra Vocations Club of Madison County. Another audience member, Father Jeremy Paulin, OMV, of St. Mary Parish in Alton, also wanted to bring it to his parish. They later met with the St. Serra Vocations Club, Marquette Catholic High School, and other area priests and parishes and worked together to bring three performances of Father Tolton's story to one venue, where people from the Riverbend area are invited to see the story. (One performance will be private for area students, the other two are open to the public.)

Deacon Kessler said, "Our St. Serra Vocations Club promotes vocations at both our parish schools and our Marquette Catholic High School. The play on the life of Father Tolton uniquely presents his faithful story. To have the performance during the annual Catholic Schools Week allowed almost 1,000 of our school community to be inspired by his life and fidelity. The fidelity of Augustus Tolton speaks to all, no matter one's age, to be encouraged in our response to God's call to faithful Discipleship in the single life or family vocations."

“Father Tolton’s story needs to be told,” Coleman said in a release. “As a black man, this very important part of history is something that I want the world to hear about. I truly feel blessed to be the one to share Father Augustus Tolton with all who will listen.”

[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)