



ORBIS BOOK OF THE MONTH

THEA'S SONG

THE LIFE OF THEA BOWMAN

by Charlene Smith and John Feister
preview by Michael Leach

Let's forget about those people we looked to as role models who let us down, and turn our attention to a role model who only lifts us up. Sister Thea Bowman passed away in 1990, yet her goodness still inspires Catholics everywhere. You don't know much about her? That's OK. Let me introduce you!

Thea Bowman was a Catholic nun whom everybody wanted to be near to soak up her joy. She changed the way people thought about themselves and others. Her example was an antidote to prejudice, hatred, sadness and all the things that drive people apart. Thea lived for God and brought peace and assurance to God's people even on her deathbed at age 53.

How did this young black woman from a small town in Mississippi who entered an obscure convent of white nuns in Wisconsin become, without seeking it, a pioneer role model in interracial relations throughout the world?

Thea's grandfather's family were freed slaves. She earned a Ph.D. in English and literature, was an expert on William Faulkner, and a gifted singer and speaker. Her voice and presence were unforgettable, whether

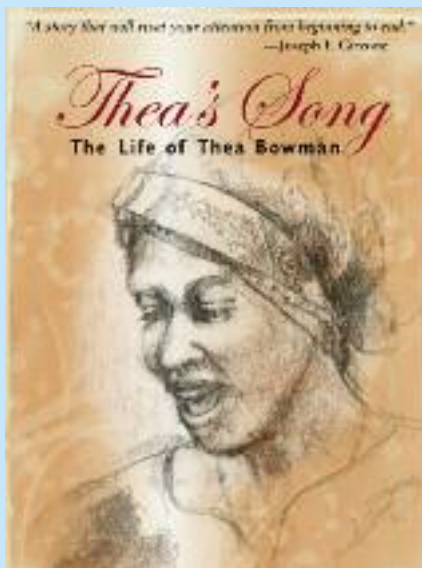
echoing across a Mississippi church as a teenager leading a children's choir, or as a charismatic adult in a northern cathedral filled with people of all races. She illuminated the Gospel across the United States in parish after parish and at the prestigious Institute for Black Catholic Studies in New Orleans. She inspired Mike Wallace in the most repeated *60 Minutes* interview of all time, was sought out by Muhammad Ali as an exemplar of harmony, and finally, stricken with cancer, led "We Shall Overcome" at a meeting of the U.S. Catholic bishops, inspiring them to stand up and sing, to clap and sway in the name of the Lord!

It is one of life's mysteries that a life so engaging, so promising, could fall to a terminal illness in midlife. Yet that is a key part of Thea's story. It is the story of a woman who said, "Let me live until I die," and showed those around her how to drink deeply of life's cup to the very end, even as she spent her final years in a wheelchair.

Thea's Song is a definitive, authorized biography of a modern-day heroine like no other, published with national attention on the 20th anniversary of her death. It is the best story of a vocation I have ever read. You will love it, and may want to give it as a gift to your favorite Sister or priest, or even better, to one of your

young adult children. Role models do matter, and Thea Bowman is one of the best. ✦

Michael Leach is editor-at-large for Orbis Books.



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