

THE POWER OF A MOTHER'S LOVE AND FAITH

Although we usually consider May the “Month of Mary,” I think December comes a close second. This month we celebrate the Feasts of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Nativity of Our Lord and, on the evening of Dec. 31 and morning of Jan. 1, the Feast of Mary as Mother of God.



BY BISHOP MICHAEL
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Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ has been bishop of the Diocese of Oakland since May 25, 2013.

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One of the best definitions of a “mother” is “a woman who gives her life so that someone else may live.”

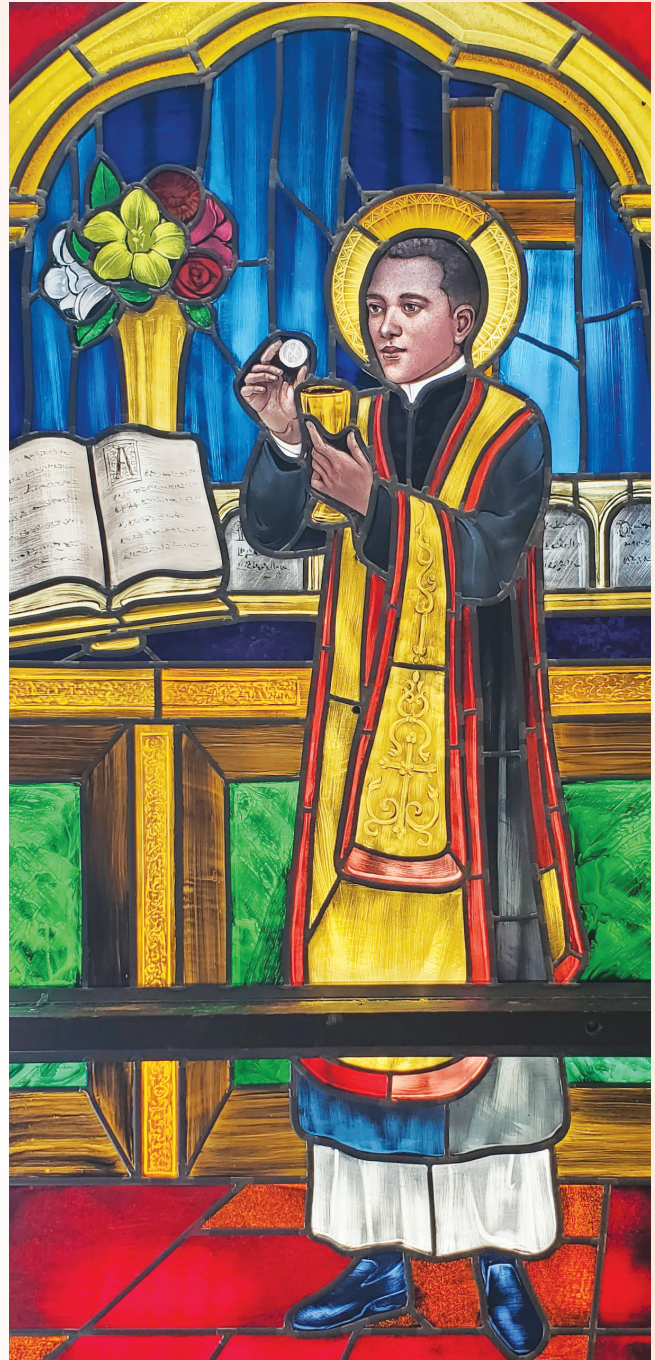
Our Lady certainly fulfills that role.

And so did Martha Jane Chisley Tolton.

Martha Jane was the mother of Father Augustus Tolton, the first African American ordained to the priesthood in the United States.

Martha Jane was born into slavery in Kentucky in 1827. As was the custom of the time, she was raised in the religion of her “owners” – and they were Catholics. One wonders how someone could embrace the religion of someone who “owned” her or him.

