A Joyful Noise

by Lisa Mladinich

Lisa Robinson had a problem. The graphic designer had been providing hand puppet programs for her Mississippi parish for about three years, using Bible-based scripts she had purchased on the Internet. They had served her and her parish well, and she'd never actually had to write a script from scratch. But this time was different. It was just over two weeks before the start of her parish's summer program. The director was asking for something Lisa couldn't find in any collection: five 15-minute puppet shows based on the lives of four saints and one very exciting holy woman—a local heroine by the name of Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA.

My free puppet ministry is hosted by the much beloved web site, CatholicMom.com, complete with a link to my home e-mail. Religious educators write to me when they want to incorporate puppetry into their programs and need a little guidance. Usually I can suggest a script from among my existing shows, and the person behind the query is satisfied. But when I first heard from Lisa, I didn't have any scripts dealing with lives of the saints, and I hadn't even heard of Sister Thea.

I said a little prayer and hit the Internet. My research revealed a remarkable person whom I liked immediately. An African-American nun raised in the deep South, Sister Thea became a highly educated, accomplished teacher, speaker, and singer who helped bring black culture into mainstream Catholic worship.

I wanted to write the script but I had a problem. My style of writing puppet scripts for children can be summed up thusly: take a simple concept and whack it repeatedly with a large banana. But how, I worried, could I take the life of a beautiful, holy nun—the granddaughter of a slave who spent her life teaching racial pride and tolerance—and turn it into slapstick without treating Sister Thea and her life with disrespect? I didn't want to get bogged down in politics, and I didn't want to lose my sense of humor.

But what does a middle-aged white woman from the suburbs of Long Island know about black culture? What if it came off as preachy, or worse, condescending? The show would be performed for several racially diverse groups of children ranging from preschool to the fourth grade, and I didn't want to lose their interest either. This sensitive and terribly important material had to be funny. I prayed a little harder and went back over the details, trying to find a way in.

Saint Prayer Cards — Series of 5
Mary Magdalene, Thea Bowman, Peter, Stephen, and Paul
(Prayer cards available from Harcourt.)
Dear Friends of Thea,

**In La Crosse.** Good-bye and thank you, Beth Erickson, for five years service as editor of *Thea News*. We will miss you. We wish you and husband Kevin well as you take on additional parenting responsibilities of a new baby daughter Josie Beth born July 20. We have enjoyed working with you and are grateful for the creative, professional way you have helped to hand on Thea’s legacy.

Hello and welcome to Mary Pat Hill, OSM, who is our new editor. *(See bio on page 7.)* We are happy that you are with us, Mary Pat.

**In Pittsburgh.** On May 17, 2006, the 10th annual fundraiser dinner sponsored by the Thea Bowman Black Catholic Education Foundation took place in the club lounge at Heinz Stadium courtesy of Pittsburgh Steelers’ owner Dan Rooney. The annual Thea Bowman Foundation award was presented to Mr. Rooney for outstanding support of Catholic education.

Assisted by Pittsburgh Friends of Thea, Mary Lou Jennings, foundation director, coordinated the successful event. Popular Super Bowl Champion Steeler strong safety Troy Polamalu co-chaired the occasion. Pittsburgh Bishop Donald Wuerl, having just been named Archbishop of Washington, DC, led the invocation.

Rooney met Sister Thea in La Crosse, Wisconsin, in 1985 when both of them received Viterbo College’s (now University) prestigious John XXIII award. They became friends. When Thea’s bones were ravaged by tumors and she could no longer walk, Rooney gave her a wheelchair that she christened her “Steeler-Mobile.”

Currently, Thea scholars are working toward baccalaureate degrees at Catholic University, Duquesne University, Seton Hall University, St. Francis University, and the College of St. Mary’s in Omaha.

The 2007 dinner is scheduled for April 19. Same venue, again courtesy of Dan Rooney. Join us.

**In Canton.** Congratulations to Holy Child Jesus School in Mississippi on its 60th anniversary! Alumni, faculty, and parents gathered Thanksgiving weekend for a picnic in the schoolyard, tour of the school, banquet, dance, liturgy, and continental breakfast to mark the occasion. The Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration were saluted for their leadership and generosity to the mission.
by Mary Pat Hill, OSM

iz and Margaret—the Hill Twins as they were known in school—remember their favorite teacher, Sister Thea, with great fondness. Sharing memories of their 6th grade teacher at Blessed Sacrament School, La Crosse, Wisconsin, took Margaret right back: “I can feel her. She had an aura, a presence to you like no one else. It is hard to put into words what drew you to her. She made you feel special.”

