



Sr. Thea Bowman

(1937-1990)

Diocese of Jackson

“We unite ourselves with Christ’s redemptive work when we reconcile, when we make peace, when we share the good news that God is in our lives, when we reflect to our brothers and sisters God’s healing, God’s forgiveness, God’s unconditional love.” Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A., shared these words a few weeks before dying of cancer in her home in Canton, Mississippi as part of a reflection on Holy Week, entitled, “Let Us Resolve to Make This Week a Holy One” in the Diocese of Jackson’s newspaper, Mississippi Today. These would be the final public words of a religious woman who dedicated her life to spreading the joy of the Gospel and promoting cultural awareness and racial reconciliation.

A self-proclaimed, “old folks’ child,” Thea Bowman, was the only child born to middle-aged parents, Dr. Theon Bowman, a physician and Mary Esther Bowman, a teacher. At birth she was given the name Bertha Elizabeth Bowman. She was born in 1937 and reared in Canton, Mississippi. As a child she converted to Catholicism through the inspiration of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity who were her teachers and pastors at Holy Child Jesus Church and School in Canton. These religious communities nurtured her faith and greatly influenced her religious vocation.

Growing up, Thea listened and learned from the wisdom of the “old folks,” the elders of her community. Ever precocious, she asked questions and gained insights on how her elders lived, thrived and survived. She learned from family members and those in her community

coping mechanisms and survival skills. These skills proved essential as she navigated through the horrid experiences of blatant racism, segregation, inequality, and the struggle for Civil Rights in her native Mississippi. At an early age, Thea was exposed to the richness of her African-American culture and spirituality, most especially the history, stories, songs, prayers, customs and traditions. Moreover, she was cognizant that God loved and provided for the poor and the oppressed. Her community instructed her, “If you get, give- if you learn, teach.” These life lessons instilled in her an abiding love for God and to be charitable toward those most in need.

For Thea Bowman, her conversion to Catholicism was rooted in what she witnessed: she was attracted to the Catholic Church by the example of how Catholics seemed to love and care for one another, most especially the poor and needy. For Thea, she was impressed by how Catholics put their faith into action. At the age of fifteen she told her parents and friends she wanted to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual adoration and left the familiar Mississippi terrain to venture to the unfamiliar town of La Crosse, Wisconsin where she would be the only African-American member of her religious community.

As her religious profession, she was given the name, “Sister Mary Thea” in honor of the Blessed Mother and her father, Theon. Her name in religious life, Thea, literally means “God.” She was trained to become a teacher. She taught at all grade levels, eventually earning her doctorate and becoming a college professor of English and linguistics.

The turbulent 1960s was a period of transformation for a nation torn by racial strife and division. The United States was confronted by the quest for justice and racial equality for all Americans. The late 1960s was also a time of transformation for Sister Thea Bowman: both a spiritual and cultural awakening. The liturgical renewal of the Second Vatican Council encouraged Sister Thea to rediscover her African-American religious heritage and spirituality and to enter her beloved Church “fully functioning.” She emphasized that cultural awareness had, as a prerequisite, intentional mutuality. She was eager to learn from other cultures, but also wanted to share the abundance of her African-American culture and spirituality. Indeed, Sister Thea became a highly acclaimed evangelizer, teacher, writer, and singer sharing the joy of the Gospel and her rich cultural heritage throughout the nation.

Spurred by the need to return home to Canton to care for her aging parents, in 1978, Sister Thea, with the blessing, approval and permission of her superior and religious community, accepted an appointment by Bishop Joseph Bernard Brunini to direct the Office of Intercultural Affairs for the Diocese of Jackson. In this position Sister Thea continued to assail racial prejudice and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity. She was a founding faculty member of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. With the full support of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, Sister Thea remained then and remains still a member in good standing in her religious community.

In 1984, Sister Thea faced devastating challenges: both her parents died, and she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her friends and students encouraged her to choose life. Sister Thea vowed to “live until I die” and continued her rigorous schedule of speaking engagements. Even when it became increasingly painful and difficult to travel as the cancer metastasized to her bones, she was undeterred from witnessing and sharing her boundless love for God and the joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Donned in her customary African garb, Sister Thea would arrive in a wheel chair with no hair (due to the chemotherapy treatments) but always with a joyful disposition and pleasant smile. She did not let her wheel chair, or the deterioration of her body keep her from one unprecedented event- an opportunity to address the U.S. Bishops at their annual June meeting held in 1989 at Seton Hall University in East Orange, NY. Sister Thea spoke to the bishops as a sister having a “heart to heart” conversation with her brothers.

