

Thea News

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1 2005

*Let us unite
our sufferings,
inconveniences,
and
annoyances
with the
sufferings
of Jesus.
Let us stretch
ourselves,
going beyond
our comfort
zones
to unite
ourselves
with Christ's
redemptive
work.*

*During this
Holy Week,
when Jesus
gave his life
for love,
let us truly
love one
another.*

Several days before her death, Thea dictated this meditation at the request of *Mississippi Today*.

Sister Thea Bowman Center for Women— Opening Doors and Eyes at Siena College

by Shannon O'Neill

The Sister Thea Bowman Center for Women opened its doors in the fall of 2004, welcoming and encouraging all members of the Siena College community to enter, sit down, and open their eyes to the many gender issues affecting today's society.

Stereotypical portrayals of women in the media, sexual harassment, glass ceilings, and an array of other societal maladies put pressure on college women—pressure that may lead to low self-esteem, eating disorders, and other unhealthy or dangerous behaviors.

The Sister Thea Bowman Center for Women's primary function is to help women understand and cope with these pressures. But, the center is not just for women. Shannon O'Neill, Ph.D., the center's director, plans to get both female and male students involved by empowering them with the resources and support they need to create, plan, and carry out their own gender awareness programs. "I would love to see programming coming from students," says O'Neill. "That way the programs are about things they care about, not what I think they should care about."

With its focus on peace and understanding, dialogue and learning, the mission of the Sister Thea Bowman Center for Women, says O'Neill, echoes and complements the mission of Siena College, a Franciscan and liberal arts institution in Loudonville, N.Y.

Learning at the center will happen in a number of ways. Students may peruse the small library resources, use the center as a safe place to engage in difficult or sensitive discussions, and may also apply to work alongside O'Neill in a variety of work positions. O'Neill also hopes that students who utilize and learn from the Sister Thea Bowman Center for Women will go on to initiate learning opportunities for others. "When a student becomes informed about important issues, they are more likely to go on and inform others," she says. "And, peer education is one of the most effective ways to spread awareness."

Sister Thea Bowman, for whom the Center for Women is named, was in many ways a peer educator herself. She was known for helping to bring the richness of black culture and spirituality, as well as the message of community and equality, to the Catholic Church and the greater community. A scholar, teacher, singer, poet, storyteller, preacher, and performer, she traveled the country spreading her message to thousands of people before passing away in 1990.

For more information, visit www.siena.edu/student-affairs. •



Siena College students enjoy the atmosphere in the new Sister Thea Bowman Center for Women.

Contributed Photo

From the TBL Coordinator

March 1, 2005

Photo: Joyce Greteman, FSPA



Charlene Smith, FSPA

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Dear Friends of Thea,

Thea-related anniversaries and celebrations you will want to note:

“**Holy Child Jesus School** (HCJS) celebrated the 50th anniversary of its first high school graduating class—the class of 1954, in Canton, Miss., Thanksgiving weekend in 2004. The event was an opportunity for all alumni of HCJS to gather in Canton to renew friendships, reminisce, and express their gratitude and affirmation for the quality education they received from their teachers, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA) from La Crosse, Wis.

“Doris O’Leary, of Compton, Calif., a member of the first graduating class, attended. (Doris and Sister Thea Bowman were HCJS classmates. Thea left her hometown to join the La Crosse Franciscans at the end of her high school sophomore year.) Also present were Mary Walter Heires, FSPA, who taught at HCJS from 1951-67, and her sister, Rita Heires, FSPA, who taught in the enrichment summer program in 1966, the summer of the Freedom March.

“Evidence of the fine leadership that has developed through the years was observable in the parish positions, on committees, and in music, ministry, youth activities, and stewardship responsibilities. The physical appearance of HCJS and educational programs from pre-school through sixth grade are thriving under the leadership of Anita Henning, CSA. Former HCJS teachers and alumni were delighted with both. The high school had closed in 1980.

