

# Thea News

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 9 MARCH 2006



*“When we as Catholic students, parents, faculty, staff, administrators, approach believers of other religious traditions with appreciation and reverence, we realize their faith and faithfulness . . . As we work with them for peace and justice, as we cooperate with them in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, teaching the ignorant, empowering the oppressed, we truly share the Good News of the Kingdom.”*

—From *Sister Thea Bowman: Shooting Star*, page 95.

## Fifth School Named for Sister Thea

by Mary Queen Donnelly

Fifteen-year-old Ricardo Phipps was making a trip from Natchez, Miss., to Jackson, with his family, for a Diocesan Black Catholic Day of Reflection at the old St. Joseph High School on Bolling Street. He had heard that Sister Thea Bowman would speak. She was often the topic at his parish church of Holy Family in Natchez. He had heard and read about how dynamic and inspirational she was in the midst of her struggle with cancer, so he was excited about his first opportunity to see and hear her.

At that point in Ric Phipps' life, he had not had much exposure to African-American nuns. He was excited about meeting any African-American religious, men or women, because he had begun to think about this as a potential way of life.

When Thea spoke, she interspersed her message with song. It was his first encounter with Thea. He wasn't able to meet her personally, but seeing and hearing her for the first time left an indelible impression. He was first struck by her appearance; she spoke from a wheelchair, a blanket across her lap. Her head was exposed, bald from chemotherapy.

The now 30-year-old Father Ricardo Phipps looks back on that day, one forever etched in his memory. “She was luminous and the only place from which the light could have possibly come was from the Spirit of God. She confessed very honestly that she was not having a good day physically, but otherwise she was okay. She knew she had a mission that was bigger than her sickness, and yet, part of her ministry was tied to it. It was a large part of what was so inspirational to me that she knew so well how to draw from the strength of Jesus, the solid rock, to witness to others as she was called that day. I can't remember exactly what she said—I remember how she said it. She was on fire!”

Today, Father Phipps, current pastor of St. Mary's and Christ the King Catholic parishes in Jackson, has been facing his own mission. With financial difficulties because of rising costs to run the schools, such as increased health premiums and salaries for faculty and staff, he needed to make a decision about the schools' futures. Not wanting to close either was a challenge that gave birth to inspiration. With the approval of Bishop Joseph Latino, of the Jackson Diocese, Father Phipps decided to combine both schools under a new name. The new school will be called Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School, the fifth school to be named for Thea.

“I think she is the ideal patroness for this new school. She embodies exactly what we are trying to impart to the students by their experience of Catholic education, a love for



*Inset: Father Ricardo Phipps. Above, Father Phipps shows plans for the new school to be named Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School.*

Fabvien Taylor

*“Fifth School Named for Sister Thea” continued on page 7*

# From the TBL Coordinator

March 1, 2006

Photo: Joyce Greleman, FSPA



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Dear Friends of Thea,

**New Painting of Thea**—You will be delighted to hear about a new painting of Thea! On her birth anniversary, Dec. 29, we announced news of a recent gift to our Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA) community at a private showing in the FSPA motherhouse here in La Crosse.

During summer 2005, Msgr. Patrick Wells, pastor, St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Houston, Texas, commissioned local artist and friend, Tony Bryant to paint a Thea. You'll recognize Bryant's Thea. He was inspired by a 1988 Regina Dick, FSP, Boston, photo. We use that photo in *Thea News*. I think the artist painted God's love shining through our luminous Thea! The painting is large—a 3'x4', oil on canvas. Patrick Wells and Tony Bryant hoped we'd like it. We do!



Contributed Photo

The new Thea painting was commissioned by Monsignor Patrick Wells, left. The artist, Tony Bryant, right, was inspired by a 1988 photograph of Sister Thea.

**Publication changes in our popular *Thea News***—We will continue it! Once a year. Primarily electronically.

- ◆ News about Thea is easy to gather. She inspires continuously, randomly. Activity about her attracts long-time devotees and new admirers. Artists, parishes, authors, study groups, students paint her image, name church halls in her honor, include her in books about apostolic-great-merciful-inspirational-prophetic-visionary people, feature events about her life and legacy, even produce a video about her burial site!
- ◆ Many, many *Thea News* readers use the Internet. Beginning with this issue of *Thea News* we will publish our newsletter once each year. Access without charge to the newsletter will continue on [www.fspa.org](http://www.fspa.org) (click on "FSPA News," scroll to "Thea News").
- ◆ Our yearly designated Web posting date is March 1. Tell your friends. All past issues will remain available online. Print copies as you wish.
- ◆ Because of rising postage and printing costs, only pre-paid bulk print orders can be filled. Call 608.791.5618, write, or e-mail [csmith@fspa.org](mailto:csmith@fspa.org) for prices and January deadlines on bulk orders. Since *Thea News* began, March 2002, we have not charged a subscription fee; we are grateful for donations that help cover costs.