This well-crafted, yet at times, quite spontaneous message spoke of the Church as her “home,” as her “family of families” and as her trying to find her way “home.” She explained what it meant to be African-American and Catholic. She enlightened the bishops on African-American history and spirituality. Sister Thea urged the bishops to continue to evangelized the African-American community, to promote inclusivity and full participation of African-Americans within Church leadership, and to understand the necessity and value of Catholic schools in the African-American community. And when she was through she invited the bishops to move together, cross arms and sing with her, “We Shall Overcome.” She seemingly touched the hearts of the bishops as evidenced by their thunderous applause and tears flowing from their eyes.

When asked by her dear friend and homilist for her funeral, Father John Ford, S.T. what to say at her funeral, Sister Thea responded: “Tell them what Sojourner Truth said about her eventual death, ‘I’m not going to die. I’m going home like a shooting star.’” And so she did, peacefully at five o’clock in the morning of March 30, 1990 in the home where she was reared in Canton, MS. Sister Thea said she wanted inscribed on her tombstone the simple, yet profound words: “She tried.” “I want people to remember that I tried to love the Lord and that I tried to love them...” She was buried beside her parents and an uncle at the Elmwood cemetery in Memphis, Tennessee.

Sister Thea Bowman’s life was always one of Gospel joy, enduring faith, and persevering prayer even in the midst of racial prejudice, cultural insensitivity, and debilitating illness. Her personal holiness witnessed to the faith and endurance of her ancestors, the hope express in the Spirituals, compassion for the poor and marginalized, her devotion to the Eucharist, and the radical love embodied by St. Francis of Assisi. Asked how she made sense of suffering, she answered, “I don’t make sense of suffering. I try to make sense of life... I try each day to see God’s will...”

Her life epitomized the words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Indeed those who enjoy life most are those who leave security on the shore and become excited by the mission of communicating life to others.” [10] Sister Thea’s life is also a radiant example of Pope Francis’ *Guadete Et Exultate*. The Holy Father writes, “Holiness is boldness, an impulse to evangelize and to leave your mark in this world. [129]... Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace.”[25]

During her short lifetime (52 years), many people considered her a religious Sister undeniably close to God and who lovingly invited others to encounter the presence of God in their lives. She is acclaimed a “holy woman” in the hearts of those who knew and loved her and continue to seek her intercession for guidance and healing.

Today across the United States there are schools; an education foundation to assist needy students attend Catholic universities, housing units for the poor and elderly, and a health clinic for the marginalized that are named in her honor. Books, articles, catechetical resources, visual media productions, and a stage play have been written or created documenting her exemplary

life, spirituality, and ministry; prayer cards, works of art, statues, and stained-glass windows bear her image all attesting to Sister Thea's profound spiritual impact and example of holiness for the faithful.

Prayer for the Cause of Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A

Ever loving God, who by your infinite goodness inflamed the heart of your servant and religious, Sister Thea Bowman with an ardent love for you and the People of God; a love expressed through her indomitable spirit, deep and abiding faith, dedicated teaching, exuberant singing, and unwavering witnessing of the joy of the Gospel.

Her prophetic witness continues to inspire us to share the Good News with those whom we encounter; most especially the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. May Sister Thea's life and legacy compel us to walk together, to pray together, and to remain together as missionary disciples ushering in the new evangelization for the Church we love.

Gracious God imbue us with the grace and perseverance that you gave your servant, Sister Thea. For in turbulent times of racial injustice, she sought equity, peace and reconciliation. In times of intolerance and ignorance, she brought wisdom, awareness, unity and charity. In times of pain, sickness, and suffering, she taught us how to live fully until called home to the land of promise. If it be your Will, O God, glorify our beloved Sister Thea, by granting the favor I now request through her intercession (mention your request), so that all may know of her goodness and holiness and may imitate her love for You and Your Church. We ask this through Your son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.