Liz recalled, “In all my years in school, Sister Thea was the only teacher who made a connection on a personal level. Her personality was kind and generous. She was unusual. It was her person that kept me drawn to her. She had a warmth and strength that emanated from her.”

Margaret greatly enjoyed music class. “She had a beautiful voice and laugh. She called us her ‘little ones,’ and I loved that. She seemed to take us under her wing.” Another special memory for Margaret was recollecting that, when she was in high school, she and her former teacher met by chance, and “Sister knew me, even my name.”

Reading was and still is a favorite time for Liz, who remembered how Sister Thea read. “Her voice and inflection mesmerized us. Something in her speech was musical. The boys settled down, too. You could hear a pin drop.”

The Hill Twins agreed that they “loved going to school in sixth grade.” They feel very blessed to have been taught by Sister Thea years before thousands of others were also deeply touched by her presence and gifts.
Sister Thea Bowman

by Lisa Mladinich

This puppet show, second in a series of 5 shows (see page 1), follows the one on St. Mary Magdalene.

Billy (flying around again)
Take that EVIL! I am a follower of Jesus Christ! I am the great, the fast, the BRAVE Saint Marvin Magdalene!!!!

Susie
Um, excuse me, Billy?

Billy
Oh. I didn't see you there. Er… how long have you been standing there listen-ing – er, watching me?

Susie
Long enough, MARVIN Magdalene!

Billy
Well, you don't expect me to pretend to be a GIRL, do you?

Susie
I guess not. Marvin Magdalene. It has a ring to it. Okay. Resume superhero behavior.

Billy
I can't NOW.

Susie
Why not?

Billy
The moment has passed. I'm not inspired any more.

Susie
Do you need me to tell you another inspiring hero story?

Billy
You have ANOTHER one?!!!

Susie
Oh, our Catholic history is FULL of great hero stories.

Billy
No way.

Susie
Way.

Billy
Okay. But let me guess this time.

Susie
Okay.

Billy
Is he really big and strong, like me?

Susie
Bil

Billy
Okay. Who is she?

Susie
Sister Thea Bowman.

Billy
Sister?

Susie
Yes, she was a religious nun, a sister.

Billy
Why isn't she a saint?

Susie
Somebody's working on that. She probably will be. I think they're already throwing a big party for her in heaven.

Billy
No way.

Susie
Way.

Billy
So, who was she?

Susie
Maybe I'd better start at the beginning. Sister Thea was born right here in Mississippi almost seventy years ago.

Billy
Here in Mississippi?

Susie
Yes, in Canton, to very good Christian parents.

Billy
They weren't Catholic?

Susie
Nope. Her father was a Methodist and her mother was an Episcopalian. And her grandfather had been an actual SLAVE.

Billy
No way.

Susie
Way. He was a slave, bought and sold in the days when it was legal to buy and sell human beings.

Billy
That's HORRIBLE.

Susie
Yeah. Horrible.

Billy
But that must have made her Grandpa feel just TERRIBLE.

Susie
It made a lot of people feel terrible. But Thea's father became a doctor and her mother became a teacher.

Billy
Wow. They started out with big problems and ended up doing very well.

Susie
Yes. They must have been people of great faith and strong character.

Billy
Dude. (nodding agreement)

Susie
Well, because of slavery, things were hard for black families in this country. It set them back, you might say.

Billy
They needed a superhero to fly in and hop those bad guys… those people-buyers and sellers… right in the… (catches a look from Susie, remembers) er… I mean, they needed a superhero to follow Jesus’ way of love!

Susie
Now you're talking, brother Super-dude!

Billy
Righteous! So this little girl, this girl named Thea… did she follow Jesus’ way of love?

Susie
Boy, did she ever!

Billy
How did she do it?

Susie
She was a teacher.

Billy
Yeah? What did she teach?