Work continues on a much-anticipated Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, biography. After the book, a film!

*Charlene Smith FSPA*

## About the Artist—Tony Bryant

One of Houston's renowned artists, Tony Bryant has had an astounding impact on the city's art world. Originally from Georgia, he began perfecting his skill at Atlanta Area Tech, where he spent two years studying commercial art. From there, he worked for Turner Communications as a pictorial artist by day, while attending night school at Atlanta College of Art.

Today, the majority of his work is commissioned. His work includes paintings of President Lyndon B. Johnson; former Houston Oiler Earl Campbell; singer Donna Summer; and other distinguished artists, athletes, business and government leaders. In addition, Bryant gives public showings and lectures at several schools and universities. Visit: [www.tonybryant.net](http://www.tonybryant.net) or e-mail: [tonybryantart@yahoo.com](mailto:tonybryantart@yahoo.com).

# Sister Thea to the Rescue

by Cansalee Johnson

Sister Thea Bowman is an angel who somehow, beyond my knowledge or understanding, has become a vital part of my life.

I first learned of Sister Thea when I joined the Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Parish (OLMM), Wyandanch, N.Y., Black Catholic Committee in 1981. My friend, Rita Darden, always talked about Thea as if she was one of the most inspired and blessed individuals alive. At that time, if someone had told me how deeply Sister Thea would touch my life, I would certainly not have believed.

In 1990, after Sister Thea went home to be with our Heavenly Father, Rita gave members of the committee a small token of something that had been Sister Thea's. For me, it was a pencil. Little did I know that she wanted me to use that gift to write a miniature part of Thea's legacy. In February 2003, I wrote a story about one of our black saints for the OLMM black history month program. It had not occurred to me that Thea had not yet been canonized, so I used my pencil to write "Reaching Beyond the Break."

Later that year, while attending a weekend retreat on Sister Thea at the Tabor Retreat Center, I spoke about Sister Thea. After my talk, I went to my room and witnessed my first miracle. Lying in the sink was a stem with three leaves extended from it. Since everyone else was downstairs, and I was the only one staying in the room, I hurried back downstairs and showed it to the only person who would not think I was out of my mind, Rita Darden. She explained the three leaves represent the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. I placed it in my Bible. Rita said I would experience many more miracles in the future.

During my second retreat on Sister Thea at the Tabor Retreat Center, Marie Watson, a friend, gave my granddaughter a little doll, which we named

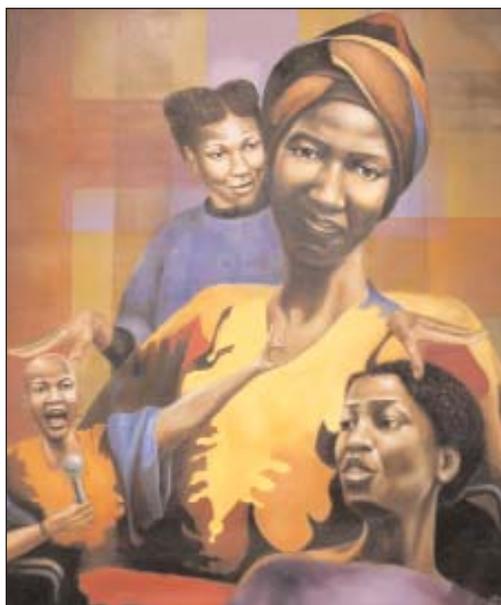
Sister Thea. My granddaughter gave it to me and I hung it on my car's rearview mirror, along with a rosary. Sister Thea and I have developed a very close relationship. I talk to her everyday and say the "Olde Folks Child" prayer. The first thing I do after entering my car is take the cross and Sister Thea doll in my hand and ask the heavenly spirits to take me where I am going, and back, safely.

