

Diocese of Dallas and Parish honor the late Sister Thea Bowman

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Contact: Lari Newman-Williams
214.374.7614
theabcelebration@gmail.com

Orator, singer, preacher, evangelist to be honored at Holy Cross in Dallas

Holy Cross Catholic Church in Dallas will celebrate the life of Sister Thea Bowman with storytelling, testimonials, music, a portrait unveiling, and the dedication of a bronze memorial plaque in honor of the African-American nun who left a lasting mark on the congregation.

The celebration will take place at Holy Cross, 5004 Bonnie View Rd., Dallas, TX 75241, on Saturday, October 15 at 3:30 p.m., followed by Mass at 5:00 p.m.

Sister Anita Baird, DHM, a long-time friend of Sister Bowman, will speak at the Mass. A Mass setting composed by Dr. Aaron Mathews in Sister Bowman's honor will be debuted at the Mass. And Sister Roberta Fulton, S.S.M.N., also a friend of Sister Bowman, will present a program to the children of Holy Cross Parish.

Sister Bowman was a nationally known orator, singer, preacher and evangelist until her death in 1990 at the age of 52. She visited Holy Cross Parish and other Dallas area parishes several times in the 1980s and so endeared herself to Holy Cross parishioners that they named the parish hall after her. She often enlisted the Holy Cross choir to accompany her at other engagements in the area.

"Sister Thea spoke up at a time when African-American Catholics didn't have a voice," said Vicki Mathews, a long-time Holy Cross parishioner and choir member. "She inspired us to be proud of our black heritage and the gifts we bring. We started singing more from our traditions and feeling freer about expressing ourselves."

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Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A.

Sister Bowman was born into a Methodist family in Yazoo City, Miss., in 1937 and grew up in nearby Canton. Her parents, Theon and Mary Bowman, named her Bertha. They sent her to Holy Child Jesus Catholic School, staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from La Crosse, Wis.

With her parents' permission she joined the Catholic Church when she was nine years old. She decided to join her teachers' religious order as a teen, but her parents opposed it. Eventually they relented and allowed her to go. Theon and Mary later joined the Catholic Church themselves.

At that time, women entering the convent were given new names. Bertha requested and received the name Thea. After taking vows her religious order sent her on to earn master's and doctorate degrees in English literature and linguistics at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Sister Bowman taught in parochial schools and at Viterbo University in La Crosse. In 1978, she returned to Mississippi to care for her aging parents. While there, Bishop Joseph Brunini of the Diocese of Jackson recruited her to develop outreach from the diocese to nonwhite communities and to help create intercultural awareness among all races.

Her ministry grew and attracted national attention. Soon she was in demand to speak to congregations of all races and traveled around the United States and to several foreign nations.

Sister Bowman was an expert on William Faulkner. "Faulkner taught me to appreciate my state, both the glory and the shame of it," she said. "He helped me to understand white folks, their ways of thinking and feeling and responding."

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She attended the first annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference at the University of Mississippi in 1974 and every year after until her death. She challenged the attendees understanding of black people with word and song.

In the mid-1980s, Sister Bowman contracted breast cancer that spread to her bones. She continued to travel, sing and preach as long as she could, even after she was confined to a wheelchair. She died at home on March 30, 1990. Though she is already considered a saint by those whose lives she touched, there is fervent hope among many Catholics that the Church will begin the formal process of canonizing her.

Holy Cross Parish

Holy Cross Catholic Church is recognized as the African-American Catholic parish in Dallas. The congregation was ethnically Czech and Irish when the parish was founded in 1956.

However, the assignment of a black priest, Father William Lane, in 1961 drew black Catholics from all over Dallas to the Southern Dallas Parish. The parish became active in the civil rights movement and in the betterment of the surrounding community.

In the 1980s, Holy Cross declared itself a sanctuary church for refugees fleeing from the civil war in El Salvador.

The Rev. Timothy Gollob has been pastor of Holy Cross since 1969.

Sister Anita Baird, DHM

Sister Anita Baird, a Catholic nun of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary religious order, will speak at the Mass at the October 15 celebration of the life of Sister Thea Bowman.

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In 1997 the Chicago native became the first African American to serve as chief of staff to the archbishop of Chicago. In 2000, Cardinal Francis George appointed her the founding director of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office for Racial Justice, which directed the archdiocese's initiatives to eradicate racism in its structures and institutions. Sister Baird also served as Cardinal George's liaison for race relations to the city of Chicago.

Sister Baird met Sister Bowman through the National Black Sisters' Conference, and they became close friends. During Sister Bowman's frequent visits to Chicago, she would stay with Sister Baird and her mother.

Sister Baird said Sister Bowman "had the ability to bring people together from all different backgrounds. She was proud of her heritage and culture but had the ability to respect others."

"The gift she gave us," continued Sister Baird, "was the understanding that the Church belongs to us as much as others, that the Catholic Church could not be catholic without us."

Sister Baird currently resides in Chicago and serves as the superior of her order's U.S. province.

Sister Roberta Fulton, S.S.M.N.

St. Mary of Namur Sister Roberta Fulton also met Sister Thea Bowman through the National Black Sisters' Conference. She found Sister Bowman to be "a genuinely good loving person with a lot of spirit."

She said that even though Sister Bowman had a doctoral degree, she remained comfortable with everyone. "She was social justice oriented wanted to lift up and build up poor people," said Sister Fulton.

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Sister Fulton is principal of St. Martin de Porres Catholic School in Columbia, South Carolina. She is a past president of the National Black Sisters' Conference and serves on the board of the National Black Catholic Congress. She also serves on the Commission for Higher Education at the University of South Carolina in Sumter, South Carolina.

Besides participating in the celebration of the life of Sister Bowman, she will present a program to the children of Holy Cross Parish.

Aaron Mathews, Ph.D.

It was natural for Dr. Aaron Mathews to compose a Mass setting in honor of Sister Thea Bowman.

“I didn't know her, since I was only four years old when she died,” said Mathews. “But I've known about her all my life.”

Mathews grew up as a member of Holy Cross Parish in Dallas, where his parents, Vicki and Sherbie Mathews, are leaders in the choir.

The director of Liturgical Music at St. Charles Parish in Hartland, Wis. earned his bachelor of arts degree in music performance at Morehouse College in Atlanta. While there he joined the Newman Center liturgical music group called the “Sr. Thea Bowman Scholars.”

Mathews went on to earn his master's degree in piano pedagogy at Georgia State University and a doctorate in the same field at the University of South Carolina. After completion of his studies, he taught for a year at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wis., a school where Sister Bowman had studied and taught. Viterbo had a major event that year in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of Sister Bowman's death.

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Although Mathews had previously thought about composing a Mass setting to honor Sister Bowman, it was the occasion of the celebration at Holy Cross that prompted him to do it this past summer.

The work, he explained, was written for piano and choir. It is a blend of styles, gospel, jazz and some classical.

“I tried to capture how (Sister Bowman) would sing it,” said Mathews. “I wanted it to be singable and true to the African-American experience.”