Susie
She taught regular school, but she especially taught joy and love. And she taught people of all colors to respect each other. She taught black people to bring their culture into the Catholic Church and celebrate with Jesus in their own special way! You want to go back in time and listen to her?
Sister Thea Bowman Puppet Show

Billy I sure do! She sounds like a ton of fun! Let’s go!

Susie Okay. Take my hand, brother Marvin.

Billy Hey, cut that out.

Susie (laughs) Okay. Come on, Billy. Sister Thea, we’d like to hear… the words you spoke to cast out fear!!!!

(They fly backwards and disappear—Sister Thea appears and speaks to the children in the audience—it might help to have some back-up characters repeating her statements Gospel-style, chanting hallelujahs and singing with her. Here is a suggested rhyme-chant conversation with some puppet characters and with the children in your audience…)

Sr. Thea (with great joy and humor) Hello out there! My name is Sister Thea. And I am here to speak to you about letting your light shine to the GLORY of God!!! Glory hallelujah! Can anyone tell me who the light is that shines inside each one of us?

Kid 1 Superman?

Sr. Thea No, little one. It is not superman. Any other guesses? (Take guesses from the audience until someone guesses Jesus.) Yes! You have got it right! You have got it right! It is JESUS. Jesus is the LIGHT! Now let me ask you: do you have to be WHITE to shine with Jesus’ light?

Kid 1 No way!

Sr. Thea You’re right! You don’t have to be white to shine with Jesus’ light. It is all right to shine with that light if you are black or red, brown, yellow or white!

Kid 2 Amen, Sister Thea!

Sr. Thea Now does that light have to be a huge shining light? Does your light have to be very, very, very bright?

Kid 1 Yes! Like a supernova!!

Kid 2 Or a volcano or a humongous light bulb!

Sr. Thea Not so, little children, not so! But I see that YOU both have a glow! Your light can be small, not big at all. You can shine with a flicker, you can shine with a glow, but shine you must! It’s the only way to go!

Kid 1 But Sister Thea, HOW do we shine?

Sr. Thea You shine when you are kind, you shine when you are good, you shine when you do the things you know that you should. You are pleasing to God when you sing and when you pray, so let’s all be candles lit up with love today!!!!

Kid 2 Sister? Is my light shining when I put my toys away?

Sr. Thea Yes, child, that’s so right after you play.

Kid 1 Is my light shining brightly when I listen to a sad friend?

Sr. Thea Yes, my precious baby, so that a broken heart can mend. Share the Good News of Jesus Christ by listening, praying, working, and playing with love in your heart. Bring the Good News to all.

Kid 2 But Sister, what if they’ve already heard the Good News?

Sr. Thea Tell it to them again! Do you know anybody who has heard too much good news? (actual quote) And if you teach one person, they will teach another and another. Repeat after me: EACH ONE TEACH ONE! (actual quote) Wonderful. Louder! EACH ONE TEACH ONE! Very nice! We must spread the news to ALL people and rejoice for it is our greatest gift.

Kid 2 Then if my friends and I work together, each with our little light….?

Sr. Thea You’ve got it, child of Jesus! You’d all be burning bright!

Kid 1 Sister, what colors can shine again? I can’t remember. Was it purple and blue and orange, too?

Sr. Thea Listen up, my children, I will teach a game to you. Take the fingers of one hand, hold them up spread out and strong… Now learn the people colors and work together, each with our little light….

Kid 2 And the colors of our people, Everyone is made from God’s love,
“Sister Thea Bowman Puppet Show” continued from page 5

His truth is marching on!  
Red, brown, yellow, white, and black,  
Each one is so good and lovely,  
Make God smile  
with your bright color.

His truth is marching on!  
Glory, glory hallelujah!  
Glory, glory hallelujah!  
All the colors of our people are  
made in the image of God!

Kid 2  Sister, what color are you?  

Sr. Thea I am black, my child.

Kid 2  I like your dark skin.

Sr. Thea Thank you! I like being black. I like being myself,  
and I thank God for making me my black self. (actual quote) I like your skin, too!

Kid 2  Thanks, Sister! But what if someone tells me that I’m the wrong color and won’t play with me?

Sr. Thea You tell that person that THAT’S just bunk because Almighty God does not make junk! (actual quote)

Come, let’s sing another song. Sister Thea loves to sing. Did you know that Saint Augustine said that when you sing you pray TWICE? It’s true! Songs are a very special way of praying. Now let me teach you to sing my favorite song: This Little Light of Mine. Do the gestures with me, okay?

