

TWO LIVES CONVERGE

Mary Queen Donnelly

When Sister Thea (Bertha Bowman) and I were growing up in the town of Canton, MS, during the 1950s, our lives were as parallel as the Illinois Central railroad that ran through the town – and as separated. We were insulated in our own cultures: Thea in her African American culture and I in the segregated-divided town typical of the deep South.

However, our Catholic faith and our parents began to erase the lines drawn by society. At the time, I was attending an all-white public school and Thea was a student at Holy Child Jesus Catholic School run by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

One Sunday my parents took the family to Mass at Holy Child Jesus Church. I am not sure why or exactly when. Not long afterwards, my mother became friends with the Franciscan Sisters at the mission school and decided to help out by working at “the store” at Holy Child. She sorted and mended the clothes for sale (token price) at the store and by so doing helped fund the school as well as assist the African American community. It was my first experience in a diverse community.

The Bowman family and our family knew one another through their association in the Holy Child Jesus church. One day to our surprise, and certainly the surprise of Dr. and Mrs. Bowman, their daughter decided to leave her cozy home and friends to join the all-white Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration based in La Crosse Wisconsin. Even Thea’s pastor had recommended she join the Holy Family Community of Black Sisters in New Orleans, but she was determined to go to La Crosse. Her father warned her, “They are not going to like you up there, the only black in the middle of all the whites.” Bertha’s response was, “I’m going to make them like me.”

Thea’s decision paved the way for a journey that would evolve into an appreciation of the contributions of a multicultural and diverse society. At first, she thought she had to embrace the Caucasian culture of the European Western Catholic Church to the point of denying the

contribution of her own African American culture in order to become the perfect Catholic nun.

However, she would grow to realize the contributions of her own culture to the universal (Catholic) Church as well as the cultures of the Native American, the Asian American, the Latino, and even globally African and Asian lands.

She would eloquently write and speak to the necessity of embracing all cultures in order to become a whole and fruitful society.

In her words: (Courtesy of *Shooting Star*)

...The history of our country is a history of diversity – Portuguese explorers, Spanish conquistadors, French traders, English settlers, Africa slaves, Italian immigrants, Irish immigrants, German scientists, Filipino students, Vietnamese refugees, Saudi Arabian merchants. All became part of the Native American people, the Winnebago, Navaho, Cheyenne, Iroquois. These people prided themselves in their differences – their diversity- in customs, dress, language, and governmental structure, but they came together as friends.

Still, folks would try to convince you that we are all alike.

If you believe that, you don't need to bother about multicultural pluralism. We are not all alike. Emphatically NO! We do not look alike. We do not sing, dance, pray, play, think, cook, eat, wash, clean, chew, laugh, dress, or spit alike.

Asians are not like Europeans, are not like Africans, Irish are not like Italians who are not like French. Africans are not like Afro-American. Black folks are not alike.

If I begin to believe that we are all alike, look at what I'm going to miss: the richness, beauty, wholeness, and harmony of what God created.

To heck with the melting pot! As for adopting the idea of a melting pot and coming out gray, we refuse. ... the whole idea of a melting pot is unhealthy.

Thea and I both were born of an insulated society. She grew to learn how unhealthy it was. As we became adults, we knew more than ever that I was not like her, and she was not like me. We held many ideas in common, but we expressed them differently. We loved each other and respected each other, and that has made all the difference for both of us.

My mission in life is to spread Thea's Word.