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1

SENATE RESOLUTION

2 WHEREAS, On April 1, 1854, Augustus Tolton, a man who would
3 become the nation's first African-American priest, was born
4 into slavery to Martha Jane Chisley and Peter Paul Tolton, who
5 were both kept in slavery in Brush Creek, Missouri; and

6 WHEREAS, When the nation was headed toward a civil war,
7 Peter Paul Tolton escaped slavery to join the Union Army,
8 dreaming of freedom and education for his children;
9 unfortunately, he died in St. Louis shortly after his escape;
10 and

11 WHEREAS, In 1862, Augustus Tolton's mother, determined by
12 the sight of him and his brother doing field work at ages 7 and
13 8 and worried that any of her three children would be sold to
14 other slave-owners, planned and carried out the family's
15 harrowing escape to Quincy; and

16 WHEREAS, In Quincy, Martha Tolton sent Augustus Tolton to
17 get an education with the Notre Dame Sisters in St. Boniface
18 Parish in Quincy, which caused an uproar that eventually forced
19 Augustus to withdraw from school until Father Peter McGirr of
20 nearby St. Lawrence School (later St. Peter's) prepared the way
21 for his school to accept its first black student; and

1 WHEREAS, Father McGirr, recognizing Augustus Tolton as a
2 devout young man who served Mass daily before going to work,
3 saw in Augustus a possible vocation in the priesthood;
4 realizing that no seminary or religious order in the United
5 States would accept Augustus due to his race, Father McGirr
6 began with local priests to assist in Augustus' formal
7 education in 1873; and

8 WHEREAS, In 1878, the Franciscans at St. Francis College
9 (now known as Quincy University) took Augustus Tolton in as a
10 student; while at St. Francis, he excelled academically, helped
11 influence the temperance movement, started a Sunday school, and
12 urged families to see to the religious instruction of their
13 children; and

14 WHEREAS, In 1880, while in search of a seminary to pursue
15 his priestly vocation, Augustus Tolton left Quincy for Rome,
16 Italy to become a seminarian at the Propaganda Seminary (Urban
17 College), which trains priests for work in mission countries;
18 and

19 WHEREAS, On the day before his priestly ordination,
20 Cardinal Simeoni told Augustus Tolton that a committee had
21 agreed that he should be sent to Africa, but that the Cardinal
22 overruled the decision, announcing that "America has been
23 called the most enlightened nation in the world. We shall see

1 whether it deserves that honor. If the United States has never
2 before seen a black priest, it must see one now"; and

3 WHEREAS, On April 24, 1886, Augustus Tolton was ordained to
4 the priesthood at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome; and

5 WHEREAS, Father Tolton subsequently returned to Quincy and
6 became pastor of St. Joseph's Church on July 25, 1886; he
7 worked tirelessly for the welfare of his parish, travelling
8 great distances for numerous speaking engagements around the
9 country to raise money to maintain the church and school; and

10 WHEREAS, In 1889, Father Tolton came to Chicago and was
11 placed in charge of a fledgling group of black Catholics under
12 the title of the St. Augustine Society out of St. Mary Church
13 in downtown Chicago; and

14 WHEREAS, In 1891, after moving to St. Monica's store-front
15 chapel, Father Tolton assisted in garnering support for the
16 construction of a grand St. Monica's Church; by the time the
17 church opened, Father Tolton was ministering directly to 600
18 African-American Catholics and tirelessly aiding many others
19 who were afflicted by poverty; and

20 WHEREAS, Father Tolton's unceasing dedication to work and
21 to serving those in his community kept him constantly busy,

1 leading to much noticeable fatigue and exhaustion; and

2 WHEREAS, On July 9, 1897, upon returning to Chicago from an
3 annual gathering of priests in Bourbonnais, Father Tolton
4 passed away at the young age of 43 of heat stroke; he was laid
5 to rest in St. Peter's Cemetery in Quincy; and

6 WHEREAS, On February 24, 2011, in consideration of Father
7 Tolton's priestly dedication, particularly to African-American
8 Catholics, the Cause for the beatification and canonization of
9 Father Augustus Tolton was officially opened; therefore, be it

10 RESOLVED, BY THE SENATE OF THE NINETY-SEVENTH GENERAL
11 ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that that we commemorate the
12 126th anniversary of the ordination of Father Augustus Tolton
13 as the first African-American priest in the United States and
14 designate the date of April 24, 2012 as Father Augustus Tolton
15 Day, during which we urge all Illinoisans to remember his
16 unyielding commitment and ministry to African-American
17 Catholics in Quincy, Chicago, and across the nation.