

Sister Thea Bowman honored by her Franciscan sisters and friends

First African American FSPA member remembered on 25th anniversary of her death

BY JANE COMEAU

LA CROSSE – Friends of Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Thea Bowman gathered at St. Rose Convent on March 29-30 to honor the 25th anniversary of her death.

Friends and storytellers Father Maurice Nutt, Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (CSSR); Sister Marla Lang, FSPA; Brother Mickey McGrath, Oblate of St. Francis de Sales (OSFS); and Mary Lou Jennings, founder of the Thea Bowman Foundation; shared their memories of Sister Thea, who came to them in different stages of their lives, and in hers. During the “Friends of Thea” panel presentation, hosted March 29 by the Franciscan Spirituality Center, more than 75 guests heard firsthand how Sister Thea affected the lives of these men and women and how they carry out her legacy today.

Sister Marla opened the panel, offering “the love FSPA poured into Canton (Miss.) in the 1940s touched Bertha Bowman (Sister Thea) deeply ... and during high school, she did whatever it took to become an FSPA.”

When told that the northerners would not like her, Sister Thea, the first African American to join the FSPA, responded, “I’m going to make them love me.”

And they did. According to Sister Marla, when FSPA leadership recognized Sister Thea’s gifts, they educated her through to the doctorate level.

“Sister Thea passionately engaged many in wake up calls for social justice ... in one year she spoke in 163 locations ... 163 locations ... challenging and empowering others,” she said. “As a spirit driven woman, she opened us to another culture ... it’s hard to imagine FSPA without Thea and Thea without FSPA.”

Sister Marla offered this Thea-inspired message to the guests: “Live the call to be in communion with each person’s process to become more.”

Guests attending the panel also had the opportunity to view “Thea Bowman: Life and Legacy on Display.” This exhibit showcased art and artifacts, including art by Brother Mickey McGrath, that illustrated Sister Thea’s effect on the world during and after her



Dan Johnson-Wilmot leads the Viterbo University Concert Choir during the March 30 Sister Thea Bowman Homegoing Mass in Mary of the Angels Chapel. The Mass marked the 25th anniversary of Sister Thea’s death.



Jane Comeau

“Friends of Sister Thea” panelist and Thea Bowman Foundation founder Mary Lou Jennings shares her memories of Sister Thea and how she carries on her legacy through educating African Americans who otherwise would not receive opportunities for higher education. The foundation boasts the graduation of more than 250 students.

life. The Franciscan Spirituality Center hosted the exhibit, which was open to the public for two weeks in March.

To culminate the celebration of life, the FSPA and friends gathered March 30 in Mary of the Angels Chapel to honor Sister Thea on the day she died 25 years prior.

Father Maurice, presider, told those gathered, “Today as we come to remember Thea, there are so many attributes you could name about her as a scholar, an activist, an advocate, a friend, a companion, as someone who loved her Lord, her Franciscan vocation, the Eucharist. But I knew Thea

as someone who worshipped. She was not ashamed to worship the Lord wherever she was.”

Sister Thea’s Mass was streamed live and a recording is available at www.fspa.org/theabowman. During Mass, Brother Mickey unveiled a new Thea painting, “Brother Sun, Sister Thea,” inspired by the picnic shared between St. Francis and St. Clare. His print is available at www.bromick-eymcgrath.com.

The 25th anniversary of Sister Thea’s death was also celebrated in her home Diocese of Jackson (Miss.). Catholic News Service released a news story following the events stating, “There is no doubt that Sister Thea Bowman possessed a presence ... she was a trailblazer in almost every role – first African-American religious sister from Canton (Miss.), first to head an office of intercultural awareness, first African-American woman to address the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, but to those who grew up under her tutelage in Canton, she was a singular inspiration.”

The CNS report went on to highlight Sister Thea’s encounter at the U.S. bishop’s meeting in June 1989.

“She told the bishops that people told her black expressions of music and worship were ‘un-Catholic.’ Sister Bowman challenged that notion, pointing out that the church universal included



Charlene Smith/FSPA

Brother Mickey McGrath, left, and Father Maurice Nutt pose with the Brother Mickey’s latest Sister Thea Bowman painting, “Brother Sun, Sister Thea,” which is inspired by the picnic shared between St. Francis and St. Clare.

people of all races and cultures and she challenged the bishops to find ways to consult those of other cultures when making decisions. She told them they were obligated to better understand and integrate not just black Catholics, but people of all cultural backgrounds.”

La Crosse Mayor Tim Kambat proclaimed March 30, 2015, Sister Thea Bowman Day. Among her many efforts, the proclamation recognized: “... her work, while teaching grades five and six at Blessed Sacrament Elementary School in La Crosse, Sister Thea sought to build a partnership between the white students there and the black students at her home school, Holy Child Jesus Mission School in Canton, Mississippi, through an interchange of letters, pic-

tures, stories, and songs, thus developing a happy relationship between the two schools; and Sister Thea’s reputation as a stellar student, distinguished scholar, performance artist, and a much-loved and admired authority on black literature remains solid at Viterbo University in La Crosse.”

Today, the FSPA continue to recognize the many ways in which Sister Thea’s spirit continues to move people to find their deepest humanity. Her legacy, including six schools, a center for women and a foundation that all bear her name – continues to educate and advance people of all backgrounds.

Editor’s note: Jane Comeau is director of communications for the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.