

Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman; by Charlene Smith and John Feister; Orbis Books; 2009, soft cover, 319 pp., \$18.

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“All along the way her voice and her presence were unforgettable,” note Charlene Smith and John Feister in the introduction to their Christopher Award-winning biography, “Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman.” The book meticulously documents both the voice and presence of this vibrant woman of faith, starting with her humble beginnings as the descendent of freed slaves in small-town Canton, Miss., a place so entrenched in segregation Thea once wrote that when the railroad removed race separation signs in the railway depot in 1955, “the white folks nailed them up again.”

Bertha “Birdie” Bowman (who would later become Sister Mary Thea Bowman, FSPA) already had much going for her though. Born into a loving family of middle class, black professionals, her teacher mother and doctor father encouraged education, compassion and a joy in living. Bertha, their only child, was born 13 years into their marriage and was, above all, loved, with her mother carefully chronicling her life in scrapbooks kept from birth through her years as a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration.

Young Bertha was well aware of discrimination and its unjustness from an early age — segregated drinking fountains, black men being called “boy,” a black youth returning from life up north, shot by police for being “uppity” and running through the Bowman’s yard before collapsing next door.

She also experienced a strong religious upbringing and had tried Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist and other Protestant brands of faith

before her baptism at the age nine, by her own choice, at the Holy Child Jesus Mission, served by the Order of Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity. She was attracted, she said, by the good she saw the Catholics trying to do. Her parents later followed her into the Catholic Church.

It was to ensure a better education than the shabbily-equipped local black public schools offered, that the Bowmans enrolled their daughter in 6th grade in the mission's new Holy Child Jesus School, staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. These selfless women became her role models and she followed in their footsteps to St. Rose High School at the congregation's motherhouse in La Crosse, Wis., at the age of 15, despite her parents' initial reluctance.

Her commitment there never wavered, despite the culture shock of finding herself in an all-white environment with unfamiliar foods, snowy winters and overt racism, even in the convent. (An older nun informed her there was a "nigger heaven" for "your kind" and "other animals.") Just as unsettling was the lack of singing, dancing and closeness she had experienced in church services back home.

Within two years she was hospitalized for tuberculosis and sent to live in a sanatorium, maintaining her usual cheerful spirit throughout, though it meant missing a year of school. Her college education was put off for several years to follow her mission assignment of teaching in La Crosse as her school's first black teacher, leading to some initial consternation. Now known as Sister Mary Thea, she set about partnering her classes with students at Holy Child Jesus School in her hometown of Canton, an early effort in intercultural sharing.

Her next teaching assignment was to Holy Child Jesus in deeply racist Mississippi at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to make its presence felt in America. "Freedom Rides," the

Montgomery bus boycott and the murder of Emmett Till were making the news and even little Canton was becoming a “melting pot” for civil rights activism.

She finally received her bachelor of arts in 1965 from the FSPA’s Viterbo College in La Crosse

All of this immensely broadened Thea’s cultural perspective as did graduate studies at Catholic University of America, where her curiosity was whetted about “all things black, all things African.” She pushed herself toward becoming an expert in black music, poetry, literature, history and black oral tradition. A graduation present from her parents being a “study tour” trip to Europe, topped off with 3-week seminar at Oxford University.

She also was becoming, the authors note, “a Franciscan who began to appreciate that St. Francis preached joy,” awakening to the fact that she needed to “be herself.” A song from her past that she now sang with gusto, “This Little Light of Mine,” became her way of life.

In 1972, she became chair of the English Department at Viterbo College — a force to be dealt with who shone as an authority on black literature and Negro history, a performance artist and a distinguished teacher and speaker. Native American consciousness was emerging, and Thea initiated a Native American literature class at Viterbo.

When her parents became ill, she returned to Canton to care for them in 1978 and served as Diocesan Consultant for Intercultural Affairs, traveling around the diocese and throughout the South conducting workshops, lecture-recitals, liturgy celebrations and short courses. Vatican II stressed local cultures and Thea ardently promoted this, as well as the legacy of Martin Luther King and her vision of making music as rich a part of cultural tradition for Catholics as it was for Protestants.

Soon she was on the national and international speaking circuit. There were trips to Africa, an interview with Mike Wallace on “60 Minutes” and interest by Harry Belafonte in producing a documentary on her life starring Whoopi Goldberg, with whom Thea also became good friends, though the project never came to fruition.

This whirlwind of activities throughout the '80s was interrupted by a bout with breast cancer, followed by treatments and flare-ups until widespread cancer returned with a vengeance. Still she refused to give up, resting between engagements, speaking from a wheelchair, her hair lost to chemotherapy treatments and her life a witness to suffering. “Trying to understand my suffering,” she said, “helps me to understand the gift of my Savior and the love of my Savior.”

Despite excruciating pain, she managed to record an album, “Sister Thea: Songs of My People.” In 1989, Thea’s last full year, she spoke from a wheelchair before a national assembly of bishops, memorably leading them in singing “We Shall Overcome,” as they linked arms.

Her death in 1990 was a national event within Catholic circles and beyond. The memorial service in Canton was followed by the funeral in Jackson to accommodate the vast number of attendees from all faiths, races and walks of life who came to honor her. Writing of the service, Thea’s childhood friend, Mary Queen Donnelly, summed up her life in a memorial article published in *America*: “At a time of much division in the Church, Sister Thea possessed the charismatic gifts to heal, to bring joy.” She was, indeed, unforgettable.

Edited 2.4.2013

Charlene Smith, FSPA