

Sister Thea Revisited

by
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Twenty years ago, priests, religious brothers and sisters, cardinals and friends stretched in long lines to enter St. Mary's Catholic Church in Jackson, Mississippi, to remember and honor Canton, Mississippi native Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, who glanced one last time at the little light of a candle on her dresser and breathed her last breath on this earth. As she had embraced so many during her life time, Sister Thea's weak head was now cradled in the arms of her dear friend Sister Dorothy Ann Kundinger, FSPA. Sister Dorothy, who had walked the journey with Thea preaching and teaching all over this land and as far as the homeland of Africa, now whispered a few words of comfort to her friend. At around 5:20 a.m. Sister Thea's shoulders slumped and she gave up her spirit. It was March 30, 1990.



It was a beautiful day in Memphis, Tennessee, March 30, 2010. The cloudless, cobalt blue sky formed a canopy over the pilgrims gathered in historic Elmwood Cemetery. They had traveled from near and far to remember their mentor, their teacher, their counselor, their friend. The alabaster Bowman tombstone

stood a fitting ten-foot monument to the life of Sister Thea Bowman. Father Maurice J. Nutt, CSsR, former student and protégé, had arranged a wreath of roses in her honor.

He began the Liturgy of the Word: Some of you did not know Sister Thea Bowman personally and yet you are here. Why? You are here because someone who did know her, who sang with her, who learned with her, who loved with her brought you here.

His eyes turned to the young students from Holy Names of Jesus and

Mary School who had gathered before the tombstone under the guidance of principal Sister Donna Banfield, SBS.

"And so you ask, how can I know Sister Thea? She is gone. She has been dead some twenty years. I say to you Sister Thea is not gone. As long as someone remembers her laughter, as long as someone loves her, as long as someone lights their little light and gets it out from under the bushel, she is here with you. She will teach you as she taught us."

With that, the student choir broke into song: *This little light of mine...I'm gonna let it shine . . .*

The congregated church lifted high their hands and waved them in the afternoon breeze as if carrying palms. Old and young swayed to the gospel music. Incense rolled from the makeshift Caribbean drum. All joined in now.

This little light of mine . . .

Father Maurice, pastor of Holy Names parish and author of *Thea Bowman: In My Own Words*, continued: "Now, children, I have a story to tell you. My mother and father had both died when I was just twenty-two years. One summer not long afterward my father died, I was in class with Sister Thea at Xavier University in New Orleans. At one of her lectures, she broke into song. It was a meaningful song to her and one she sang often."

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child . . .

"I was a grown person by now, but I'm here to tell you I cried like a baby. I'm sorry, children, but I was a baby that day. Big tears rolled down my cheeks. Sister Thea, whom I hardly knew at the time, stepped from behind the lectern, came down to the student chairs and cradled me in her arms. She rocked me and sang to me right there in front of everyone. She said, "It's going to be all right. Just keep on keepin' on." From then on, I called her Mother Thea because that day she became my mother.

"So, yes, you can know Sister Thea. You know why? Because you know Father Maurice and you know all these folks who brought you here today. Look around you. There are hundreds of people here today, but who brought you here? Sister Thea gave *them* a light and they will share it with you."

After the liturgy of the Word, the pilgrims walked up the hill to the monument marking the graves of the unnamed slaves in Tennessee. It is a large, unhewn, earthen stone, about six feet across with a flat top that forms a table. Sister Dorothy Kunderinger, FSPA, had brought the Kente cloth that covered Sister Thea's casket at her funeral and the



candle light that Thea last saw before her death. Father Maurice offered the Eucharistic part of the Mass at the Monument to the Unnamed Slaves.

"Sister Thea, member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, loved the Eucharist. Let us commune with her in the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ," prayed Father Maurice. With that, a little child, too shy until now, began singing (*a capella*) *Amazing Grace*.

Father Maurice persuaded Sister Thea's best friend Sister Dorothy Ann Kunderinger to speak a few words to the crowd.

"Thea was all about family. She loved home, and she loved you as her brothers and sisters. She was an only child. All the more, she loved us, black, white, Indian, Hispanic, Asian, African, Protestant, Catholic, straight and gay. She wanted all of us to be brothers and sisters to one another. She wanted us to be *home* to one another. She wanted you, "Church," to be home to all of us."

It was a long time before the church dispersed. It had been a long afternoon but one they knew they would cherish for the rest of their lives. Some plucked roses from the wreath in remembrance. They embraced one another in goodbyes, knowing their common bond was Sister Thea Bowman.

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