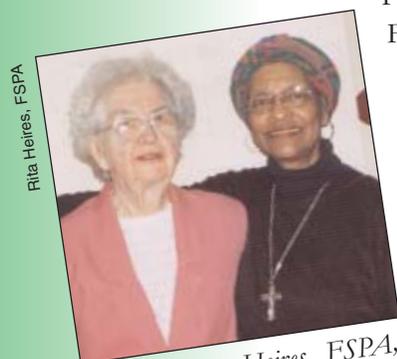
“It is a source of great pride to see that the elementary school, begun nearly 60 years ago in 1949, still provides quality educational opportunities for the youth and families of Canton.”

Thea News is indebted to Mary Walter Heires, FSPA, for the news from HCJS.

The **15th anniversary of Thea Bowman’s “home-going”** is March 30, 2005. A festive “remembering” celebration with song, story, and art will take place at 11:30 a.m., on Wednesday, March 30, in Mary of the Angels Chapel, St. Rose Convent, La Crosse. Thea’s kind of music will be performed by the renowned Viterbo University Concert Choir under the direction of Daniel Wilmot-Johnson. Doris O’Leary will give Thea reflections. A new Thea painting by Maryam Gossling, FSPA, will be presented. The popular “Flavor of Soul” Southern cuisine lunch follows. Everyone is invited. By popular demand, Friends of Thea will lead discussions and showings of Thea videos at Viterbo University and St. Rose Convent during the preceding week. Times and places to be announced.



HCJS’s permanent exhibit honors former student and teacher (1961-68) Thea Bowman, FSPA.



Mary Walter Heires, FSPA, veteran HCJS teacher, and one of her pupils, Doris O’Leary, class of 1954.



Anita Henning, CSA, current HCJS principal, with Mary Walter Heires, FSPA.

Charlene Smith, FSPA

Thea's Words Teach a Teacher

by Peggy Johnson

It was three years ago on my first hermitage experience that I heard of Sister Thea Bowman. The memories are vivid: crunching through the solitary snow on my 40th birthday. Fasting. Praying amidst a forest of trees. And meeting Sister Thea in a cottage named in her honor. It was her voice on a cassette tape of black spirituals left in the cottage, a voice that sang joy. And then, I forgot her.

The memories of her companionship on that hermitage evaporated as life continued beyond that week in 2002. I developed a new passion: the Enneagram, a personality system that categorizes people into nine distinct character types. The integration of spirituality and insight into human nature drew me to zealously study it.

The Enneagram attempts to simplify and bring order to the overwhelming complexity of the human personality. Yet, the Enneagram's overarching purpose is not to reveal personality differences, but to guide humans toward self-knowledge. It was this focus that captivated me. It gave me access to methods that could advance my search for greater emotional and spiritual health. More than that, I realized the incredible implications it had for strengthening relationships.

But, the real test came when I began to apply Enneagram principles to my work as a scholar, teacher, and administrator at St. Mary's University in Winona, Minn. I wanted to determine if study of the Enneagram could lead tutors in the Writing Center to become more empathic toward student writers if they understood their own limitations and possibilities as well as the strengths and weaknesses of student writers.

I actively pursued application of Enneagram concepts in formal training of tutors in the center. I believed in its value and ability to transform lives. Enneagram training was popular, and it was a smashing success. Yet, something was missing. While the students and tutors had a greater under-

standing of their motivations in relationships, they didn't see the need to change themselves to any significant degree. There was no solid attempt to overcome limitations or develop possibilities; instead, they seemed to become their "number" through the help of the detailed descriptions provided.

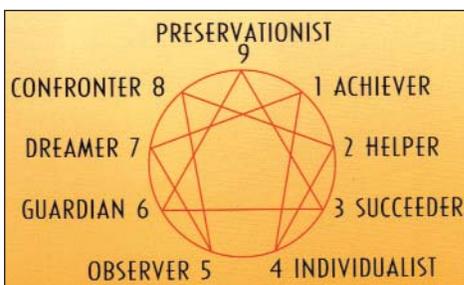
And, then, I met Sister Thea again. She came to me this second time through the video *Sister Thea: Her Own Story*. I recognized joy in Thea's voice, and I saw courage in her eyes, tenderness in her face.