This little light of mine  
[indext finger up like a candle]  
I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]

This little light of mine  
[indext finger up like a candle]  
I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]

This little light of mine  
[indext finger up like a candle]  
I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]

This little light of mine  
[indext finger up like a candle]  
I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]

This little light of mine  
[indext finger up like a candle]  
I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine  
[arms still open, wave them back and forth]  
Won’t let anyone (blow) it out  
[mime blowing and shaking head “No”]

I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]  
Won’t let anyone (blow) it out  
[mime blowing and shaking head “No”]

I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]  
Won’t let anyone (blow) it out  
[mime blowing and shaking head “No”]

I’m gonna let it shine  
[arms opening up and out in an arc]  
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!  
[arms still open, wave them back and forth]  
(note: do not say the word “blow”—actually make a blowing sound)

Sr. Thea Very nice, children! Praise God.

Kid 1  Sister Thea, why do you like to sing so much?

Sr. Thea I sing because I’m happy! I sing because I’m free! His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me! (sing this, if you know the tune)

Kid 1  And me?

Sr. Thea Yes! He watches all of us! Now I want you to repeat after me. (one line at a time; actual quotes edited from her talks with children)

“I am somebody. / I’m somebody special. / I’m God’s child. / I can change things. / I can make life better for myself, / for my family, / for my community, / for the church, / for the world. / I make life better when I say yes to God’s will in my life. / And I want to say yes to God. / I want to say yes to life, / yes to hope, / yes to love, / yes to you, / yes to eternity.”

Sing with me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so!

Now go out, children, and make a joyful noise unto the LORD!!!!

(She and the others fade back and Susie and Billy reappear.)

Billy Wow! Sister Thea is a great hero! And what a joyful NOSE she had!

Susie What?

Billy She said something about her joyful nose.

Susie No, Billy, she said make a joyful NOISE unto the Lord. Noise. She means singing and shouting for joy.

Billy Oh. (pause) Well, I thought she had a joyful nose.

Susie Oh good grief.

Billy And her ears were pretty joyful, too.

Susie (mildly disgusted) All right. I’ll see ya later. (more cheerfully) I gotta go share the Good News! (exits)

Billy (calling after her) And her eyelids! Definitely joyful! (to the audience) Didn’t you think so? And what a smile. (sighs) She made me happy to just be me, alive in God’s loving hands. Yeah, that Sister Thea is one great hero. (singing, dancing and exiting) He’s got the whole world in His hands…. ✿

Tell us your Thea news:

Thea News  
912 Market Street  
La Crosse, WI  
54601-8800  

or  
e-mail  
csmith@fspa.org

Contributed Photo: Tupelo, Mississippi Production
Thea Notes . . .

Anniversary

The Thea Bowman House in Utica, New York, is celebrating 20 years of “love, growth, and compassion.” A special anniversary dinner took place on November 16, 2006.

Dedication

On September 3, 2006, Christ Our Hope Catholic Church in Lithonia, Georgia, dedicated its hall to Sister Thea Bowman. Atlanta’s Archbishop, Most Rev. Wilton Gregory, led the celebration.

The naming of the hall was proposed by parishioner Etta Herriot, who believes that “Sister Thea lived her life as if a light in darkness. She was an inspiration for so many people, not the least of all, for me.” Etta shared these reasons with Kysa Daniels, a journalist who wrote about the dedication.

“A Joyful Noise” continued from page 1

I started writing and longed to speak with someone who had known Sister Thea. I could write about her, but I didn’t have a sense of her. I logged on to her order’s web site and contacted Sister Charlene Smith, FSPA, the coordinator for the Thea Bowman Legacy in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and a friend of Thea’s. She was a font of details, full of affection for Thea’s cause, and very kindly put me in touch with another Thea friend, Sister Dorothy Ann Kundinger, FSPA, in Jackson, Mississippi.

