Column: Year of Mercy

Father Augustus Tolton: Exemplar in the Jubilee of Mercy

by Akua Kankam

Mercy is a simple word. Theologically, when we think about mercy, we do so with a focus on the mercy of God. Anthropologically, people find the concept of mercy within the legal system, arts, and entertainment. We see mercy in big ways, but do we see it in small ones? Are we witnesses to mercy within the minutiae of the everyday? Do we not only receive it, but experience it emanating from ourselves?

Members of the Fr. Augustus Tolton Pastoral Ministry program are charged with understanding the life of their namesake and the problems that he struggled against as he fought for basic rights denied him because of his race. Sr. Caroline Hemesath’s From Slave to Priest: The Inspirational Story of Father Augustine Tolton, chronicles Fr. Tolton’s life and in particular the joys and the weight of becoming the first recognized African American priest in the United States. From Slave to Priest follows Fr. Tolton’s story from his parents’ wedding, through his escape from Brush Creek, MO, to Quincy, IL, and all the way to his death in 1897.

The life of an escaped slave in the time of the Civil War was marked by heartbreak and pain. Despite the agony he endured under institutional racism, Augustus Tolton was actively vocal about the desires of his heart. He was unabashed about his vocation, and God opened doors on his behalf. Ordained as a new priest in 1886 and signed to America instead of Africa, he held a great deal of apprehension around returning to the United States. Fr. Tolton had to minister in a country that had categorically denied him the opportunity to attend seminary and heed God’s call as a priest. Hemesath describes Fr. Tolton’s state of mind in this way: “Lord, I can conquer ignorance, weakness, and heathenism. But Lord, I cannot conquer the racial hatred in America.” Nevertheless, Fr. Tolton returned home and faced his well-founded fears.

Although he anticipated racism generally, the ill treatment he received at the hands of his own brother priests was a particularly great source of pain for Fr. Tolton. German priest Fr. Michael Weiss, pastor of St. Boniface and ecclesiastical dean of Quincy, IL, was known to call Fr. Tolton “the nigger priest.” In an 1890 letter to Fr. John Slattery, Fr. Tolton indicated that “I was having too good a success in Quincy and the Dutch priest could not stand it. Of course I left more for peace sake than anything else. I wrote to Rome first and got the Cardinals consent to come to Arch Bp Feehans.” Fr. Weiss’ animosity propelled Fr. Tolton to state in a report, “He is persecuting me,” and catalyzed Fr. Tolton’s move to the diocese of Chicago.

1 Akua is a Chicago native and is a current Tolton Scholar in the Master of Divinity program at the Catholic Theological Union. Along with her studies, Akua is a Recruitment and Admissions Associate for CTU.
2 Fr. Tolton’s first name has been used interchangeably as “Augustine” or “Augustus.”
3 Caroline Hemesath, S.S.F., From Slave to Priest: The Inspirational Story of Father Augustine Tolton (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 154.
4 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 182.
6 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 184.
Despite these difficulties, Fr. Tolton treated fellow Christians and fellow priests with the utmost respect. He rarely spoke ill of anyone, and advised others to do the same. He reminded his own parishioners to treat all ministers well, Catholic or not, and regardless of the ministers’ treatment of them. Fr. Tolton could have maligned the Christian leadership who were making his life difficult, but he chose not to reciprocate their actions, instead continuing his work and even consulting with Fr. Weiss as needed. Instead of being deterred by Fr. Weiss’ racism, Fr. Tolton used it as an opportunity to exhibit the very mercy that is the vocation of all the baptized. As befitting a person considered for canonization, Fr. Tolton is a shining example of what it can mean to live a life of mercy.

In 2015, Pope Francis proclaimed that 2016 will be the Jubilee of Mercy. The “Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee of Mercy” describes the patient, loving, and merciful nature of God as a parent in deep relationship with God’s children, challenging those children to employ that same level of mercy with one another. As the Bull so eloquently states at the beginning:

We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy. It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

The Bull urges the faithful to evidence the mystery of mercy through their actions. It specifically calls us to focus on both corporal and spiritual works of mercy during this jubilee, supporting the assertion that while we are freely given the gift of mercy through God’s grace, we must choose to extend that mercy to others. Whether corporal or spiritual, it is a conscious, deliberate act that requires intentionality and God’s continued grace. The Bull tells us that “mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are.”