Most importantly, I heard her wisdom. I don't know if she had been aware of the Enneagram or had studied its scholarship, but her life captured its essence through her ability to teach all people to be themselves, to be true to who they were, and to share themselves with others. "If we share ourselves," she said,

"how rich we would be."

Sister Thea has taught me that the missing element in Enneagram teaching and learning is the understanding that the system must be absorbed and then abandoned in order to celebrate our possibilities and to develop authentic, interconnected relationships. She says, "Find your gift. Find your talent and use it. Let your life shine by doing your part. Care about somebody, love somebody, and tell them, 'I love you, I love you, I love you. I really, really love you.'" Analyzing our personalities leads us to discover our gifts and talents as well as our limitations, but analysis somehow holds us in that stage of discovery. Sister Thea's words have taught me that we can go beyond the stage of self-discovery only when we no longer cling to our own identities; only when we become unattached to our unique identities can we share our authentic selves with others.

Sister Thea's words tell me that the secret to understanding the Enneagram is to transcend our type in order to reach across personality barriers to connect as human beings. While knowledge of Enneagram concepts can help us better understand our behaviors and attitudes, in its ultimate form, it nudges us to open up to each other's souls. •



The nine "personalities" of the Enneagram.



Contributed Photo

Peggy Johnson

Peggy Johnson, an affiliate with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, teaches writing and directs the Writing Center at St. Mary's University in Winona, Minn. She was introduced to the Enneagram six years ago at a Franciscan Spirituality Center workshop in La Crosse. The Enneagram personality system is now the center of her doctoral dissertation. She lives with her husband and three children in Winona.

Remembering Thea: Waiting for the Lord with Courage

by John E. Ford

We gather here today to ponder the meaning of Thea's life and genius, her vowed fidelity, her healing love, and yes, the burden of her suffering and her ultimate passage through death.

Even in the face of human suffering and anguish and death we must, this day, not only renew our belief that God will come, but we must also find ways to imitate this irreplaceable woman. There is no other Thea. None other will come in our lifetime. We must recognize that, even as we come to celebrate her new life. We must need to find a way, somehow, to imitate Thea who took the psalmist's words literally. "Wait for the Lord with courage. Be stout-

There is no other Thea. None other will come in our lifetime. We must recognize that, even as we come to celebrate her new life. We must need to find a way, somehow, to imitate Thea.

hearted and wait for the Lord."

She did that and more. But, before we can even dare to try to imitate the qualities of Thea Bowman, we need to try to understand her, to understand who she was.

Who was she really? This religious woman who made us experience God's glory, who was she? This religious woman, who made us experience parts of our own soul and heart we did not know existed, who was she? Who was she? Who was this woman who made us look at ourselves and what we said we stood for? Who was she? Who was this woman so many people appropriated to themselves? Who was this woman who was so patient and giving with others who intruded on her life and her home and her bedroom when she had so little to give? Who was she? Who was this woman who was spoken of last night and will be today and tomorrow and as long as we have a memory? Who was she?

We read in the Gospel of John, Chapter 20, about Mary Magdalene standing at the tomb and weeping. As

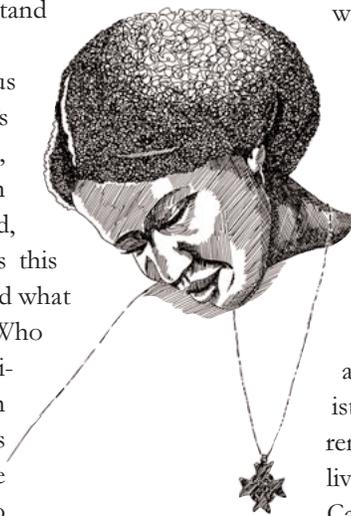
Mary Magdalene discovered, it is hard, very hard, to see the true dimensions of a person through tears. The last time I visited Thea, on March 4, she was undergoing treatment to shrink a tumor behind her right eye. After the tumor had begun to shrink and she thought she could begin to rest and heal and go on about another day, Thea said, "I am crying." It wasn't that she was sad; it was just that the regimen of treatment left her with constant tears.

