

Sister Thea Bowman Was 'Everybody's Sister'

▲ by Sister Charlene Smith, F.S.P.A.

JUST 20 YEARS AGO on a sunny April 3, at the largest Catholic church in Jackson, Miss., legions of friends celebrated the homegoing of an unforgettable woman.

The evening before, people streamed into Holy Child Jesus Church in Canton, Miss. "They had come to celebrate the life and death of one Sister Thea Bowman, a black Catholic Franciscan sister who had become nationally recognized for introducing black American culture, song and ritual into Catholic liturgy," wrote a childhood friend, Mary Donnelly in *America* magazine.

When she was a teen, then-Bertha Bowman penned in a brief autobiography, "On Dec. 29, 1937, in Yazoo City, Miss., I was born, the first and only child of my parents who had already been married for 12 years. I was baptized Episcopalian and reared Methodist. Before I met Catholicism in 1947, I had tried Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Adventist, A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion churches, but once I went to the Catholic church, my wanderings ceased."

In 1948, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, La Crosse, Wisc., started a mission school in Canton. As soon as the Holy Child Jesus School opening was announced, the Bowmans enrolled Bertha in grade six.

"Because my mother wanted me to have a chance in life," Bertha reflected, "she sent me to a Catholic school. The black public schools were tremendously disadvantaged and understaffed. The sisters begged a lot, and because they did, our school was much better supplied. Men and women all over the country gave a dollar or two to help us get an adequate education. The priest, brothers, and sisters brought an extraordinary kind of dedication to the education process..."

The impact Holy Child Jesus had on Bertha was life-changing. In a climate saturated with racism, segregation, and injustice suffered at the hands of whites, the mission school brought hope and a sense of dignity and pride to the black and poor of Canton.

When she turned 15, Bertha announced she wanted to enter St. Rose Convent. Inspired by the Franciscans, her intent was to become a woman religious. Though her parents were reluctant to let her go, she was single-minded in her decision.

Arriving at the convent a thousand miles from home, Bertha experienced culture shock – being the only black in a western Wisconsin white world. Yet she was determined. She excelled academically, fell in love with the Franciscan joyful way of life and received the name Thea of God.

After professing vows, she taught in La Crosse and Canton for eight years before enrolling full time in the doctoral program in English at Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. She excelled as a distinguished scholar and formed a burgeoning career as a speaker/singer on black oral tradition and gospel music. From 1971 to 1978, she was professor and chairperson

from 1980 to 1988. Her specialty was teaching liturgical worship and preaching to clergy, sisters and brothers who ministered in black parish communities.

The year both of her parents died, 1984, Thea was startled by a diagnosis of breast cancer. She continued speaking and travelling while undergoing chemotherapy and radiation.

The U.S. Catholic Conference

it, for she was so confident, so optimistic, so determined. "But there aren't enough Sister Theas around," I told her. "One's enough," she promptly answered, "you ask my friends. They'll tell you that's plenty."

Sister Thea described the gospel singer "as one chosen from the people by the people to suit their immediate need. The singer lifts the Church, the people, to a higher level of understanding, feeling, motivation, and participation. Song is not an object to be admired so much as an instrument to teach, comfort, inspire, persuade, convince, and motivate."

The year 1988 marked the 20th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. By then, his birthday was officially a national holiday. The Milwaukee black Catholic community invited Sister Thea to keynote their observance, which turned out to be a singular triumph. The program, "Martin Luther King: Seize the Vision," took place in the Performing Arts Center in downtown Milwaukee.

Journalist Lyn Hartman captured the spirit for the Milwaukee Journal. She reported one of Sister Thea Bowman's missions was letting kids know that they are beautiful. Sister Thea stated, "We're all called to free ourselves and to free one another. I want our singing to be able to convey that, not just to ourselves, but to our children and to our elders."