I received my second and life-saving "miracle" last August. I got in my car, and after asking the heavenly Father and Sister Thea to protect me, I went to do an errand. After finishing the errand, I braked at the intersection when I noticed a tractor-trailer moving in the left lane at an excessive speed. The first thing that entered my mind was "road rage." The light changed. The cars stopped—freezing the right lane. The tractor-trailer ran the red light in the left lane. It was moving too fast. The moment I decided to enter the right lane, he decided to come over to the right, and his back tires hit the front side

of my car. It spun me around and, thank God, my car landed on the sidewalk. No one could believe that I was sitting in the driver's seat without a scratch on me. My car was totaled. If the heavenly spirits had allowed the truck to come over and change lanes a second later, its wheels would have hit the door on the driver's side, instead of the front end, and I would not be alive to thank Sister Thea and the Lord for saving my life.

After leaving the hospital because I was fine, I returned home, where I realized I no longer had my rosary or Sister Thea doll. While thinking about this, I thought I heard someone say, "Call your son-in-law and have him go over to the junkyard and retrieve your lifesavers." I did.

Since I had to buy a new car, I bought Sister Thea a new rosary cross to hang on. She appears very happy, and we still have our daily conversations, one being the "Olde Folks Child" prayer. •



"Four Theas" by artist C. Bester. Courtesy of the FSPA Thea Collection.



Contributed Photo

Cansalee Johnson

Cansalee Johnson has a bachelor's degree in special education and elementary education from Empire State College in New York and a master's degree in school counseling from Long Island University. She served on Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal's Catholics of Ancestry Committee and on a similar committee for Rockville Center in New York. In 2003, she wrote a brief play about Thea's life for black history month and the Sister Thea Bowman Gospel Choir Celebration. She belongs to the Sister Thea Bowman Sisterhood Retreat Committee and is retired from a 23-year career as a teacher. Today, she lives in Hampton, Ga. and has five adult children and 16 grandchildren.

# One Family's Journey to Thea and the Joy of Adoption

**M**y wife Katy and I are godparents to Bereket Thea Ruemenapp. Bereket was born on Jan. 9, 2005, in a small village in southern Ethiopia.



*Bereket at two months old. This is the photo the Ruemenapps were given from the adoption agency.*

Last June, I had the privilege of traveling with her father, Steve, on the trip to bring her home to the waiting arms of her mother, Heather, and siblings, Sarah, 9; Benjamin, 5; and Joey, 2.

I had not been exposed to the life of Thea

Bowman until this little girl came into our lives. Since learning of the inspirational life of Sister Thea, I have come to believe this little girl's young life has been watched over by a very special patron.

In August 2004, when Steve and Heather told us they wanted to adopt a baby from Ethiopia, Katy and I were not surprised. Heather, a social worker and full-time mother, is adopted and has an adopted sister. Steve, an assistant principal at St. John's Prep near Boston, had always put the needs of others ahead of his own.

Both he and Heather are champions of social justice and not unaccustomed to sacrificially giving of themselves.

To most people, it would seem they had their hands full with their very smart and adorable biological children. Apparently, they wanted to do more. When Steve and Heather were asked, "Why do you want to adopt?" their response was, "We're

saving a life." "Why Ethiopia?" followed. They replied, "Why not?"

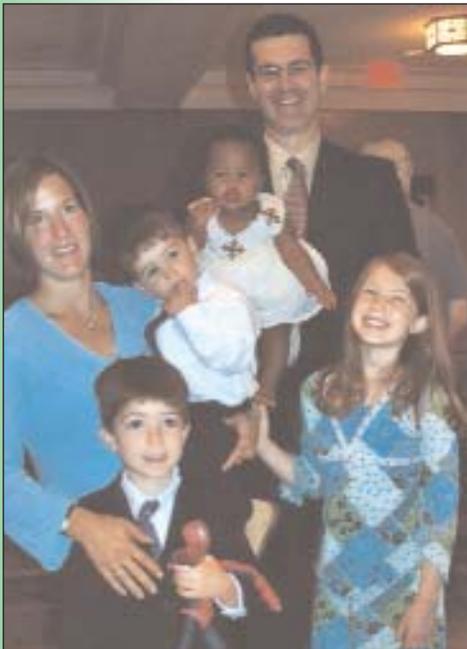
It wasn't so straightforward initially. Early on in the process, Steve and Heather differed in their choice of countries. Heather wanted Korea (the homeland of her sister, Hope) and Steve wanted Ethiopia. They decided to attend the presentations of each other's initial choices. Steve went to the Korea presentation, and Heather went to the Ethiopia presentation. Although the need was great in both countries, Heather was sold on Ethiopia.