I believe that, unlike Mary Magdalene who could not recognize the Lord through her tears, Thea could recognize everyone in that room. She saw us clearly, the good and the bad of us. Tears did not blind her. She saw quite clearly. Who was she?

Mary Magdalene made a mistake that Thea never made. Mary kept turning around. She was looking first at the empty tomb from behind tear-filled eyes, and she should not have been looking there. It was empty. She turned around, and maybe it was the sun over the gardener's shoulder, and then she turned back again after he asked her why she was weeping. Then, she turned back around and said, "Rabboni!" She recognized the Lord.

Thea always knew where she was looking and at what. Very clearly. Nothing was hidden, no matter the tears. . . This is how one college saw her and her legacy as she received one of her numerous honorary degrees. Listen:

"Charismatic evangelist, calling black Catholics to their rightful place and to expressions of their culture within the Church. Advocate and consultant for intercultural awareness for the Diocese of Jackson, scholar of English and literature, expert in the Renaissance and the work of William Faulkner, master teacher, whose methodology reached in the black community's traditional ways of learning and doing, profoundly touches rural Mississippi school children, university students, and worldwide lecture or concert audiences alike. In the glory of your ministry we witness the Franciscan ideal of joy, rendered more radiant by a woman of lively, living faith, truly black and authentically Catholic, to your lifetime of building the kingdom of God, preaching the Good News in the language of your people, and reclaiming the virtues and values that are your inheritance. We say an approving "Amen" and proudly declare you Doctor of Religion."



Remembering Thea, cont.

This “Doctor of Religion,” who was uniquely equipped to preach the Good News, gave us reason why she took the natural equipment of her compelling voice to preach the good news. Thea said it herself in her piece in *Lead Me, Guide Me*: “To the Americas, African men and women brought sacred song and chant that reminded them of their homeland, that sustained them in captivity, songs to respond to all life’s situations and the ability to create new songs, to answer new needs. In the crucible of separation and suffering, African-American sacred song was formed.”

. . . She still sings her song. She consoles us with a vision, a vision of a kingdom of justice and equity as she sang so often to us: “O, Mary, don’t you weep, don’t you mourn; Pharaoh’s army got drowned.” That’s what Thea said to try to give us Christians (Catholic, black and proud) a sense that there is no need to stop our own struggle. “Don’t weep. Don’t mourn. It is important for us to be here. Don’t weep. Don’t mourn. Put your energies and strength to some constructive purpose. Don’t give me no tears of anger. Don’t give me no tears of pity. Don’t give me no tears of resentment, rejection, or hurt. Don’t weep; don’t mourn. There is a brighter day and you have a hand in it.”

. . . I asked Thea some years ago, “What do you want me to say, Thea, at your funeral? What can I say, in the midst of my tears, trying to understand who you were? What must I say, trying to understand the people who have owned you?”

And Thea said, “Just say what Sojourner Truth said about her own eventual dying.”

“What was that, Thea?”

And Thea said, “I’m not going to die, Honey, I’m going home like a shooting star.”

Go home, Thea, go home. By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept, the Old Testament people said. Maybe some of us today might



weep by the Pearl River.

And, tomorrow some of us might weep on the shores of the Mississippi in Memphis.

If you can, try to see through your tears the legacy she has left you and how she has touched your life.