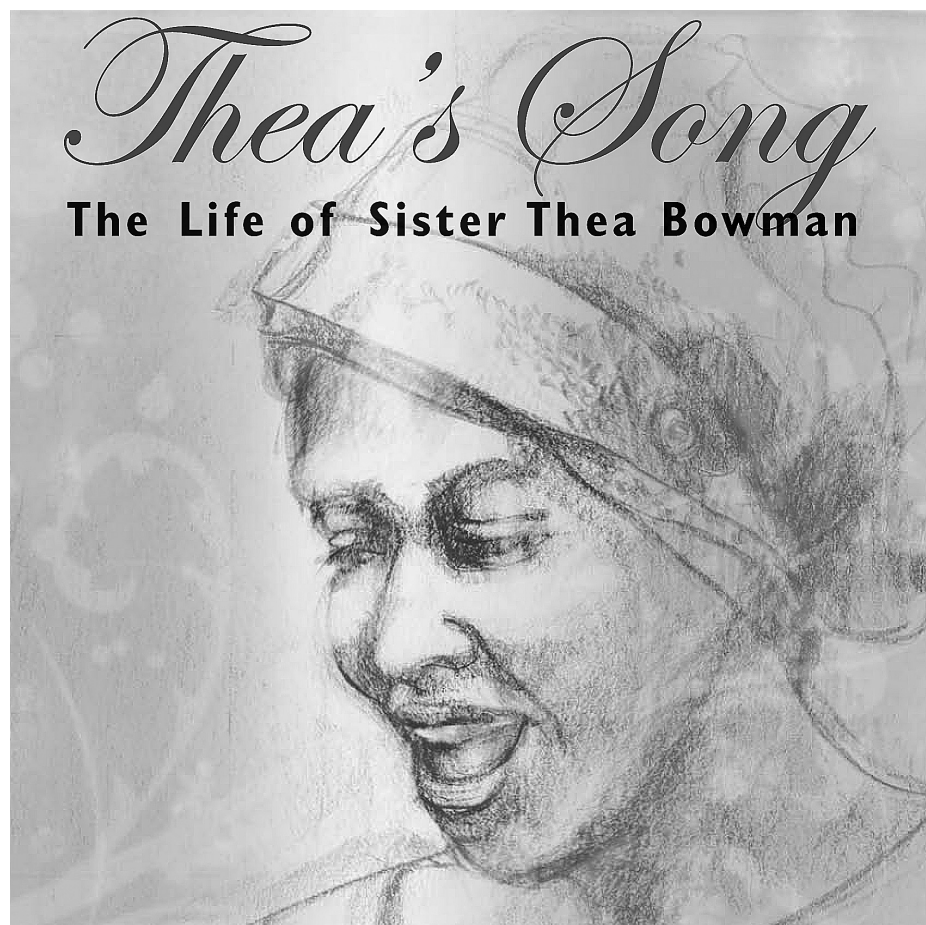
After that high-powered "Thea experience," it seems that what occurred next was remarkably shocking. The following day, back home in Mississippi, Thea had a high fever and acute back pain. X-rays showed that cancer had returned. More rounds of chemotherapy and radiation followed.

She gave her last major public address in June, 1989, at Seton Hall University, South Orange, N.J. Speaking to the U.S. Catholic Bishops, Thea, who by this time was affectionately known as "Everybody's Sister," challenged church leaders to accept her as a fully-functioning educated adult Catholic black woman.

Cancer eventually overpowered Thea's body. She passed peacefully on March 30, 1990.

In historic Elmwood Cemetery, Memphis, Tenn., Sister Thea Bowman is buried next to her parents. Engraved on the white tombstone is her requested epitaph, "She tried."

Sister Charlene Smith, F.S.P.A., Sister Thea Bowman's friend for 35 years, with John Feister, has authored the biography "Thea's Song: the Life of Thea Bowman" (Orbis Books, February, 2010).



Next Tablet Forum

The Tablet will present a special evening on the life and ministry of Sister Thea Bowman, S.F.P., on Thursday, April 29, at 7 p.m. at Immaculate Conception Pastoral Center, Douglaston. A film will be shown, followed by a talk by Brother Michael McGovern. For tickets, which are free, send an e-mail to ewilkinson@diobrook.org. Include your name and address (for mailing purposes) and how many tickets are being requested.

of the English department at Viterbo College (now University) in La Crosse.

In the late summer of 1978, Bowman returned to Mississippi to help care for her aging parents. As director of Intercultural Awareness for the Jackson Diocese, she engaged in speaking and singing throughout the South before going national a few years later. Her guiding passion was to share the Gospel. "Do you know anyone who has heard too much good news?" she would often query with a smile.

Thea helped found the Institute for Black Catholic Studies (IBCS), at Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana. She was invited to serve on its faculty, a position she joyfully held

commissioned her to produce a book for ministers in the black Catholic community. Titled "Families Black and Catholic, Catholic and Black" (c. 1985), the book caught on and is presently widely used. Sister Thea wrote in the introduction, "The book assumes that the black family is alive and well. It assumes further that we as a people need to find ways old and new to walk and talk together; to bond more surely; to extend family more widely and effectively, so that no one is fatherless, motherless, sisterless, or brotherless; so that no one lacks the life sustaining human support of family."

When I learned that Sister Thea was fighting cancer, I couldn't believe