



Celebrate Black Catholic History Month in November

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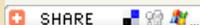
Featured Article: [I'm Going Home like a Shooting Star! The legacy of Sr. Thea Bowman](#) - On June 17, 1989, less than a year before she died of bone cancer, Sr. Thea Bowman was invited to address the American bishops. Different as she was from this group-a Southern black woman, a nun raised among Protestants, a dying woman vibrantly alive-Sr. Thea was fully herself and very much at home. [Read Full Story](#)

I'm Going Home like a Shooting Star!

The legacy of Sr. Thea Bowman

By Jill A. Boughton

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On June 17, 1989, less than a year before she died of bone cancer, Sr. Thea Bowman was invited to address the American bishops. Different as she was from this group-a Southern black woman, a nun raised among Protestants, a dying woman vibrantly alive-Sr. Thea was fully herself and very much at home.

She began her address by singing the Negro spiritual "Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child," then humbly asked the bishops to help her and other marginalized people find their rightful place in the Church: Can you hear me, Church?

Will you help me, Church? I'm a pilgrim in the journey looking for home, and Jesus told me the Church is my home, and Jesus told me that heaven is my home; and I have here no lasting city. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops: my brothers, please help me to get home.

Visibly moved, the bishops responded to her invitation by linking arms to sing "We Shall Overcome." One bishop later commented, "At a time of much division in the Church, Sr. Thea possessed the charismatic gifts to heal, to bring joy to the Church. She had no time for useless, destructive arguments. She was too busy celebrating life."

Faith and Family. This self-assured woman "looking for home" began life as Bertha Bowman. She was the only child of Mississippi parents who had been happily married for fifteen years before she was born late in 1937. "I was what people call an 'old folks' child,'" she wrote.

Bertha's father, Dr. Theon Bowman, practiced medicine in Canton, Mississippi. As a black doctor, he was not allowed to operate in the nearest hospital. He had to keep early and late hours to accommodate patients who could not afford to take time off work; they often paid their bills with turnip greens or car repairs. Her mother, Mary Esther Bowman, was a teacher.

The Bowmans' was what Sr. Thea later called an ecumenical home. She was baptized in her father's Episcopal church and went to Methodist Sunday school with her mother. At age three, she burst into song at the Baptist church. On her own, Bertha visited all the churches in town before she was ten.

When "the Catholics hit town" and opened a mission, Bertha began spending all her free time there. On her own initiative, she entered the Catholic Church shortly afterward, on June 8, 1947. As she later explained, she was drawn there through "the day-to-day lived witness of Catholic Christians who first loved me, then shared with me their story, their values, their beliefs." Her attraction deepened into a decision to enter religious life.

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Uprooted but Undaunted. In 1953, at the age of fifteen, Bertha Bowman left home and traveled to LaCrosse, Wisconsin, to enter school with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Her pastor in Canton had counseled her to join an order of black sisters in New Orleans. Her father had warned, "They aren't going to like you up there, the only black in the middle of all the whites." Bertha replied stubbornly, "I'm going to make them like me!"

With zest and determination, she adjusted to a new climate, diet, lifestyle, and way of praying. When she entered the congregation of Franciscan sisters, she also took a new name -Thea-in honor of her father.

Sr. Thea threw herself into her studies. She got her undergraduate degree, spent ten years teaching, and then earned her PhD in English at Catholic University in Washington, DC. As a graduate student there from 1968 to 1972, she met others who were becoming conscious of their identity as black Catholics. She began to realize she didn't have to turn her back on her blackness in order to serve God.

The "Melting Pot" Myth. Fascinated by the role that music and oral tradition had played in preserving her people's values, history, and faith, Sr. Thea put together a presentation on the topic and brought it to colleges. Then, and later as a public speaker, she frequently danced, preached, and broke into song, effortlessly hitting the high Cs in the old spirituals that expressed her people's faith and longing so well.

Over time, as Sr. Thea honed her ideas about the value of cultural diversity, she firmly rejected the myth of the "melting pot." She wrote: 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... Praise the Lord, we 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.

Thea insisted that monochromatic dullness was alien to God's plan-something for all Christians to resist: "As for melting and coming out gray, we refuse... The whole idea of the melting pot is unhealthy for people like me. We think it's unhealthy for you too."

Speaking Out and Joining Hands. Increasingly in demand as a speaker, Sr. Thea traveled extensively, especially enjoying two trips to Africa. In 1985 she spoke at the 43rd International Eucharistic Congress in Nairobi, Kenya. Three years later, she led a workshop on racism for the Maryknoll Sisters in Arusha, Tanzania.

Thea had no time for hatred and negativity: "We've got to stop being ashamed that our history included slavery... Let the people who created slavery answer to God for it, and let us thank God for the cultural and faith traditions that enabled us to overcome it." She valued "the contributions that nonblacks have made to black life," as well as "the truth and goodness in the heritage of every cultural group." She insisted that the celebration of black culture is not a profession of superiority over others, but "our way of joining hands with every person who seeks the Lord with an open heart."

Sr. Thea was not blind to problems, however. If she worked for a greater leadership role for black Catholics, for example, it was because her travels throughout the country had impressed her with the "invisibility" of black people-even priests and bishops-within the Church. "They are not consulted," she explained. "They are not included. Sometimes decisions are made that affect the black community for generations, and they are made in rooms by white people behind closed doors."

Realizing that the problem was two-sided, she evenhandedly pinned some of the blame on black Catholics who sat back and said, "'Let Father do it, let the sisters do it, let the friends and benefactors from outside do it.' That's the mission mentality. And it kills us and it kills our churches." She brought the essential question squarely to the forefront: "Within the Church, how can we work together so that all of us have equal access to input, equal access to opportunity, equal access to participation?"

In all this, Sr. Thea was careful to keep her innovations under proper ecclesiastical authority. "We don't want to change the sacraments. We don't want to change the theology of the Church. We just want to express that theology within the roots of our black spiritual culture."

"Let Me Live until I Die." In 1984, Sr. Thea learned she had breast cancer. By 1988, it had spread to her bones, confining her to a wheelchair. Reluctantly she underwent painful treatment and

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curtailed her travel schedule.

She approached her illness with the same practical wisdom she had demonstrated all her life. Shunning unnecessary heroics, she took pain medication so that her energies wouldn't be absorbed by pain. "I want to be able to do what I can do the best that I can," she said.

As her illness progressed, Sr. Thea found she needed God in a new way. "When I'm in pain, I know I need Jesus to walk with me. I can't make it on my own. I pray, 'Lord, I believe. Increase my faith. Help my unbelief.'" God seemed closer, she said. "I used to feel I could depend upon myself. I used to feel that I could make you a promise and that I could keep a promise... I used to say, 'It's all in God's hands.' But only now do I really know what those words mean because I've experienced them."

Like many Christians who become chronically ill, Sr. Thea didn't know how to pray about her illness at first. Should she seek healing? Should she pray for life or for death? Finally she found peace in praying, "'Lord, let me live until I die.' By that I mean I want to live, love, and serve fully until death comes. If that prayer is answered, if I am able to live until I die, how long really doesn't matter."

Thea Bowman died on March 30, 1990. Her wake and funeral were thronged with people of every color, age, denomination, and economic status.

Trinity Mission Father John Ford had asked Sr. Thea what he should say at her funeral. Quoting a famous abolitionist and former slave, she answered:

"Just say what Sojourner Truth said...
'I'm not going to die. I'm going home like a shooting star.'"

Jill A. Boughton is a Word Among Us contributing writer. Most quoted material in this article is from FSPA Archives.

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