As you look up in the sky and see in the night and the day God’s own glory and creation, just remember that Thea will be singing a g a i n to you:

“I’ll be singin’ up there, singin’ up there, I’ll be singin’ up there, yes, singin’ up there. O, come on up to bright glory, I’ll be singin’ up there. If you miss me down here, if you miss me down here, I’ll be singin’ up there. If you miss me singin’ down here, O come on up to bright glory, I’ll be singin’ up there.”

“If you miss me prayin’ down here, if you miss me prayin’ down here, come on up to bright glory, I’ll be prayin’ up there.”

“If you miss me walkin’ down here, if you miss me walkin’ down here, O, come on up to bright glory, I’ll be walkin’ up there.”

“If you miss me shoutin’ down here, if you miss me shoutin’ down here, O, come up to bright glory. I’ll be shoutin’ up there.”

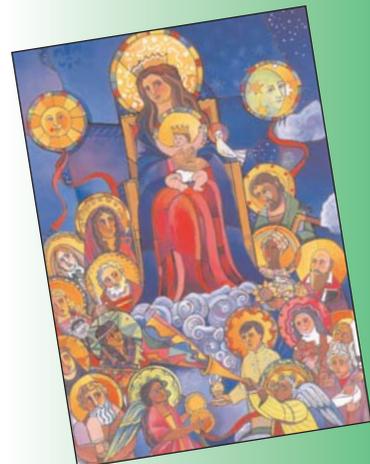
“I’ll be singin’ up there. Yes, I’ll be singin’ up there. O, come on up to bright glory, if you miss me, ‘cause I’ll be singin’ up there. If you miss me, O, come on up to bright glory.”

We miss you, Thea, but behind our tears don’t let us miss your legacy. God bless us. ●

Father John E. Ford is a member of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity and a friend of Sister Thea who preached this homily at her funeral.

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Queen of All Saints



This colorful and vibrant art is the work of Michael McGrath, noted Thea artist and oblate of St. Francis DeSales. The piece, “Queen of the Saints,” is reprinted with permission from World Library Publications, publishers of McGrath’s latest book, *Blessed Art Thou, Mother Lady, Mystic, Queen*. Inspired by titles from the Litany of Loreto, the book contains 20 images of Mary plus poetic prayers by Richard N. Fragomeni. The saints in this print are: Mary Magdalene, St. Brigid, St. Paul, Fra Angelico, Kateri Tekawitha, Moses, Angel Gabriel, St. Andrew Kim, St. Therese of Lisieux, Abraham and Sarah, St. Francis de Sales, Thea Bowman, and St. Joseph. For information, visit www.beestill.com.

Thea Notes . . .

Scholarships & Honors

The Sister Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation is celebrating its 15th year as a foundation. A gala annual scholarship fundraiser dinner is planned for Thursday, March 10, 2005, at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. The first Thea Bowman Foundation Award will be presented to Bishop Donald Wuerl who initiated and developed both the Extra Mile and Crossroads programs for African-American youth. Through these programs, economically disadvantaged African-American youth in Pittsburgh can attend both primary and secondary Catholic schools. Pittsburgh's Kuntu Repertory Theater will perform excerpts from *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, a retrospective of Harlem's golden years. Contact Mary Lou

Jennings, foundation executive director, for information, 218.263.4865.

Donations are welcome. Women from the African American Catholic community in the Diocese of Cleveland will be recognized at the **Thea Awards**,

designed to honor African-American women in the spirit of Sister Thea Bowman, on March 6, 2005, at the Intercontinental Hotel on the campus of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Award recipients foster educational opportunities, demonstrate strong personal faith and compassion, and have an intense interest in encouraging Black Catholic identity. Recipients receive awards in one of three categories: Spirit of Thea, Shining Star,

and Rising Star (for women ages 13-21). Leola Wilson will receive a lifetime achievement award for her work with the African American Catholic community and her 40 plus years of service with the Catholic Youth Organization in the Diocese of Cleveland.