Fr. Tolton truly was a child of God who acted on his ability to provide mercy in two ways: he honored his abusers with spiritual works of mercy, and he provided for those in need with corporal works of mercy. He did not allow the racism of fellow priests and the sociocultural, economic system of slavery to create a divide between himself and the Church. Fr. Tolton, in fact, identified the unifying, evangelizing mission of the Church as its inherent response towards slavery:

The Catholic Church deplores a double slavery—that of the mind and that of the body. She endeavors to free us of both...I was finally admitted to the College de Propaganda Fide, and found out that I was not the only black man there. There were students from Africa, China, Japan, and other parts of the world. The Church which knows and makes no distinction in race and color had called them all. When the Church does all of this, is she not a true liberator of the race? In this Church we do not have to fight for our rights because we are black.

During speaking engagements, Fr. Tolton used his experiences with slavery and racism to constructively advocate for the Church, rather than tearing it down because of the actions of some. His mercy toward the Church, despite the lack of mercy shown by some of its children, allowed him to reconcile the disconnect between the mission of the Church and the systemic social evils of the time in which he lived. Fr. Tolton’s spiritual mercy perpetuated

7 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 181-182.
9 Francis, Misericordiae Vultus, no. 9., emphasis added.
10 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 185.
spiritual mercy. He provided the opportunity for others to receive God’s mercy through his evangelization, simultaneously channeling the love that stayed retaliation to evidence the love that God has for all people regardless of race. He helped elucidate the Church’s “primary task,” providing “a moment full of great hopes and signs of contradiction...to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God’s mercy.”

In addition to the spiritual mercy Fr. Tolton exercised with those in the Church, he also practiced a great deal of corporal mercy. Fr. Tolton worked for a community that was in “dire poverty” to the point that “some of them were destitute. It was only because [the children] received clothing and shoes, sometimes even food, that they came to school at all. Catholic as well as non-Catholic children crowded into the classrooms in winter just to have a warm place.” The American population was still struggling to recover, twenty-one years after the country’s costliest war. This struggle was especially pronounced within the African American community. Working with African Americans in a post-Reconstruction America meant dealing with a people who grappled with abject poverty and insolvency. Fr. Tolton's mercy “indicate[d] God’s action towards us. [God] does not limit himself merely to affirming his love, but makes it visible and tangible.”

Fr. Tolton was a catechist, evangelist, lecturer, pastor, and counselor, who regularly visited the elderly and infirm. He made God’s love visible and tangible by tirelessly working to assist those who needed help.

Christian faithful will always have the opportunity to work towards cultivating mercy. While the work is difficult, the beauty of this faith is that there are exemplars who have illustrated, through their lives, methodologies for doing the difficult work. The people of God have the witness of the lives of saints and of saints-to-be, such as Fr. Augustus Tolton, who provide direction in imparting mercy.

We enact the spiritual and corporal work of mercy in our everyday lives by paying attention to seemingly minute opportunities. Consider taking on the qualities of patience, kindness, compassion, attentiveness, and forgiveness, remembering to offer support to others in small ways. It seems that humanity has forgotten how to care for one another. More to the point, we have forgotten that caring for one another happens within the everyday, within the smallest of actions. I personally strive to smile at a stranger or a colleague who passes by. I believe in the importance of taking the time to ask how someone is doing and taking the time to listen to the response. I think that it is important to analyze the non-verbal behavior of people within our communities; if the person seems troubled, I ask. In my estimation, Fr. Tolton’s example was clear: there is no Christianity without community and there is no community without addressing the needs and daily care of others.

As in the church of Fr. Tolton’s time, we as Christians, and as ministry practitioners, are often the worst offenders. It is incumbent upon each one of us to reach out to one another in deceptively innocuous ways. Court the gifts of consideration, understanding, charity, mercy, and attentiveness to others. Pledge to do one small thing everyday to evidence care for someone outside of your friends and family. Learn to laugh with people. Make the effort to remember people’s names. Let go of infractions. Allow the giving of your all to begin in your daily life by giving your all to one another in the moment.

Are there other things the faithful can do that are greater than these modest actions? The short answer is yes; but the “greater” actions begin with the greatest impact of the humblest actions. Will there be days when doing these things will slip our minds, or seem impossible? The answer again is yes; but it is something that all the faithful fail in everyday. This is why mercy, and the grace that makes mercy possible, are so important. As the Bull makes clear, “we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us...we are called to gaze even

11 Francis, Misericordiae Vultus.
12 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 172.
13 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 172.
14 Hemesath, From Slave to Priest, 169.
more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father’s action in our lives.” As we move forward in this Jubilee of Mercy, may we all remember that “mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon”\textsuperscript{15}, and may we seek to be overcome, like Fr. Tolton, by the love God has given to us and asks us to impart to each other.

\textsuperscript{15} Francis, \textit{Misericordiae Vultus}. 