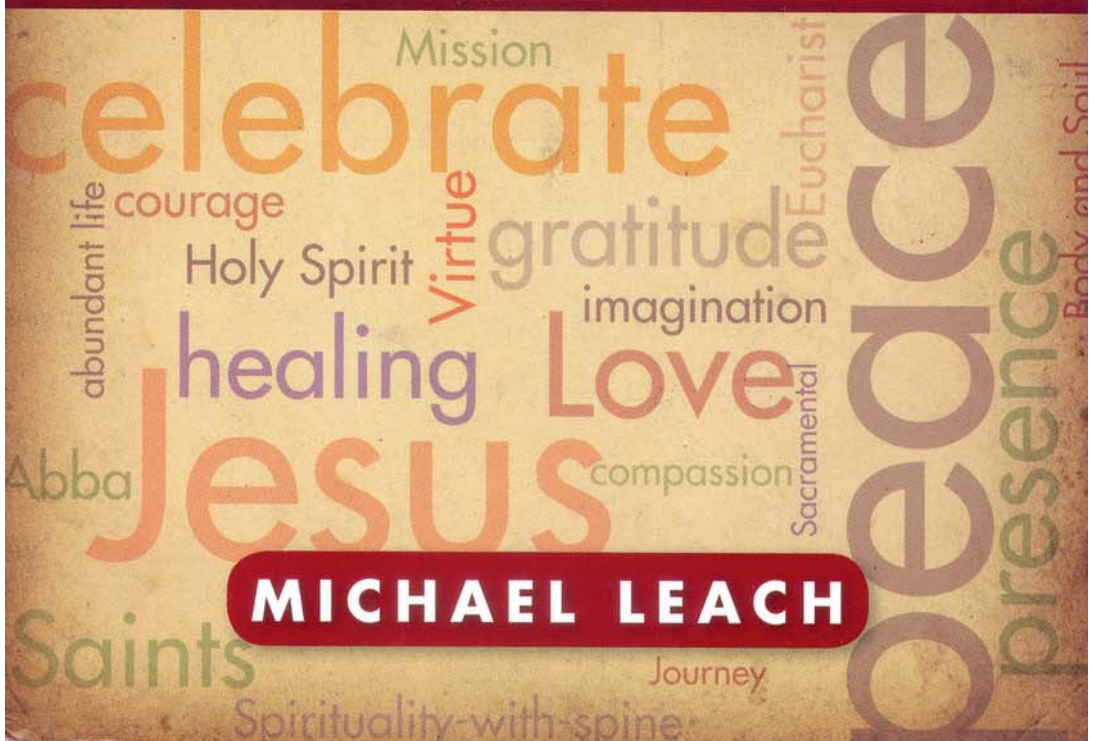


WHY STAY CATHOLIC?

Unexpected Answers to a Life-Changing Question



MICHAEL LEACH



Thea Bowman

She Who Overcame: Thea Bowman

I can't preach in the church. Women can't preach in the Catholic Church. But I can preach in the streets. I can preach in the neighborhood. I can preach in the home. I can teach and preach in the family.

—THEA BOWMAN (1937–1990)

Let's pay less attention to scandalous priests and athletes and politicians and turn our attention to role models who not only never let us down but lift everybody up. Sister Thea Bowman died in 1990, yet she still astonishes us. You don't know much about her? That's okay—that's why she's here. Let me introduce you.

Born in Mississippi in 1937, Thea Bowman learned to love Jesus as a child and entered a Franciscan convent of white nuns in Wisconsin when she was seventeen. Without seeking it, Thea would become a pioneer role model in interracial relations. What did she do? She did what she was told. But wherever she went, Thea expressed what she knew: God's transforming love. "Sometimes people think

they have to do big things in order to make change,” Thea said, “but if each one would light a candle, we’d have a tremendous light. My goal is to share good news. I want people to know that happiness is possible.”

People caught happiness just by being near her.