Martha Jane is an example of Christ, who said of the Pharisees, “Do what they say, but do not practice what they do.” She embraced the Catholic Faith, which gave her courage and spiritual strength, which she duly imparted to her children.



She was given away as a wedding present to another family in Missouri in 1849, and separated from her own family. She was married in the Catholic Church to Peter Paul Tolton. When the Civil War broke out, her husband escaped to join the Union Army, but died in the war.

In 1863, with great faith and trust in the Lord, Mary Jane also decided to escape with her three young children in search of freedom. Although she and her kids had the assistance of the Underground Railroad in their trek north, they were pursued and shot at by bounty hunters. She made

it to the free state of Illinois and settled with her children in Quincy.

Martha Jane enrolled her son Augustus in Catholic school, where he was the only Black student. There was such an outpouring of opposition and harassment from White families against having a “colored child” in their school that Martha Jane had to withdraw young Augustus.

Again, remembering Jesus’ words, “Do what they say, and not what they do,” she remained steadfast in her faith. And she refused to give up on her quest to give her son a Catholic education. She eventually met a kinder priest, Father Peter McGirr, who took Augustus into his parish school. Opposition followed, but Father McGirr condemned racism from the pulpit and defended the Tolton family and their right to attend Catholic school.

As the years progressed, Father McGirr noticed in Augustus the makings of a future priest and encouraged him to apply to seminary. Although he had top grades and excellent recommendations, Augustus was rejected by every seminary in the United States to which he applied, because he was African American.

And his mother was there for him. Even though it meant that Augustus would not be around to work and support the struggling family, Mary Jane kept encouraging him not to give up.

Eventually Augustus was accepted by a seminary in Rome that specialized in training missionaries. He said goodbye to his mother and

sailed for Italy. After six years, he completed his studies successfully and was ordained a priest in Rome. He celebrated his First Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica on Easter Sunday morning. Unlike seminarians ordained in Rome today, his mother could not be present due to the time and expense of travel.

Yet there she was when her son, now Father Tolton, arrived home in Quincy. She was there with tears of joy to witness her son celebrating Mass in the local parish church, after which she knelt at the Communion rail to receive his “first blessing.”

Mary Jane’s faith in God, her love for Jesus, her closeness to Our Lady – all were rewarded on that day.

Yet her faith was to be tried again, twice. Father Augustus was assigned to start a parish in Quincy for African American Catholics. But he was such a good preacher, and sang the Latin High Mass so beautifully, he attracted White Catholics who joined his parish. He also began attracting converts from African American Protestant churches. The opposition of jealous White Catholic priests and Black Protestant pastors eventually forced Father Tolton from the town.

And his mother was always there for him.

Father Augustus was accepted by the Archdiocese of Chicago, and asked to found an African American parish. He brought his mother with him, and she served as his housekeeper and sacristan. Because of his tireless work, and his reputation as a

noted homilist, Father Tolton received invitations from all over the United States to preach. And he was able to collect enough funds to build St. Monica’s Church. He built his parish up from 60 to 300 members by the time the church was dedicated.

And his mother shared his joy.

Father Tolton was good – but maybe too good. Because of overwork, he collapsed and died of heatstroke on the streets of Chicago in 1897 at the age of 43.

Like Our Lady, Martha Jane had her *Pietà* moment, beholding her dead child.

More than 100 priests attended Father Tolton’s funeral at St. Monica’s. At his request, he was buried back in Quincy, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled, “The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone.”

Martha Jane continued to serve as housekeeper and sacristan at St. Monica’s, with her warm welcome and home cooking. She was known universally in the parish as “Mother Tolton.”

On Dec. 23, I will rededicate the newly renovated St. Joseph Church in Fremont. To my great joy, it features an extraordinary new stained-glass window of Venerable Father Augustus Tolton. It is the first window I have ever seen, anywhere, dedicated to this man of God.

Maybe someday we will dedicate a window to his mother, Martha Jane.

Bishop Barber’s column is adapted from a homily he preached Nov. 5 at St. Benedict Parish, Oakland.

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