In April 2005, Steve and Heather received the news that they had a daughter waiting to be brought home. When Steve got the call at work, he had just been perusing the Thea Bowman note cards he had received in the mail from Pax Christi. Having already been well familiar with Sister Thea's spiritual life, Steve *immediately* knew his new daughter would bear Thea's name.

The referral packet from the adoption agency contained a picture of Bereket at two months old. According to the international doctor, although Bereket's picture and information did not portray a little girl in excellent health, her condition did not appear to be out of the ordinary given the circumstances.

We would learn later that Bereket's condition was grave

when she was brought to the orphanage, Horizon House, in Ethiopia. The staff did not expect Bereket to survive; however, through their dedicated care and, we believe, the intercession of Thea



*The Ruemenapp family—parents Heather and Steve and children (l-r): Benjamin, Joey, Bereket Thea, and Sarah.*



*Bereket Thea enjoys lots of love from her new family, including brother Joey, 2.*



*Bereket Thea, the name of this child adopted from Ethiopia, means "blessings of God."*

Bowman, Bereket pulled through. To this day, Steve and Heather are amazed at how happy and active Bereket is. One can't help but believe the physical adversity Thea Bowman experienced at the end of her life "carried over," for a short while, in Bereket's life-only to be quashed by Thea's interminable spirit. Surely Thea's work is not yet done, and perhaps, her spirit mingles with that of this little girl.

The name Bereket is translated as "one who has benefited," or, in short, "blessings." It is common for adoptive parents to change the name of the child to a more "American-sounding" name, mostly due to the fact that some of the children's names are nearly impossible for our English-speaking tongues to pronounce.

After the adoption experience, though, Steve and Heather knew that Bereket would always be "Bereket." The addition of her baptismal name, Thea (of God), would indeed announce the child as a "blessing of God." Although her name was

not constructed with the English translation in mind, can you think of a better name to describe this happy little girl? No doubt, Bereket will face adversity in her life. Unfortunately, many of the difficulties will be social given the fact she is a black child being raised by a white family.

We are confident Bereket, as well as her family and friends, will draw inspiration from the life of Thea Bowman and help continue Thea's message of social justice and joyful worship of the Lord. •



*Heather Ruemenapp enjoys spending time with her new daughter, Bereket Thea.*

**Author's note:** *Bereket's adoption was an odyssey in and of itself. Please read more about it at <http://ethiopia.generation.com>. Also, please visit Wide Horizons for Children (<http://www.whfc.org>) for information on sponsoring or adopting a child. All photos with this article were contributed.*

## About the Author: Brian G. Wagner

Brian G. Wagner lives with his wife of 13 years, Katy, in Macomb, Mich., a suburb of Detroit. Between them, they have 22 nieces and nephews and 10 godchildren.

They are founding and active members of St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic Church, where Brian has been choir director and/or cantor since 1996. In addition, Brian is a senior systems analyst for the UAW-Ford National Programs Center.

He and Steve Ruemenapp have been best friends since meeting in 1980 in high school at De La Salle Collegiate in Detroit.

Steve met his wife, Heather, in 1991 while Steve was in formation for priesthood with the Holy Cross Community. Heather was a Holy Cross associate at the time. Steve left the priesthood formation, and Steve and Heather married in 1993.



*At left, Brian Wagner holds his goddaughter, Bereket Thea. Above right, Brian and his wife, Katy, pose with Bereket Thea on the day of her baptism.*



# Thea Notes . . .

## People

**Brother Michael “Mickey” McGrath** will speak this summer to students in the theology summer graduate program at La Salle University in Philadelphia. In addition to his presentation on Thea, students will enjoy talks on Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, and Thomas Merton.

**Kathy Coffey** spoke about Sister Thea and the creative and collaborative effort behind the art for the book *Women of Mercy* at the Call to Action National Conference in Milwaukee in

November 2005. Brother Michael McGrath and a group of young women created art for the book. An article written by Coffey, “Portraits of Mercy” also explains the unique *Women of Mercy* project. It was published in the September 2005 issue of *U.S. Catholic. Women of Mercy*, by McGrath and Coffey, was published by Orbis Books in 2005 and is available for \$20 by calling 800.258.5838. Coffey is an author and editor who lives in Denver.

