

Sister Thea Bowman Still Speaks

When Bertha Bowman was 10 years old, she told her parents she wanted to convert to Catholicism. Six years later, she took another step on her spiritual journey, becoming a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration and taking the name of Sister Thea. It wasn't as simple a story as it sounds, however: The year was 1953, and Bowman, a black girl from Mississippi, was entering an order in La Crosse, Wis., made up of the descendants of German immigrants.

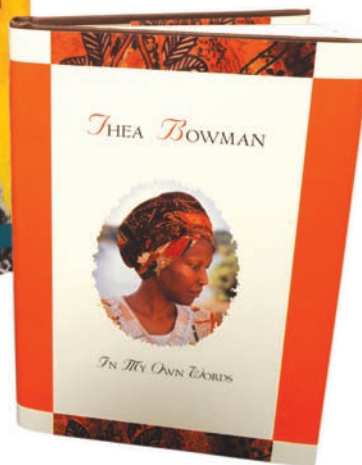
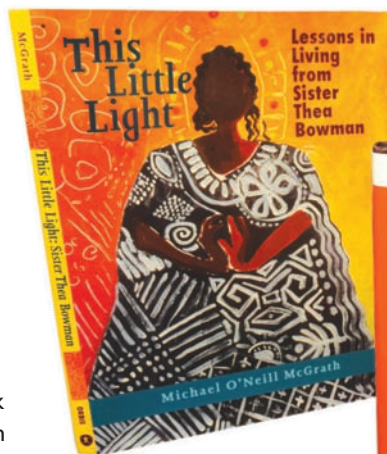
Her Franciscan sisters recognized Sister Thea as a natural teacher with a brilliant mind and in 1966 sent her to CUA to earn master's and doctoral degrees in English, the latter of which she received in 1972. As she studied literature, she also delved deeply into the black oral tradition.

For the next 18 years, she used this combination of intellectual insight and deep connection with black spirituality to challenge America's attitudes about blacks, Catholics and black Catholics. During a 1987 interview on "60 Minutes," for example, she chided, "I still don't hear Mike Wallace saying 'Black is beautiful,'" to which the normally taciturn Wallace exclaimed, "Black is beautiful!" And in 1989 at a U.S. bishops' conference on black Catholics, Sister Thea began her speech singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and ended it by inviting the bishops to stand and join her in "We Shall Overcome," which they did with gusto. Sister Thea was in a wheelchair then, her bones weakened by cancer.

The internationally renowned speaker and teacher lived an intense and public spiritual life to the very end, more than fulfilling her prayer to "live until I die." She passed away in 1990, and many have proposed that she be considered for canonization.

Rev. Maurice J. Nutt, C.Ss.R., a close friend to Sister Thea, has edited a new book, *Thea Bowman: In My Own Words*, a compilation of excerpts from her writings, talks and interviews. Published by Liguori Publications, it is one of a series of books called "In My Own Words"; among those featured in the series are Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Pope John XXIII and Pope Benedict XVI.

Beginning with a seven-page biography, the book is divided into 14 sections, each named after a spiritual that Sister Thea



sang and drew strength from, with subheads specifying the topic of the section, for example, "The Wisdom of the 'Old Folks,'" "The Black Family" and "On Being Black and Catholic." At 112 pages, this book is an excellent introduction for those who don't know Sister Thea and a compact guide for those who do.

In another new book, *This Little Light: Lessons in Living From Sister Thea Bowman* (Orbis Books), artist and author Brother Michael O'Neill McGrath, O.S.F.S., attests to the dynamic nun's ability to touch people's spirit.

One afternoon in the early 1990s while he flipped through *U.S. Catholic* magazine at his dying father's bedside, Brother McGrath happened upon Sister Thea's final interview, "On the Road to Glory," in which she shared her thoughts and feelings about her impending death. Her words were like a shining light, he writes, in a "dark and wounded time."

More than a year after his father died, Brother McGrath viewed a video about Sister Thea's life titled "Her Own Story." Afterward, exhilarated by images from the video, he began to paint. When he stopped two weeks later, he says, "There were nine new paintings ... in a style very different from anything I'd done before. ... I felt as if I were just a brush, stroking and pushing the colors of the Divine Painter."

This Little Light features color reproductions of those striking paintings, interwoven with anecdotes, prayers, biography and stories about how the paintings came to be, as well as news of those who carry forward the vision that Sister Thea proclaimed: to "minister to our brothers and sisters wherever we find them."

These books testify to Sister Thea's amazing spirit, showing how she still inspires us to follow her call to "share the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be Church." — C.C.