

# Celebrating February as Black History Month

## A Profile on African American Priests



**Father Charles Uncles** was the first African American Catholic Priest to be **ordained in the U.S.** on Dec. 19, 1891. Father Uncles was born Nov. 8, 1859 in East Baltimore. The Archdiocese of Baltimore is home to many firsts, including the Rev. Charles Randolph Uncles, who was the first African American first black ordained priest in the county and one of the **founding members of the American Josephites**. He was ordained in 1891 by Cardinal Gibbons in the Baltimore Cathedral. He broke the color barrier in Baltimore's St. Mary's Seminary, at a time when segregation within and outside the Catholic Church was the norm. Fr. Uncles' ultimate achievement, his ordination, in 1891 made headlines around the country, including those of the New York Times newspaper. To become a priest, Fr. Uncles studied at a seminary in Quebec and at the Josephine seminary, which was on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Two years after his famous ordination, Father Uncles became one of the founders of the St. Joseph Society of the Sacred Heart, commonly known as the Josephites. It is noted that during this time of segregation, Fr. Uncles suffered the brunt of racism and was restricted and limited because American bishops wouldn't appoint him to position in their dioceses. As a result, Fr. Uncles was relegated to teaching in the seminary and he could not be a pastor of a church in a diocese outside of Baltimore. The Josephites is a congregation of priests and brothers whose exclusive mission is to serve the African-American community. Founded after the Civil War to minister to newly freed slaves, the organization has served the African American community since 1871 for the spiritual needs of millions of persons of African descent.

**Father Augustus Tolton** is a pioneer African American Catholic who was the first priest of African descent acknowledged **to serve** anywhere in the United States.



Father Tolton was **ordained a priest** with his class during the Easter Vigil on April 24, 1886 at St. John Lateran Basilica **in Rome**. He was born on the Hagar farm in Bush Creek, Missouri, in 1854. He escaped slavery with his family and settled in Quincy, Illinois, a major stop on the Underground Railroad. He joined the closest Catholic Church, the German parish of St. Boniface. Augustus and his mother both worked at the Harris Cigar Factory. When Augustus was 14, the pastor of the Irish parish, St. Peter’s, invited the boy who could barely read to enroll. Father McGirr and the sisters who ran the school knew they needed to prepare both parents and students for the school’s first black student.

“As long as I was at the school, I was safe. Everyone was kind to me,” Father Tolton recalled years later. He also learned to serve Mass. From the time he was 14, he served Mass every morning before going to work or school. At 16, he made his First Communion and started to think about the priesthood. The priests who knew him also saw a future priest in the dedicated, pious young man. After he finished his basic education at 18, Fr. Gus received the help of Father McGirr, who began to help him find a seminary. All Father McGirr had to do was find a seminary. He wrote to every seminary in the country and all gave him the same answer: We aren’t ready to accept a Negro. For the time being, local priests tutored Augustus privately in between his work at both the cigar factory and as a janitor at St. Peter’s. He also found time to help start a Catholic school for Blacks. It seemed the Mill Hill Fathers in England might accept him at their seminary, but it later became clear they thought he should stay in America. Bishop Baltes then appealed to the Urban College in Rome, but this international seminary also suggested that Augustus attend seminary in the United States. No one understood how impossible that was. Finally, a second appeal to the Urban College through the Franciscans lead to Augustus’ acceptance.

In Rome, he was “Gus from the U.S.,” loved by his fellow seminarians and admired for his deep spirituality by his teachers. After his ordination in 1886, he was sent back to the diocese of Alton, Illinois. In his first year, he took over the school he had founded and also created a flourishing parish at St. Joseph’s, attended by both blacks and whites. A year later, the diocese got a new bishop and the neighboring parish, St. Boniface, a new pastor who was jealous of the success of the black priest

next door. He wanted nothing less than for Father Gus to leave. As a result of this circumstance, Father Tolton accepted an invitation to minister in Chicago. In Chicago, Father Gus was made pastor of all Black Catholics in the city. He built the first Catholic Church in a Black neighborhood and wore himself out ministering throughout the city. He was declared venerable in 2019.



**Father James Healy**, considered by some as the first Catholic priest of African descent to work in the United States, **was ordained in Paris in 1854**. Historians noted that Father Healy never considered himself as Black. James Augustine Healy was born in Macon, Georgia, in 1830, as a slave. His father was an Irish immigrant who married his mother, a Black woman, in Santo Domingo. At that time, however, Georgia did not recognize interracial marriages, so the children were legally slaves. Ten children were born of this union, and three of them became priest.

In June of 1855, **Father Healy** was appointed as the Chancellor of the Boston diocese during the Civil War, and was authorized to set up the first chancery office. In 1862 came more duties when he was made Rector of the Cathedral. Bishop Fitzpatrick died in 1866, and the new Bishop made Father Healy the pastor of St. James Parish, the largest parish in Boston. In 1874, the Holy See announced that Father Healy had been made the **Bishop of Portland, Maine**. He **was the first Black Bishop of the diocese**. He presided over this diocese of the far north for 25 years. His greatest concern in his new diocese was the poor, of whom there were a large number, both Irish and French-Canadian. He himself went out regularly to administer the last sacraments to the ill, or to anyone who was dying as the results of a street brawl, which were common at that time in his pioneer diocese. He also made it a point to promote education, and did his best to provide for Catholic schooling for the poorest of the children of his diocese. He established a Catholic school in Portland and then he would appear at their house with food and clothing. This was a time when few of the working people made more than nine dollars a week. Thus, the Bishop made himself a one-man relief agency for those in distress. Bishop Healy brought in the Sisters of Mercy to staff parochial schools, and he started a junior college for girls. During his 25-year term as Bishop, his diocese prospered. More than 60 new churches were built, along with 68 mission stations, and 18 more parochial schools were founded. An equal number of convents and

welfare institutions were built. The Catholic population of the diocese more than doubled to 96,000 by the end of his career.

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