According to *Columbia* magazine (September 2004), a four-year grant was formed in December 1996 through a partnership between the **Knight's of Columbus** and the **Sister Thea Bowman Black Educational Foundation**. The grant, in the amount of \$25,000 per year, is for African-American students who want a Catholic education. Recipients need not have a tie to the Knights of Columbus.

Events & Fundraisers

Attendees at the Thea Retreat in February 2005 at the **Tabor Retreat Center** in Oceanside, NY, were treated to a presentation by Margaret Melkonian, the United Nations Representative of the Hague Appeal for Peace.

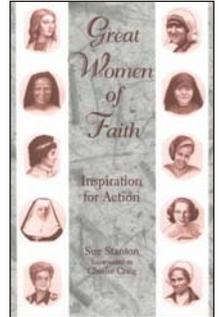
On Oct. 9, 2004, the Thea Bowman Benefit Dinner at **St. Henry's Parish Hall** in Cleveland was held as a fundraiser for the Thea Bowman Center in Cleveland.

During a two-day mission last fall for **St. Basil the Great** in Brecksville, Ohio, and **St. Catherine's** in Cleveland, the choirs collaborated on Sister Thea's favorite hymns as Brother Michael McGrath presented his corresponding Thea paintings.

Thea Bowman House in Utica, N.Y., held an "Eclectic Spring Concert" at St. Francis DeSales Church on June 23, 2004.

In Print

Great Women of Faith, a new book by Sue Stanton, celebrates the stories of three dozen women called by God. Among them: Jane Addams, Flannery O'Connor, Sojourner Truth, and Thea Bowman (Paulist Press, \$12.95).



The third graders in catechetical classes at St. Pat's in Onalaska, Wis., are learning about Sister Thea from **Call for Faith** (Harcourt Religious Publications, Catechist Edition Parish Three, 2005).

Living Justice, Proclaiming Peace, the 2004 Youth Ministry Resource Manual, contains a quote about Sister Thea Bowman and solidarity as written by Joseph A. Brown. (Published by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, Inc., in Washington, D.C. ISBN: 1-932619-00-3.)

Another sighting in print is in the cross-cultural encyclopedia called **Holy People of the World**. (Published by ABC-CLIO, ISBN: 1-57607-355-6, www.abc-clio.com.)

Finally, a quote from Thea is in **The Little Burgundy Book**, with short reflections. (Published in 2004 by the Diocese of Saginaw.)

Passings

Longtime member and president of the Board of Directors for Thea Bowman House in Utica, N.Y., **Oreatha Bowens** died May 10, 2004, after a battle with cancer. •

Tell us your Thea news: **Thea News**, 912 Market Street, La Crosse, WI 54601-8800 or e-mail theanews@fspa.org.

Finding Thea; Finding Joy

Beth Bruner

While teaching junior high at the St. Angela Center of Kuemper Catholic Schools in Carroll, Iowa, during 1996-97, I was in need of a lesson plan. A priest friend lent me a videotape of Thea. Teaching multiple class sections, I had the opportunity to view the tape several times. I was intrigued with this woman of spiritual greatness. Her ability to keep on “keepin’ on” impressed me.

From there, my journey to know Thea began. I grew up in Carroll, attending Catholic schools. I was educated by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA), whose influence was not only felt in our schools, but also in our local hospital and community. My mother graduated from St. Angela Academy and St. Anthony School of Nursing, both institutions grounded in Franciscan tradition. I have always had great respect of the FSPA devotion to the ministry of teaching. As a high school student, one of my mentors at Kuemper was Sister Charlene Smith. Charlene was the dean of women and a drama teacher. Charlene believed there was nothing we couldn’t do. Sometimes that meant memorizing great Shakespearean soliloquies. She set the bar high. As a result of her influence, as well as the example of other FSPA, I was drawn to a career in teaching.

After attending college, marrying, starting a family, and living in Des Moines and Guthrie Center, Iowa, the longing for a Catholic education for our children brought us back to Carroll. I was fortunate to begin working in the schools I had attended.