Thea’s great-grandparents were freed slaves. She was proud to be African American. While she earned a PhD in English literature and was an expert on William Faulkner, Thea was known most of all as a gifted singer and speaker. Her voice and presence were unforgettable, whether she was filling a Mississippi church as a teenager or echoing through a Northern cathedral packed with people of all races when she was an adult. While she helped found the prestigious Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, Thea came to national attention by preaching the gospel to parishes throughout the United States. She inspired Mike Wallace in the most repeated *60 Minutes* interview of all time, was sought out by Muhammad Ali, Harry Belafonte, and Whoopi Goldberg, and finally, stricken with bone cancer, led in the singing of “We Shall Overcome” in the halls of the U.S. Catholic bishops, inspiring those stodgy men to stand up and sing, to clap and sway in the name of the Lord!

It was at that remarkable meeting in 1989, just months before her death, that Thea, bent over in a wheelchair on a stage that happened to be higher than the assembled bishops, challenged them: “What does it mean to be black in the church and society?”

She answered by sitting tall and singing, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Her voice broke through walls. "Can you hear me, church? Will you help me, church? I'm a long way from home, a long way from my home." She asked again, "What does it mean to be black and Catholic? It means that I come to my church fully functioning. That doesn't frighten you, does it? I bring myself, my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility as gift to the church!"

At the end, as Thea was wheeled down the aisle of the auditorium, the bishops got out of their seats and lined up against the wall to witness her passing. Some of them knelt at her wheelchair. Many embraced her. All were silent.

After a long illness, Thea Bowman died at age fifty-three.

It is a mystery that a life that shone like a billion candles could flicker out so soon. Yet that is a key aspect of Thea's journey. She was a woman who showed us how to drink deeply of life's cup to the very end, even as she spent her last years in pain.

"When I first found out I had cancer," Thea told an interviewer from *Praying*, "I didn't know what to pray for. I didn't know if I should pray for healing or life or death. Then I found peace in praying for what my folks call 'God's perfect will.' As it evolved my prayer has become,

'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, how long really doesn't matter. Whether it's just a few months or a few years is really immaterial." When the interviewer asked her if God was really present in suffering, Thea answered:

God is present in everything. In the universe, in creation, in me and all that happens to me, in my brothers and sisters, in the church—everywhere. In the midst of suffering, I feel God's presence and cry out to God for help, "Lord, help me to hold on!" I don't try to make sense of suffering. I try to make sense of life. I try to keep myself open to people and to laughter and to love and to have faith. I try each day to see God's will. I pray, "Oh Jesus, I surrender." I pray, "Father, take this cross away. Not my will, but thy will be done." I console myself with the old Negro spiritual, "Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world. I'm going home to live with God!"

Everyone wanted to be near Thea Bowman. They soaked up her joy like a sponge fills with water. She changed the way people thought about themselves. Her example was an antidote to prejudice, exclusion, sadness, and all the things that drive people apart. "If we are not family," she taught, "we can't become church." Thea Bowman didn't live for the church, or for herself, or for others. She lived for God. Her life tells us what it means to belong to the family of God.

Come and see: www.fspa.org (About Us/Thea Bowman) and *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman* by Charlene Smith and John Feister

WHY STAY CATHOLIC?

The answers will surprise and sustain you!

Scandals in the Catholic Church won't go away. The same uninspiring sermons keep coming. Lay people are left wondering where "the beef" in Catholicism has gone. In light of all this, it's no wonder that so many Catholics are asking, Why stay Catholic?

In *Why Stay Catholic?*, national best-selling author Michael Leach offers surprising, inspiring, and timely answers to this life-changing question, giving readers plenty of reasons to celebrate the Catholic faith here and now. In part one, he explores and explains great ideas Catholics never hear about, even from the pulpit; in part two, he introduces inspiring, often little-known Catholics who never make the news but can make a big difference in people's faith; and in part three, Leach highlights great Catholic organizations that change the world.

Ultimately, *Why Stay Catholic?* is an invitation to "taste and see how good the Lord is." Cradle Catholics, returning Catholics, ex-Catholics, and even non-Catholics will love this celebration of a faith that lives and lasts.

"Why Stay Catholic? took courage to write, and Michael Leach shows a masterful understanding of the meaning of Church and the mystery of God's purpose for all of us.... A remarkable achievement!"

—Joseph Girzone, author of the *Joshua* series



MICHAEL LEACH is editor-at-large and publisher emeritus of Orbis Books. Dubbed "the dean of Catholic book publishing" by *U.S. Catholic*, he recently received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Catholic Book Publishers Association. He is the author of many books, including the national best seller *I Like Being Catholic*. Michael lives in Connecticut.

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