Those interested in learning more about Thea artist **Marshall Bouldin III** can explore a back issue of *International Artist* magazine. Bouldin was featured in the June/July 2004 issue. A Mississippi native, Bouldin has painted the portraits of musicians, university presidents, and more. Bouldin’s portrait of Sister Thea Bowman and another of Bishop Joseph Brunini were on display at a fall 2005 exhibit of

Catholic portraits and artists at the Mississippi Museum of Art in Jackson.

## Events

Over 20 women who gathered at Monte Alverno Retreat Center in



*Retreat steering committee, l-r: Mary Stern; Shelia DeValk; Sharon Salm; Barbara Hirn; Jan Gugala; Marlene Weber, FSPA; and Vinal Van Benthem, SFO.*

Appleton, Wis., had a truly uplifting experience during an evening retreat, **“Women of Today—The Life of Sister Thea Bowman”** on Sept. 20,

2005. Friend of Thea, Marlene Weber, FSPA, led the discussion, reflection, and prayer. Sister Marlene is on staff at Monte Alverno.

## Places

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the **Thea Bowman House** in Utica, N.Y. In 1986, the venture got underway as Agape House. In 1996, they took the name of Sister Thea Bowman. The house provides educational programming and varied opportunities to children and families that are marginalized. For information, write or call: 731 Lafayette St., Utica, N.Y. 13502, 315.797.0748.

The nation’s only historically black Catholic university didn’t escape the destruction rendered by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. According to Delores Spikes, former president of the University of Maryland—Eastern Shore, **Xavier University** hopes to be operating in a limited

capacity early this year. It will be some time before it can return to completely operational.

A Sister Thea Bowman related ministry is being formed in Haiti. Called **Haitian Connection-Koneksyon Ayiti**, the ministry seeks to provide a compassionate response to the multitudes suffering poverty in that country. In the mission statement, it says, “We view education as an important vehicle toward self help and grassroots development, and we perceive the strength of the Gospel message as a catalyst of change for the people of God.” Contributions to Haitian Connection-Koneksyon Ayiti are tax deductible. For information, e-mail Renate Schneider at schn067@yahoo.com. •

## Thea Hermitage House in La Crosse



*Lee Etta Clark and Doris O’Leary (guest speaker) attended the “Flavor of Soul” celebration on March 30, 2005. They visited the Thea Hermitage House while they were in La Crosse. The two are childhood friends and former classmates of the late Sister Thea Bowman. The hermitage is one of three built on the edge of a woodland. They offer a place of peace and quiet for those wishing to experience a time of personal retreat. For information, contact the Franciscan Spirituality Center at 608.791.5295, [www.franciscanspiritualitycenter.org](http://www.franciscanspiritualitycenter.org). (Contributed Photo)*

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

## “Fifth School Named for Sister Thea” *continued from page 1*

the church and a pride in whom they are. She’s a prime example of what perseverance and surrendering to God can do for a person, offering peace and a firm sense of mission at times when others would expect them to give up and give in. And aside from all these other gifts that Sister Thea had, she was a great intellectual and was able to integrate the knowledge she had into a form that could empower people in their everyday lives,” says Father Phipps.

The idea of naming the school after Sister Thea Bowman came from a need to find an example of someone representative of the students who attend both schools, and who is relevant to young people today. “Almost all of the student body at Christ the King and St. Mary is African-American. Thea was

proud of her identity. Plus, Catholic schools are some of the greatest tools of evangelization the Catholic Church has. Sister Thea’s story is an example of how this model of evangelization has worked very well. The influence of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration at

Holy Child Jesus School in Canton, Miss., motivated her to join the Catholic Church. I hope and pray that the same welcoming and attractive environment that led Sister Thea to want to come to the church will exist in this new school,” he explains.

The joint school will provide a comprehensive Catholic education for students from preschool to sixth grade in one Jackson location—Christ the King campus. Architects determined which of the two campuses best served as a solution to the problem. Both school boards decided that Christ the King has the existing buildings, with renovations, to best serve both student populations.

A new building on Christ the King campus will have a double function: a cafeteria and gymnasium for students and a center for parish activities. Fundraising for the parish center has already begun. On Sunday, Nov. 20, 2005, Father Phipps announced the capital campaign goal is to raise \$1.2 million for the school merger. In addition, grants

and corporate donations will be pursued to raise the needed funds. “Of course, we welcome any donations that will help us to open this new school for the 2006-2007 school year,” Father Phipps says.