In 1998, I journeyed to La Crosse to see a medical specialist. Charlene was in La Crosse serving in administration for the FSPA. We reconnected and she shared with me what she knew about Thea. The more Charlene became involved in the Thea Bowman Legacy, the more interested and moved I became. I began to read everything I could get my hands on about Thea.

A move to the high school in 1997 brought the opportunity to teach theology. My students, who were introduced to Thea in 1996, learned even

more with me during their high school years. In 2003, as the director of campus ministry, I made a pilgrimage to La Crosse with a group of students. This pilgrimage was coordinated with the Thea Bowman “Flavor of Soul” commemoration. Brother Michael McGrath’s grace-filled presentation was breathtaking. His Thea artwork was amazing. That he was inspired to produce such masterful work furthered my belief that Thea was still present among us.

Learning about Thea and sharing her love of the Catholic Church with my students has been a blessing. Teaching in a rural Midwestern setting where diversity is limited presents a challenge when trying to discuss the global church. Thea taught that church is family and family has to stay together. That sense of solidarity is the message I hope my students will take with them. For Thea, being black and Catholic was a gift of deep spirituality. How I wish we all could have known Thea in her lifetime.

Thea’s inclination to put a positive outlook on life, combined with her deep spirituality, are what stay with me. My daughter Alison, 19, was preparing for her confirmation in 2003. When it came time to choose a confirmation name, she couldn’t come up with one that suited her. I reminded her of Thea, whom she had become aware of through visits with Sister Charlene. It was a perfect fit—a saint—someone whom she would aspire to imitate.

Time has passed since my first meeting of Thea, but she has been present. A parent of one of the students who went on the La Crosse pilgrimage told me that Sister Thea spoke at his high school graduation in Breda, Iowa. My students who went on the pilgrimage graciously absorbed all they could of Thea’s history. Another parent shared with me her experiences of Thea at Viterbo University when she was a student there.

The opportunity to know Thea after her death could leave a person feeling heavyhearted. It has been quite the opposite. For me, coming to know Thea Bowman has been a journey divinely inspired...one filled with joy. •



Beth Bruner



Alison and Beth Bruner both feel a connection to Sister Thea. Contributed photo.

Beth Happe Bruner is the director of campus ministry at Kuemper Catholic High School in Carroll, Iowa. She is in her 10th year there and directs ministry, coordinates the confirmation program and teaches theology. She is a graduate of Kuemper, the University of Northern Iowa and earned her master’s degree from Briar Cliff University. She and her husband, David, have three children: Alison, Maria, and John.

Contributed Photo

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From Those Who Knew of Thea...



Katherine Palmisano

"How does a nine-year-old girl know she wants to be a Catholic, not Methodist, like her family? Sister Thea Bowman had found God very early in her life, and she knew that God had a plan for her in the Catholic faith. Thea was a light of God, and when she entered a room, everyone felt her faith and holiness. Thea was like a candle; her light spread to all corners of the room."

—Excerpt from 9th grader Katherine Palmisano's report
Skutt Catholic High School Honors Theology, Omaha, Neb.

"Some years ago, I was privileged to watch the late Sister Thea Bowman preach during a meeting of the U.S. bishops. The bishops and I were mesmerized and deeply moved. I said to myself then—and have said since to anyone who would listen to the story—that I thought I saw a glimpse of the Church's best future that day."

—Excerpt, "From the Editor's Desk," by Tom Roberts
National Catholic Reporter, Oct. 15, 2004

"Of course, we knew Sister Thea—she was truly a memorable woman who brought a different kind of spark of life to the Viterbo community. Growing up on the north side of La Crosse did not expose us to any real diversity, but Viterbo did, even in 1974!"

—Linda Gleason and Paul Pendleton
Graduates of Thea's alma mater,
Viterbo University, La Crosse, Wis.