I reached Sister Dorothy Ann in the early morning hours before her long day of working with AIDS patients. Sister Dorothy Ann had actually lived with Thea during her final years and bubbled over with an easy joy and quiet good humor in her memories of their time together. In the course of our conversation, I realized something: Thea would not have liked the pedestal I had placed her on. She was funny, she sang like a house on fire, she was full of light and life, and the kids would have adored her. I discovered that my problem wasn’t finding a way to make Thea and her cause entertaining; it was that there was far more material than I had time to address and not enough space to do justice to her mission, her personality, and, above all, her faith in Jesus. I was galvanized by the encouragement and faith of Sisters Charlene and Dorothy Ann. Neither seemed the least bit protective in the artificial sense; they would project no image of sterile piety or fragile saintliness on their friend who once told an inquiring child, “A saint is a sinner who just keeps on trying!” Thea was strong. Thea was family. And Thea was a hoot. I changed course in my writing and began to let Thea speak for herself.

When the time finally arrived on that sunny Tuesday morning in June, the children sat cross-legged on the tile floor of their parish center; their eyes lit up with expectation, chins crane forward, smiling eagerly. The curtains trembled a moment, and then the puppets made their madcap entrances, provoking belly laughs and giggles all around. For fifteen minutes of rhythmic speech, songs and wordplay, slapstick and Gospel truth, the children laughed, called out answers, and rejoiced in the antics of Lisa Robinson and her merry band of volunteers. The applause was heartfelt. Thea’s powerful life had been celebrated in a way the children would not soon forget. But above all, her Lord had been glorified in word and song—a tender message and a joyful noise to which Thea herself would have said “Amen.”

In Print

St. Anthony Messenger’s feature article “Holy People Walk the Talk” by Carol Ann Morrow (February 2007 issue) highlights holy persons that are included as models of faith in the U.S. Bishops’ 2006 United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. The inspiring modern trio—Sister Thea Bowman, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, and Dorothy Day (in Jim Effler’s beautiful painting; left column)—are featured in the Catechism. In the section on the The Creed: The Faith Professed, Thea powerfully opens Chapter 8 on Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Bruce Nieli, Paulist priest, in “Uniting America Spiritually” in America (April 24-May 1, 2006), writes about the legacy of Isaac Thomas Hecker, the founder of the Paulists. Describing contemporary examples of U.S. Catholics “in the Hecker camp,” Nieli raises up Thea as “a veritable icon of the spirit of jubilee.”

Stained-Glass Window

Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in San Antonio, Texas, has a beautiful stained-glass window with three modern church leaders: Archbishop James Lyke, OFM, Sister Thea, and Father Clarence Rivers. Their spirits are reflected with the major heading on the window: “We’ve come this far by faith.”

For more information on Lisa’s free puppet ministry, click on www.catholicmom.com/puppet.htm or e-mail her at lisamladinich@optonline.net.

Now available: Spanish translations of Lisa’s scripts by Catholic writer and professional translator, Maria M. Rivera!
Catholic students, of the Kingdom.”

we realize their

faithfulness . . .

Copies available. Inquire:
Limited number of printed

info@hillconnections.org

Mary Pat Hill, OSM
csmith@fspa.org

Charlene Smith, FSPA

www.fspa.org

Tel: 608.791.5618

La Crosse, WI 54601-8800

Thea was a member.

the ignorant,

Sister Thea Bowman:


Sister Thea Bowman Shooting Star edited by Celestine Cepress, FSPA, and with a forward by Mike Wallace, this book has selected writings and speeches of Thea’s. $9.95. Viterbo University Bookstore. 800.482.8398.

Sweet, Sweet Spirit: Prayer Services from the Black Catholic Church by Joseph A. Brown, SJ, with Fernand Cheri, III, OFM. A prayer service in honor of Thea is included. St. Anthony Messenger Press; $9.95; search.americancatholic.org; 800.488.0488.

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 Avenue NE, Cedar Rapids, IA 52402; e-mail gosslingmaryam@mcleodusa.net; or call 319.360.2559.

Almost Home: Living with Suffering and Dying. A Gabriel Award, Wilbur Award, and Silver Angel Award winning video, it shares Thea's own words about her personal experience of living with a terminal illness. Liguori Publications; 30 minutes; $39.95; www.liguori.org; 800.325.9521.

St. Thea: Her Own Story. Made shortly before her death, this video explores Thea's childhood, religious calling, and aspirations for humanity. It contains interviews with Thea and her friends. Oblate Media and Communications; 50 minutes; $19.99; www.videoswithvalues.org; 800.233.4629.