“Naming the school for Sister Thea Bowman captures the deceased nun’s spirit,” Father Phipps states. “It shows the parallels between her life and the majority of our student body, which is Protestant . . . Sister Thea came from a Protestant background and was exposed to the Catholic faith by the Franciscan Sisters. I think she would appreciate giving young people the same opportunity she had—to become connected to the Catholic Church and community through learning.”

Father Joseph Dyer, pastor of Holy Child Jesus Church and Sacred Heart Church in Canton, Miss.,

*“(Thea) embodies exactly what we are trying to impart to the students by their experience of Catholic education, a love for the church and a pride in whom they are.”*

could not agree more. He knew Sister Thea since the 1960s when they both ministered to the Diocese of Jackson. “Sister Thea is known for so many of her extraordinary talents and achievements, but I always think of her as a scholar.” he says. “She was forever teaching and she was serious about method. She earned her Ph.D. in English language and literature from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and she never apologized for raising the bar for all those she taught.”

She loved to learn and loved to teach. She taught in song. She taught from the pulpit. She taught in the streets. She taught in the classroom. She taught from her sickbed. “If you know how to sew, teach somebody. If you know how to read, teach somebody. If you know how to fix a car, teach somebody. If you know how to balance a checkbook, teach somebody. If you know how to dance, teach somebody. If you know how to love, teach somebody,” she said.

Surely, Sister Thea is smiling on her young protégé, Father Ricardo Phipps. She may not have known him personally while here on earth, but she knew him in her heart. She loved the young. She loved the clergy. She loved all God’s children, and she loved to teach. •



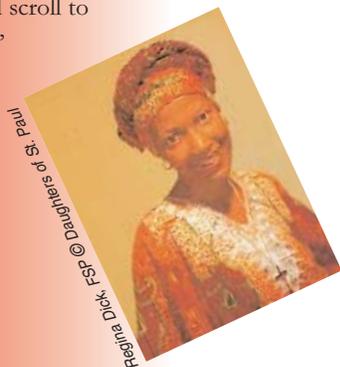
Mary Queen Donnelly

*Like Thea, Mary Queen Donnelly was born and raised in Canton, Miss. As a columnist for the New Orleans Newspaper, The Times Picayune, Donnelly met Thea while covering a lecture series Sister Thea was giving at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University. Donnelly ended up attending the institute. After Thea’s death, Donnelly wrote a memorial in her honor for America magazine, April 28, 1990 issue. Sister Thea graced the cover—the first time a woman, let alone a black woman, had been on the cover.*

Contributed Photo

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www.fspa.org. Click on  
"FSPA News" and scroll to  
"Thea News"



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## Resources on Thea are Readily Available

**Sister Thea: Ole-Time Religion:** \$29.95/video Treehaus Communications, Inc.  
800.638.4287; www.treehaus1.com; treehaus1@fuse.net.

**Sister Thea: Her Own Story:** 50 minutes. \$29.95. 800.233.4629.

**Almost Home: Living with Suffering and Dying:** An award winning  
30-minute video. \$39.95. Liguori Publications. 800.325.9521.



**Sister Thea Bowman Shooting Star:** Selected writings and  
speeches. \$9.95. ISBN 0-9671699-0-9. Viterbo University  
Bookstore. 800.482.8398.

**Thea, Joyous Troubadour of God:** Icon created by Maryam  
Gossling, FSPA. Greeting cards for \$1 per card; 11"x14" posters,  
\$15; 4"x5" plaques, \$12.50; 11"x14" plaques, \$25. Add \$3.50 for shipping  
and handling for orders up to \$15—\$4.50 for larger orders. Send to  
Maryam Gossling, 2733 Lindale Ave. NE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402; call  
319.360.2559; or e-mail gosslingmaryam@mcleodusa.net. •



## Remember Thea, Celebrate Locally!

In 2010, we'll celebrate the 20th anniversary of Thea's home-going with a  
public event in La Crosse. Until then, we invite you to remember Thea locally.  
Choose March 30 or Dec. 29. Gather for gospel singing, "Flavor of Soul"  
food, prayer services, retreats, "Thea-stories," etc. Tell *Thea News* about  
your fests. Send reports and photos to add to our growing Thea collection:  
theanews@fspa.org. •